Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Response from the Ecological Consultants Association of Victoria to questions on Notice from Committee Members

26th March 2021

We thank the Legislative Council Planning and Environment Committee Members and Participating Members for their questions during our provision of evidence at the Hearing of the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria on 24th February 2021. Where our following responses may be deficient or raise novel questions, please do not hesitate to make contact with us to seek clarity. We welcome ongoing dialogue and are willing to engage collaboratively in longer-term solutions, including providing ongoing support to guide development of recommendations arising from this Inquiry and potential solutions to address Ecosystem Decline in Victoria.

Please find following our responses to questions raised.

Matters taken on notice during the hearing (24/02/2021):

1. *In relation to the survey mentioned in your opening statement, how many members responded to the survey? As noted on page 35 of the transcript.*

   The survey received 40 responses. Of these, the majority were senior consultants, most with more than 10 years' experience and many with more than 20 years' experience.

   We'd also like to respond to some of the statements within the transcript where our membership numbers were confused with our 'supporter or subscriber' numbers. We have approximately 130 members. These include mainly full practicing ecological consultants. In addition to this, we have a mailing list that includes both our members plus others who have a direct interest in our activity and who often attend our events and receive our notifications. These are our 'supporters or subscribers' and they number at around 500.

2. *Please elaborate on the survey observation regarding poorly implemented management plans on the basis of lack of experience as a response to biodiversity decline, as well as ways that this can be effectively addressed moving forward. As mentioned on page 35 of the transcript.*

   As noted in our submission, our respondents noted the quality of a restoration/management *plan* may be excellent, but the quality of the *management* may be appalling. Effective restoration plan *management* requires several key elements: a quality restoration/land management plan based on ground-truthed ecological assessment and knowledge; resources (e.g. labour, funds) to implement the plan; community support; long-term commitment. Very often, projects commence with a quality plan. Most projects have good short-term resources allocated for

implementation. Many have great community support. Almost every project fails at the long-term commitment element, severely impacting on the effectiveness of the management plan's aims (e.g. to restore a landscape, mitigate ecosystem decline).

Typically, funding cycles are short and require full implementation to be completed within a short time-frame. *Very* few (almost none) ecological restoration projects allocate funds for long-term activities that would ensure the aims of the plan can be fully realised. Instead, when funds dry up, the great restoration work done to implement the quality management plan is left to manage itself; in a landscape matrix that is typically degraded, these restored areas become re-infested with pest plants and animals and the efforts to address ecosystem decline are lost. Long-term funding models might fund activities such as: pest plant and animal control, fence maintenance (to ensure restoration protection fencing can be repaired when the fence is breached e.g. by falling trees or digging herbivores), enhancement planting (to fill in gaps that emerge as vegetation establishes), and professional management. Our submission provides further insights into this issue (including discussions relating to skilled work being undertaken by unskilled labour to save costs).

Long-term funding models are a critical way to address this issue and so, address ecosystem decline in Victoria.

3. *In relation to your submission's recommendation around stewardship incentives for conservation works on private land, please provide examples of types of incentives. As noted on page 35 of the transcript.*

Stewardship incentives we have witnessed be effective levers for effective conservation on private land most notably includes rate reductions for landholders who undertake prescribed conservation actions on their properties. Mornington Peninsula Shire's program is an excellent example. Rate reduction incentives can include greater reductions for activities such as adding a Trust for Nature Conservation Covenant; Macedon Ranges Council provides an excellent example of this approach.

The Victorian Government could implement a program to support local government across the state to run similar programs. The program would need to be underpinned by sound knowledge of biodiversity values across the LGA – this is important, as some vegetation types are considered 'Least Concern' across the State but may be Critically Endangered within a municipality. Such a program would also need to carefully consider what are the aims of that program, to ensure incentives are provided to appropriate properties.

Further, alternative incentive programs that have been effective are those that provide landholders support for conservation works on private land by directly funding the conservation works. A highly effective model of this approach is employed by the Beyond Yellingbo project (Project Officer: Gaye Gadsden)(formerly Birds to Butterfield), whereby the project connects landholders with funding for direct works and pays the contractors directly, avoiding payments to landholders. Works include: pest animal control (e.g. deer, foxes); pest animal control; fencing of remnant vegetation for conservation purposes; and habitat restoration/revegetation. Manningham City Council

have employed a similar approach (LEAF – Local Environment Assistance Fund)(Project Manager: Cathy Willis) for well over a decade in a highly successful program. The LEAF program has an additional benefit: it supports participating landholders to write their own Land Management Plan, encouraging landholders to come to know their property more closely and take a greater custodial role in their property's management.

However, similar to Melbourne Water's landholder support program, the LEAF program at times has required financial co-contribution from landholders – financial co-contribution is not an ideal model as it presents a barrier to conservation works for those landholders for whom finances limit ability to (even partially) fund conservation works. This inhibits Victoria's ability to ensure and enable conservation of every property that meets the aims (e.g. quantity thresholds) of the incentive program. As the incredible success of the Beyond Yellingbo project demonstrates, the best approach for conservation work incentives (other than rate reductions) would be to: identify strategic properties that meet the carefully-considered aims of the project and provide support to engage and pay contractors, taking the financial- and time-burden off the landholders, further incentivising conservation work on private land. Supporting landholders to write their own informed Land Management Plan, as successfully done by Manningham City Council's LEAF program, would add an additional benefit to such a program.

Additional questions on notice from Committee Members:

4. *One of the areas we wanted to investigate with this inquiry was how the Victorian Government can create and support employment opportunities associated with protecting and restoring ecosystems. As the professional association working in this area, what potential do you think is out there for employment in conservation and what does the Victorian Government need to do to make it a reality?*

   We welcome this approach, noting there was some discussion pertaining to this at various times during the Hearing. It is worth stating and highlighting that, whilst we are the professional association working in this area, we primarily represent ecological consultants; those ecologists employed in local and state Government settings typically are not part of our membership. Thus, we have no vested interest in answering this question nor in our advocacy for increased opportunities for ecologists. Our advocacy work is borne from the knowledge and experience we have amassed, that more ecologists in Victoria will help address ecosystem decline in Victoria. Indeed, the reduction in employed qualified ecologists (in private practice, government, schools and elsewhere) seemingly has correlated with an increase in ecosystem decline, as you might expect health systems might decline in the absence of health professionals for example.

   We have a few suggestions for how the Victorian Government could address this question on notice:

   We consider there already are some great examples of 'embedding ecologists' in government organisations and authorities, with resultant positive outcomes for local ecology. We provided the example of the City of Melbourne (CoM) who has had an ecologist on staff for around five (5) years now. This role has generated a notable shift

in the focus, projects and initiatives that are being implemented in the CoM. As fellow ecologists, we recognise that restorative initiatives such as aiming to introduce 20% locally native understorey into CoM public open space will make a real difference to biodiversity and ecological function within the local area. This also is true of the ecological-inspired project to introduce a diversity of Mistletoes onto street trees.

Similar 'in-house' ecological expertise would generate improvement in ecological focus, projects and initiatives – as well as priority-setting - in all relevant government organisations and authorities. We propose this include government environmental policy units, including agenda-setting policy areas like ecology and biodiversity, forestry, fire, planning, wildlife management and public land. Other government organisations and authorities that would benefit from more professional, experienced ecologists include Parks Victoria, all local government, water authorities, Melbourne Water and utilities such as VicRoads and VicTrack. We acknowledge some of these organisations already employ ecologists, but many of these organisations do not yet, or ecologists are under-represented.

We suggest any government-initiated project, grant program or initiative that requires the services of appropriately qualified and skilled Natural Resource Management staff, should aim to be long-term. This is a significant and important opportunity for government to initiate some larger, 'state-building' green infrastructure. There have been initiatives, such as large state-wide Biolinks, mooted in historic documents such as the State government's Land and Biodiversity White Paper in 2009. Since then, the state government has undertaken modelling to show where the best areas may be to gain the best biodiversity outcomes for investment projects. These areas, in combination with locations that have good community support, including Traditional Owner support, would provide great, strategic locations to implement long-term, high profile initiatives that could play a role in addressing ecosystem decline and generate diverse employment opportunities (skilled and unskilled ecological input), especially in regional areas.

We also recommend that ecological/environmental research institutions such as the Arthur Rylah Institute are provided increased funding, to ensure and enhance their research capacity and help ensure Victoria meets its critical requirement for well-informed biodiversity research. We observed substantial reductions in staff numbers in 2012; staff numbers have not been restored to their former levels significantly impacting researchers' ability to conduct quality biodiversity research so impacting Victoria's ability to make informed decisions about how to address ecosystem decline. Additionally, ecosystem decline in Victoria was further impacted by the 2014 closure of the Keith Turnbull Research Institute, an important contributor to pest plant and animal research. The reinstatement of State-supported scientific research would provide great ecological benefit at this time and provide an enduring legacy for ecosystem – and inter-generational human - health in Victoria.