

*“Increasing habitat fragmentation, causing larger populations to break up into smaller unviable units, is a common factor in the decline and extinction of species worldwide.”*

I am writing to you to voice my support for the recommendations in the Central West VEAC report. My family has lived in the region for over 20 years, on a property that borders the Wombat Forest. While I live in the city and only interact with the forest on weekends and school holidays, my family walk and photograph flora and fauna in the Wombat Forest almost every day of the year. We have watched as the forest has been logged, burnt and neglected over many decades.

I am so impressed with the balance this report has achieved - addressing what is in my opinion (although I would argue the opinion of scientists across the world) the 3 biggest issues of our time:

- Biodiversity, habitat loss and fragmentation and the horrific loss of species,
- Climate change, and
- Water security

But this report also addresses the wants and desires of the local community, that is, to interact with nature in a way that can have detrimental effects, but also brings joy, community and connection, including activities like fossicking, dog walking, camping, hunting, fishing, collecting firewood, horse riding, bike riding, motorbike riding and 4WDing.

The opportunity for change like this is really a once (or possibly twice) in a life time event. If this report is not backed, it is extremely likely that there will be the recommencing of some form of logging in the Wombat (Vic Forests have already confirmed this), and unfortunately more mining proposals - like the ones that have been battled against in the preceding decades. Some of these past mines were proposed right next to the headwaters of the Lederberg River. It is imperative that these areas are protected for the future.

I am a primary school teacher in the city and my grade 4/5/6 class are currently learning about Biodiversity and its connections to Endangered Animals. Every time I teach this unit the outlook is worse. Do you know how many species become extinct every day? Have a guess. When I was in primary school we were taught it was one animal species a day.

The current studies tell us that this has increased to 150-200 species EVERY DAY. This is 100 times faster than the usual rate. They also tell us that in the next 50 years, we will lose 1 000 000 animal and plant species as a result of habitat loss (this is excluding other causes like pollution, hunting etc). While these predictions are highly variable and arguments can be made in many directions, almost all scientists agree that the biggest threats to endangered animals actually happen at a local level, not a global one. Surprising, right? But if you think about the sum total of every local community's failure to protect its forests and waterways, it makes sense.

It seems so obvious to me (and the hundreds of young people I have taught over the last two decades) what the right course of action in response to reports like this is, but I know that you

would be hearing other voices. Voices that are loud, emotional, scared and angry. Voices that say this draft report restricts humans' rights to be in the forest. But it very clearly doesn't restrict their right to be in the forest - it restricts \*how\* they behave in the most important parts of the forest. It provides land for low-impact uses, like camping, bushwalking, bird and animal watching, 4wds and motorbike use on roads, and also land for higher impact uses - like hunting, motorbike riding on paths not roads. The high impact use land is much more dispersed for easier access to undertake these activities, and the low impact use is in bigger chunks of land to allow stronger protections for animal and plant species.

I am so impressed to read a report that takes into account data from a local level, but also how this data fits in to the bigger picture (especially the way habitat fragmentation has effected the survival of many species), while still taking into account the local community's desire to have access to their forest. I hope that any changes made to this report to accommodate interest groups continue to be based on data. Not living next to the forest on a daily basis means I cannot speak to where, for example, the best sites for firewood collecting should be, but I can speak to the big picture of this report and its desire to ensure our natural world has a greater chance of survival in the future. I whole heartedly congratulate you on such a thorough report!