The Ecological Society of Australia Ltd (ESA, www.ecolsoc.org.au) is the peak group of ecologists in Australia, with members from all states and territories. Our members work in universities and other research institutions, government departments, NGOs, private industry and consultancies. We are a national not-for-profit organisation formed in 1959.

Inquiry into Victorian Ecosystems Decline
Ecological Society of Australia response to Questions on Notice
14 May 2021

'I guess a question on notice is around when you are then paid to do research, and we have had questions about that as well. How transparent do you need to be around who is paying, who is funding that investment or that inquiry?'

The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research[1] ('the Code') outlines the expectations of people undertaking research in Australia, or under the auspices of Australian institutions. The Code highlights transparency as a core principle that is a hallmark of responsible research, including disclosure and management of conflicts of interest. Under the Code, all researchers are required to declare conflicts of interest to an institution.

The supporting guidelines to the Code[2] expand on this principle, stating that

"*Financial interests requiring disclosure include, but are not limited to:*

- *direct payments to the researcher, such as salary, consultancy payments, speaking fees, panel memberships*
- *indirect payments to the researcher, for example funding of travel, accommodation, professional development, hospitality*
- *payments to support research, such as funding from an industry or interest group*
- *company shares or options*
- *royalties*
- *directorships*
- *some scholarships*
- *operational or infrastructure support.*"

All research institutions in Australia are required to have processes and systems in place for recording and managing real or perceived conflicts of interest.

[*regarding a biolinks project*] 'Wouldn't there have been an ecologist involved?'

Ecologists are often involved in the design and implementation of projects that focus on ecological restoration. Ecologists are involved because they can bring the best available science knowledge to support practical action for ecological recovery of damaged landscapes.

[1] Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research 2018. National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council and Universities Australia. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines/publications/r41

[2] Disclosure of interests and management of conflicts of interest: A guide supporting the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council and Universities Australia. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

For example, ecologists study how habitat loss impacts on native plant and animal persistence in agricultural landscapes. From this, recovery programmes can be designed. Solutions may include (a) increasing the amount of habitat available to native species by planting buffer zones around remnant patches of bush, or (b) reconnecting isolated patches of bush to facilitate the movement of plants and animals through the landscape.
One of the best examples of such work has been the use of fauna “bridges” that enables animals to cross major highways such as the Hume. In this example, ecologists from a range of Victorian universities, in partnership with VicRoads (now Rural Roads Victoria), designed rope-ladders as bridges to help climbing mammals (such as Squirrel Gliders and Brush-tail Phascogales) move across a major road barrier.

Ecologists also monitor the outcomes of restoration actions to evaluate success.

At much larger scales, ecologists (with partners like Greening Australia) were essential to design the Habitat 141 project in western Victoria, an ambitious habitat corridor restoration project aiming to reconnect native vegetation from the Murray River to the sea.