

My name is Teresa Hicks and the natural environment is very important and special to me. I visit National and State Parks with my grandchildren and they have learned to love them also. It is because of this that I take this opportunity to make my submission to the Review of Victoria's Wildlife Act 1975. As a member of an environment organisation, I have become aware that there are many areas of the current Act that are not suitable in today's climate, as they impact negatively on our native fauna, flora and birdlife. While I understand that there are many areas of the Act that are outdated today, I will mainly focus on a few points.

The Act does not reflect the contemporary attitudes of today:

The current manner of protecting our wildlife has proven to be inadequate for today and into the future. Modern technology has found faster, smarter ways to destroy nature and its habitats. The opportunity is now to correct and protect our future native species that are being severely impacted.

The Act allows wildlife to be declared 'unprotected' with outcomes being the suffering and destruction of many of our precious species. The intent of the Act should clearly show protection and conservation as the main purpose of the Act. Our native animals and their habitat need our protection – It is clear that the current wildlife laws are currently not working and failing to protect them and, I believe, are enabling their decline. It is critical that land clearing in these areas be halted as it is also responsible for their possible extinction. Other serious threats, like climate change and fires and pollution, have impacts not known in the past, and spell a future of further suffering, death and extinction.

In today's climate, modern educated populations are realizing the value of their native animals, which are in fast decline. We are teaching our children to love and protect them and to explore the wonders of nature in its undamaged forms. Victoria (and indeed Australia) include unique species not seen anywhere else in the world and they are a major reason for overseas visitors travelling to our State.

The Act should recognise the value of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians and include the role of Advisers before actions taken or permitted. The Act should definitely include provision for consultation with the Community on issues where the native areas are threatened. Decision makers should, in my view, include qualified science and conservation experts and organisations who can speak for nature and aid in ensuring their protection. They should be consulted also on issues where the native habitats are threatened.

Authority to Control Wildlife:

The Authority to control wildlife permit system is not transparent and allows serious destruction to our native wildlife and their habitat. In my view, this Act provides no direct

protections for wildlife under the legislation but protects invasive species like deer as protected game animals. Deer do not belong in the Australian bush and are fast increasing in numbers. They have become a real threat to the very existence of native species and natural, threatened areas. Deer are protected despite contributing to significant damage to wildlife in Victoria. I strongly request that deer protection be removed altogether. Any necessary control should be strongly regulated by a strengthened Authority to Control Wildlife Permit process and be based on very strict criteria which is transparent and reported to the public.

Giving landowners control of wildlife on or above their property could lead to destruction rather than preservation, e.g. the farmer who poisoned so many wedge-tailed eagles received minimal fines and hence little deterrent. In the last 10 years, permits were issued for up to 100 different wildlife species – I am not aware if this was for lethal or non-lethal removal. The Authority to control wildlife permit system is also not transparent and does not provide adequate protection for wildlife habitat under the Act - providing weak or no penalties for those who commit these crimes. The major change necessary, in my view, is the separation of native animals from feral animals. This Act doesn't appear to have the welfare of native animals as a separate issue from other animals and lacks principles about how to manage wildlife. The death of wildlife should carry heavier penalties and authorised officers should be given stronger powers. Permits for hunting predatory animals like feral cats, foxes, deer etc. could be encouraged as they continue to increase in numbers and kill our smaller native animals.

The wellbeing of wildlife should be first and foremost, before stakeholders or even community members. Areas for visitors should be clearly marked as wildlife protection zones so that they aren't intruded upon or damaged. Separate areas for diverse interests should be monitored and controlled, conserving the natural larger spaces for undisturbed vegetation and native animals and birds who live there. Competition between objectives and purposes should err on the side of caution – extinct wildlife is lost forever! Game animals, in my view should not be defined as Wildlife in the Act, but be excluded altogether as they harm/destroy local fauna and flora and their precious habits. Reserves would be a good alternative for hunters. Perhaps they should be regulated under a separate Act.

Respect for nature should be encouraged and alternatives found to killing our native wildlife and landowners should not have the right to harm or use wildlife on their property. Current provisions do not deter, penalties are inadequate and should be strengthened.

Finally, I believe the current Act is not an adequate tool to punish and deter wildlife crime and should be upgraded depending on the severity of the crime. I trust that the new Wildlife Act will reflect the love and respect for nature and its native species that it deserves.