

My name is Alice Drake and I am a veterinary nurse, second year Bachelor of Zoology and animal science student at Deakin University, and a passionate hiking and wildlife enthusiast. I am lucky enough to live in the foothills beneath Kinglake National Park in Woiwurrung country, where I am surrounded by eastern grey kangaroos, and many native bird species such as King Parrots, Eastern Rosellas and many more. Wildlife has always been important to me, as I enjoy all aspects of the natural world, and grew up amongst richly diverse bushland, where I was raised to appreciate native Australian flora and fauna, as well as respect the need for a richness in biodiversity which keeps our environment healthy.

I am writing a submission to comment on the review of the wildlife act currently in progress to outline some key issues I feel could be represented within changes to the act.

### What should the act do?

From an ecological and community standpoint, the act should provide a clear framework for the support and protection of *native wildlife*. This should include measures to protect wildlife from harm, the monitoring of populations to prevent extinction, and the maintenance of key habitats for at risk animal communities. Currently, the act allows for wildlife species to be declared unprotected by law, which in the past has led to events such as the hunting of wombats as a tourism draw. This is a key point which must be clarified in the revision of the act, with native wildlife having an irreversible protection from harm such as hunting, or for-profit exploitation. Another reform to the act must be the permit system for authority to control wildlife. Currently, the act is vague regarding methods of control of wildlife in the case a permit is granted. My main issues in this case are, what is permitted in the handling of wildlife if a permit is granted? Under what circumstances are permits for control of wildlife granted, and are these controls lethal? From an ecological standpoint there must be transparency in this permit system, and a need for review of what is considered a reasonable control and outcome in cases permits would be granted. In an ideal change to the act from my perspective, permits would only be granted on the basis of relocation for wildlife and assistance in this respect, not for lethal control for the convenience of those seeking the permit. I understand this issue is very complex in nature, with landholders in the agricultural sector often seeing native wildlife as being “pests” hindering productivity, but the purpose of the act should be to protect native wildlife, not provide permission for its destruction.

The act should not be used as a protection for introduced game species, such as deer, pigs and introduced bird species that may encroach on the territory of native species, damage soil structure or destroy plant species through herbivory (removing food sources for native species). The act in its current form provides protection for game species such as deer, which is antithetical to its intended

cause, as deer are a feral introduced species which have are invasive, harmful to habitats occupied by native wildlife, and damaging to Victoria's soil structure.

Included in the act's reforms should be stronger, clearly laws outlining the penalties for breaches to the act, such as intentional harm and destruction of wildlife. This issue has been covered extensively recently following the recovery of hundreds of dead Wedged tailed eagles in Victoria, and the weak penalties received by the parties involved. In the acts reform, laws regarding the destruction of wildlife should be clearly stated, with much stronger penalties to deter similar events occurring in future. Wedged tailed eagles are key tertiary consumers in Victoria, and we must not wait for their eventual decline in numbers in order to create reform. Unfortunately, not all community members view wildlife as a part of their overall community, and rather view birds such as wedged tailed eagles as harmful to their farming practices. Stronger laws must be used to deter harm in these cases, with clear guidelines to ensure law enforcements ability to punish crimes of this nature.

The act, as a wildlife protection, must include protection of key habitats of our native wildlife, most importantly, or threatened wildlife. The current act does not provide any protections for the habitat our wildlife relies on for their survival. This issue is one I consider a lot. We are concerned as Victorians for our wildlife, monitoring their numbers and breeding habits, but our current wildlife act shows a dissonance to this by not protecting the areas they need to survive. This is shown through the care and concern shown by the Australian government following the 2019-2020 bushfires, providing funding for the care and relocation of wildlife in bushfire impacted areas, then the subsequent logging of unburnt areas of key biodiversity by Vicforests in Gippsland. This is a prime example of cognitive dissonance, and a prevention of destruction of habitat should be included in the act. Animals such as the Leadbeater's possum, the greater glider and the owl species such as the powerful owl and the sooty owl rely on these irreplaceable old growth areas of forest for life, and this must be reflected in the act that serves to protect them from extinction.

Another aspect of wildlife protection the act should uphold is in relation to the protection of native birds, whose numbers continue to fall year after year. In the current wildlife act, the game management authority is intertwined with the act, serving as a governing body and issuing licences for the shooting of waterbirds such as ducks and shrub birds such as native quails. Many other states in Australia have banned duck hunting (WA, NSW and QLD), and the inclusion of the game management authority as a governing body in the act appears counterintuitive to the acts purpose, which should be *protection* and management. In 2021 I believe the community consciousness has shifted greatly regarding these issues, and I believe the act should be representative of this shift, in

removing the game management authorities influence from the act, and offering greater protection for bird species, and punishment for their disturbance and destruction.

The act should also provide a strong framework for the management of native species, including monitoring of populations, habitat management and routine surveying of areas to identify species that may be at risk of decline, in order to put aggressive strategies in place to support these animals. This should be a part of government work, and not up to small community groups with very limited funding to achieve these large goals. "Friends of" groups such as the Friends of the Leadbeater's possum are amazing, grassroots organisations, but simply do not have the means to change the structural framework that contributes to the declining populations, such as logging permissions in state parks destroying key habitat, and the need for large scale wildlife surveys to occur in these areas. The act should legislate for these large scale, ongoing protections to reduce declining populations such as the Leadbeater's possum.

In conclusion, I sincerely hope to see a stronger, clear Wildlife Act following the review process. I believe there has never been a more important time than now, in the face of anthropogenic climate change, housing development encroaching on native habitat and the threat of logging on old growth forest, to change the future of Victoria's native wildlife protections.