

**Submission
No 447**

INQUIRY INTO ECOSYSTEM DECLINE IN VICTORIA

Organisation: Knox Environment Society Inc

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Submission into Ecosystem decline in Victoria

The Knox Environment Society is a volunteer community group based within the City of Knox in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne and have the Dandenong Ranges and the Lysterfield Hills as their backdrop. Our society has an indigenous plant nursery in Ferntree Gully where we propagate local indigenous plants for sales to the public, local institutions, local Councils as well as Government agencies. In particular we act to conserve and propagate a range of rare and threatened species to try and ensure that these plants will not become extinct within the City of Knox. We partner Knox City Council in the delivery of the Knox Gardens for Wildlife Program which encourages residents to set aside part of their garden to create and connect local wildlife habitat. The program is a great success with 900 participants and its popularity demonstrates the great concern in the community about biodiversity loss and their preparedness to act in support of efforts to redress some of the losses. The Society is also interested in environmental issues at a local, state, national and international level.

Ecosystem decline has been obvious, prolonged and ongoing within the Knox area starting from European settlement and continuing today so that now only 4% of indigenous flora remain in reserves in the municipality.

Most of the suburbs have been farmed over the years and across time have been converted into suburbs with most of the remnant vegetation being removed in the process with only small pockets remaining in reserves. We are, however, somewhat fortunate as having the Dandenong Ranges and Lysterfield Hills on our boundary has meant that some areas have maintained a more natural outlook with larger blocks and a healthier attitude toward maintaining remnant vegetation. Also, sometimes, within the remaining suburbs small pockets of natural vegetation can remain on large house blocks, road verges and empty blocks of land.

The smaller pockets of remnant material is slowly being eroded as residents who own the properties look to 'clean it up', make it bushfire 'safe' whilst out in the streets local contractors who know nothing about plants are let loose with brushcutters, lawn mowers and sprays. Medium density development is also a death sentence for much of these pockets as people look to make extra cash from many of the larger block sizes. What should be of concern is that the allowable loss of these pockets of vegetation to development means that ecosystem decline has more than likely occurred over the last decade in Knox as a report in 2010 cited that 62 of the 181 critically endangered plant species in Knox at that time existed only on private land and were not represented in any reserve (Graeme S. Lorimer, Sites of Biological Significance in Knox 2nd Edition Volume 1A Report to Knox City Council, 28 June, 2010). As an example it is acknowledged that Knox lost 20% of its remaining remnant species when the Eastern Freeway was extended.

Knox was lucky to have a good covering of large and mature canopy trees. With climate change, bush fire threat perceptions and the belief that they are dangerous this has seen these important genetic store and habitat resources being removed faster than they can be replaced (in terms of street trees) or often not replaced if on private land. Even when replaced as street trees they are not fully valued and because at the mature end of their life, having lived in that spot, often for over 100 years, they are seen as dangerous or having a poor set of street tree 'values' and are replaced with something more benign. This leads to our area becoming more 'uniform' but less able to maintain a viable local ecosystem.

The biggest problem we face is that local indigenous plants and animals have no value placed on them and are generally regarded as being a nuisance, weedy or in many cases dangerous. People will move in to houses that border the national park and then complain about trees and bushfire risk and their gardens and way of life seem to be completely opposite to the environment which they have moved into.

This leads to the fragmentation and isolation of populations and eventually to them disappearing altogether. A good example of this is the Koala. This iconic animal was once found in areas along the borders with the Dandenong Ranges National Park but factors such as increased development, vegetation removal, domestic animals, introduced predators and increasing population pressure has seen this animal disappear.

Whilst tree removal is the most obvious it is the loss of lower storey plants that have a big effect as these are often the food source for much of the insect and ground dwelling animal life in the area. This is usually removed as it is not recognized as being important and is perceived as being a fire risk.

As a long term resident it is sad to see our wildlife being gradually starved of a viable habitat and whilst it is understandable that with a continually growing population our lifestyle will become more dense it is continually disappointing to see that it is the government that is being the driver and instigator in large scale ecosystem destruction in this area. What makes it really disheartening is that with all the departments and wealth of knowledge, rules and regulations they bring forward they can still develop large tracts of land without any thought or care of the ecosystems existing on those sites. Really they should set the example for the rest of the community and show that it is not all about money but a real commitment to the threatened natural communities in our area.

Two local examples are:

- 1) The recent sale and upcoming development of the former Boronia Heights Secondary College despite the large number of remnant trees, presence of important ground flora and containing a number of species classed by Knox City Council as being rare and threatened.
- 2) The crash and burn attitude of Development Victoria towards the development of the site on Burwood Highway in Knoxfield where they were quite content to fill in the current extant lake complete with its climax community in order to maximize the dwellings on their site. The retention of the functioning ecosystem in the Lake should have to be a priority if Government is serious about declining ecosystems as according to Dr. Lorimer, "Filling in any part of the dam will also cause the loss of the dense cover of significant submerged native vegetation, although it may be possible to transplant some of it to a new wetland. Losing the dam and its vegetation also means losing the habitat for all the dependent fauna, such as Blue-billed Ducks. It would take some years for a new waterbody to provide similar habitat value."
(Preliminary Ecological Assessment of the Floodplain at 609-621 Burwood Highway,

Knoxfield. A report to Knox City Council by Dr Graeme Lorimer, Biosphere Pty Ltd
Version 1.0, 17th February 2017).

Changing the decline in our ecosystems is about changing people's perceptions and attitudes toward their importance. We need to find a way to place a value on these ecosystems that we all understand and takes it into the realm that all developers and home owners understand. Governments AND ALL their departments need to take the lead and not just pay lip service to the importance of ecosystem protection and survival but have to demonstrate its worth by undertaking meaningful measures and even when it is at some costs to ensure that development does not lead to its destruction. It's all very well to have an enquiry but unless something concrete and meaningful comes from it many of the species in our area will continue to decline towards extinction.

Thank You for considering our submission
Richard Faragher
President
Knox Environment Society
28th August 2020