



Friends of Steele Creek

Submission
to the
Review of the Victorian
Flora Fauna Guarantee Act



Background to the place we love and our local projects

Steele Creek was once a series of ephemeral ponds within the catchment of the lower Maribyrnong River. The Traditional Owners, the Wurundjeri, were able to gather food, hunt and drink its clean water and carry out their ceremonies and traditions in a landscape rich with biodiversity and meaning, a resilient environment that had adapted to changing climatic conditions.

Today the two arms of Steele Creek rise on Melbourne Airport, Tullamarine. They join in Keilor Park and then flow through Airport West, Niddrie and East Keilor and join the Maribyrnong River at Essendon.

Our current project, Steele Creek Escarpment Restoration (funded through PPWPCMA grants) is occurring on land with significant Cultural Heritage values. This significant site has no site specific action plan to protect the remnants that are still present. It's up to local groups to try to attract funding and restore what we can. The land is managed by Parks Victoria who does not have the funding to protect what it is mandated to do. We are also working with Wurundjeri's Narrap team on this project, but this significant site needs a dedicated officer and full time team to ensure all the works needed are carried out over the coming decades. Without sustained funding and oversight, we suspect, these sites will become weed infested and the genetic materials in them will be lost. There has been no detailed surveying of this site to establish what vulnerable flora and fauna populations still exist on site. Without data the problem goes unaddressed.

Prior to this our small group focused on the creation of a green corridor along the waterway in an attempt to bring back some of what has been lost. We hope that future generations will have a local snapshot of the beauty and diversity that was once so prolific around Melbourne's West. The creek corridor is a series of parks and reserves. Some mature trees planted by FOSC along its banks, support populations of woodland and wetland birds like swamp hens, ducks and the endangered Great Egret.

What we see as the problem that the FFG Act needs to help with

We have lost our growling grass frogs, our local mammals, our native fish and our native butterflies. We still have Peregrine Falcons nesting in the old Niddrie Quarry and Spring Gully Reserve. The Maribyrnong catchment, of which we are part, has lost 90% of its vegetation. No Act of parliament has ever been effectively implemented to protect our urban-based volcanic grasslands eco systems. There are a number of remnant grasslands scattered throughout the west with no proper funding or coordinated plan to guarantee their survival into the future. The growth of Melbourne's west once more threatens remnant grasslands in the Werribee, Sunbury and Diggers Rest areas.

The consultation paper does not adequately address how the FFG Act will protect our depleted grasslands that are under sustained threat from urban development. The FFG Act needs to do more to protect these valuable urban ecosystems amidst ongoing urban development.

We have been powerless to protect precious rare seed banks. We have seen them lost to developers who off set them with a large piece of weed-infested land. When there were laws that could have been enacted governments chose not to implement them but rather preferred to let public land become available for development. Without financial resources to go to court and risk adverse costs finding we were powerless.

The FFG Act needs to set a higher standard of protection so that it actually prevents loss of previous and rare seed banks caused by urban development. We cannot see how the proposals in the consultation paper will achieve this.

We still see our waterways polluted from road run off and in turn this is hastening the decline of the macro invertebrate populations. Steele Creek last had a yabbie in the 1990s. Melbourne Water has reported that the vulnerable and endangered species such as Australian Mudfish and Spotted Galaxias are still present in Steele Creek. Given the degradation and chronic pollution of our waterway this is amazing and we believe these species in our local area need an action plan to protect them and rebuild them to larger population.

When the Calder freeway was built in Niddrie in the early 1970s the growling grass frog lost its habitat. We still hope it can be brought back. We know that Rakali is still present at the confluence of the creek and the river but it was once a daily sight in the waterway, as far upstream as Spring Gully Reserve, Niddrie. FOSC also engages with 3 local councils, Melbourne Water, EPA and VicRoads to achieve better stormwater management to improve water quality so that dragonflies, native fish and frogs will again thrive in the creek. But it seems to us VICROADS has no commitment to respecting our environment they do absolutely nothing to slow the flow of stormwater, laden with hydrocarbons and heavy metals, from the freeways to our waterway. They persistently pollute the waterway and the continuing decline in Macroinvertebrates populations cannot be stopped unless they act on their pollution.

Government and their agencies have NOT PROTECTED our heritage and they have played a significant role, either deliberately or by omission, in its destruction. Therefore we believe that the new Act must ensure there are no exemptions or special treatments for government departments or certain industries.

How the FFG Act can help to provide solutions to our degraded urban ecosystems

In spite of the sorry history our landscape and its eco systems we are still determined to create a green corridor. We are now seeing the return of more native birds to our catchment. In the 1970s we had three local species, we have seen 35 birds return to our valley. Our micro bat survey shows that we have three microbats feeding in the more mature trees we planted decades ago. We know that much more can be achieved but only if there are enforceable laws, with action plans and heavy penalties for breaches and omissions.

In order to protect our west and the many diverse landscapes within Victoria we believe the Minister must have the power to intervene when important species or habitats are under threat. At times we have argued for protection of an area or species only to be told "the department's records don't have a listing of that species in that area" Consequently our sightings were ignored. Clearly the database that has been used is outdated. We've also been told that our landscape and the few species left are just examples "within an already degraded environment." We knew that, we thought that made its protection even more important, but in fact more losses seemed not to matter. We believe the new act must protect genetic diversity wherever it is and thus improve the resilience of our wildlife populations and landscapes be they in the city, rural or wilderness areas.

The FFG Act must create a stronger focus on protecting urban biodiversity and restoring degraded urban ecosystems including powers, and obligations for the Minister to intervene when important species or habitats are under threat. The proposals set out in the consultation paper do not currently achieve this.

We need an Act with strong enforcement powers, accompanied by significant penalties - heavy fines and jail terms. The act must mandate proper monitoring of threatened species and have detailed action statements for their protection. Whilst we support landscape restoration and protection it must not come at the expense of individual species. We need both methods of protection.

The new act MUST ensure that there is direct investment and programs for threatened species

protection and recovery. The current fluctuating funding arrangements, lack of action plans cannot deliver the outcome that is the essence of this act.

Because there is so little left of Victoria's once great forests, grasslands and waterway populations we need an act that will protect what remains while we rebuild the declining populations. Less than 23% of river length in Victoria has good or excellent water condition. This must mean that our waterways' river health must be protected and a management plan developed binding on all government agencies and authorities to improve river health. Such efforts cannot be solely focused on areas less polluted; it must also include a long-term strategic plan for improving waterways like Steele creek. Our creek has had no improvement in water quality in the last 21 years - it is still rated as poor. Therefore we will continue to see a decline in our vulnerable fish populations. The community who has so often raised its voice on behalf of the plants and animals must now be given the power to initiate legal action to protect what remains. It is a matter of inter-generational equity that we do all we can to make up for the large-scale losses we have endured so far.

We are familiar with the work carried out at Mt Rothwell to the west of Melbourne and we hope that some of the animals that are currently missing from our local areas will one day be reintroduced. However, if we are to bring back lost populations then the Flora Fauna Act must also ensure that there is strong enforceable legislation to control pest animals such as cats, foxes and deer. On a recent visit to Halls Gap to see the spring wildflowers we were dismayed to see deer grazing alongside our kangaroos and wallabies.

Final comments

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the review of the Flora Fauna guarantee Act. Whilst we have spoken primarily to our local situation because that is the patch of the environment we seek to protect and restore we are also concerned about the ever declining forest cover in our state and the threat that poses to the animals who make their home there. For example, the dire situation that our Leadbeater's Possum is in as a result of logging activities.

The FFG Act needs to set a higher standard of protection and actually work to protect critically endangered species like the Leadbeater's Possum. We do not think that the government's proposals set out in the consultation paper will be effective in achieving this. More needs to be done under the FFG Act to protect species like the Leadbeater's Possum, instead of leaving this up to forestry regulations and the actions of the forestry industry.

We are aware of the great advocacy work done by the Victorian Parks Association and Environmental Justice Australia. Their great work, on very limited budgets, has protected what governments would have gladly sold or ignored. We fully support their submissions and hope that, given their long experience in this area **and their extensive familiarity with the inadequacies of our current act, that you will heed their advice.** Such steadfast, dedicated leadership should not be overlooked.

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