

Towards Conservation and Recovery of Victoria's Biodiversity

December 2022

The
Royal Society
OF VICTORIA

POSITION IN BRIEF

The Problem

Up to one million of Earth's estimated eight million plant, insect and animal species are at risk of extinction within the next few decades.ⁱ

More than 1,800 native Australian species and ecosystems are threatened with extinction; from land clearing, from predation and displacement by invasive species, from chemical pollutants and, increasingly, from the regional impacts of a changing global climate system.ⁱⁱ We are losing more biodiversity than any other developed country, with the extinction of over 100 native species since European colonisation now formally recognised under legislation.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Value of Victoria's Biodiversity

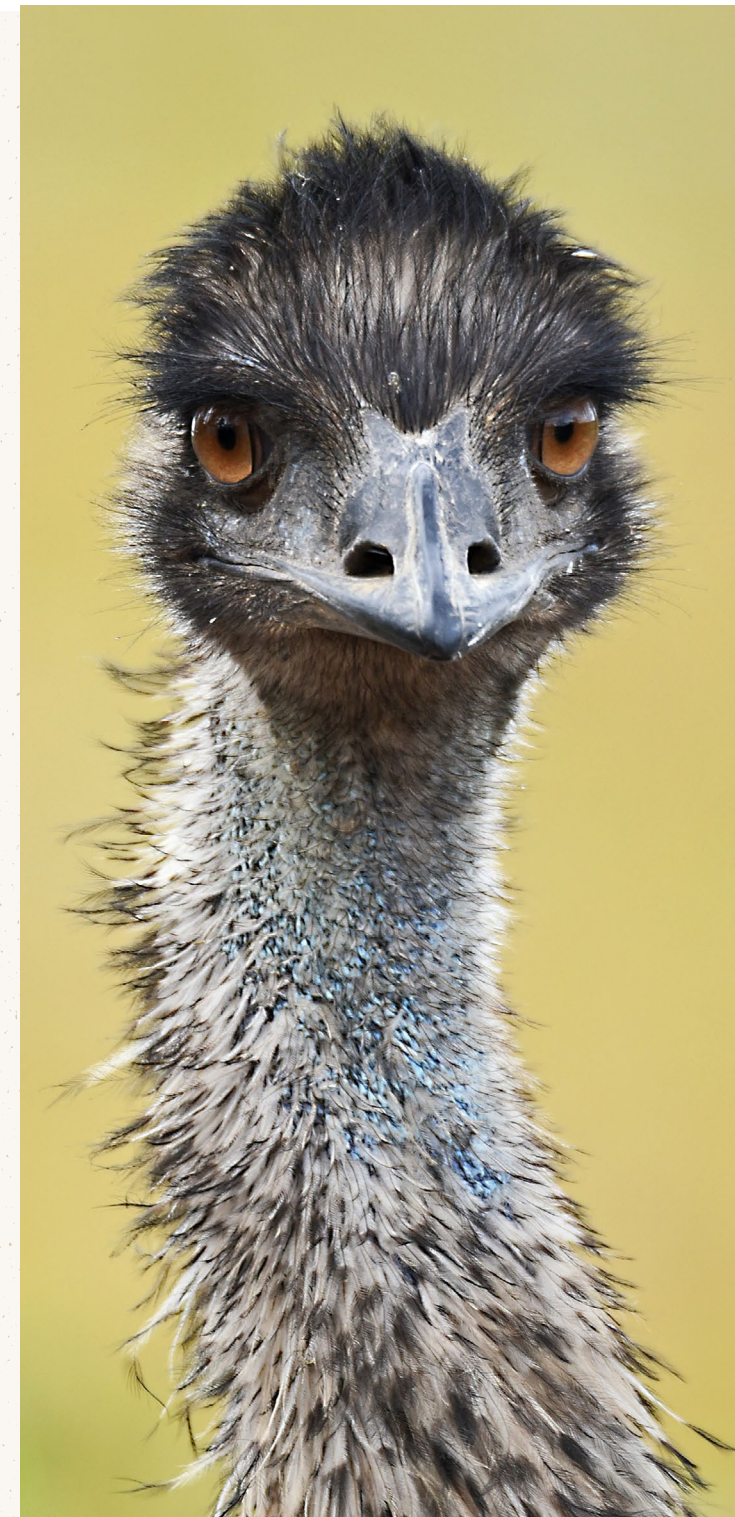
Beyond the intangible value of sustaining diverse life on Earth, the loss of biodiversity compromises the ability of our ecosystems to maintain priceless clean air and water, productive agriculture, and human well-being. Here in Victoria, our agricultural industry reported a gross value of \$17.5 billion over 2020-21.^{iv} Meanwhile, our national parks and conservation reserves contribute over \$1 billion to the State economy through tourism, save up to \$200 million on health costs, and provide over \$80 million of water purification, while preventing almost \$100 million in damages associated with flooding and coastal erosion.

Yet, a third of Victoria's terrestrial plants, birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, invertebrates and ecological communities are threatened with extinction.^v

The Cost of Recovery

Natural systems are interdependent and complex, and very difficult to recover once lost without expert guidance, sustained effort and considerable expense.

The cost of recovering Victoria's biodiversity is difficult to estimate. Ultimately, we need to understand what has worked (and not worked) through past efforts, fill our knowledge gaps with diverse, rigorous projects that test hypotheses, and demonstrate where best we can derive a clear return on investment from very limited resources. This work must begin immediately.





Towards Solutions

Over half the land area in the State of Victoria has been cleared since colonisation. This means restoration of cleared land must lead our efforts, while climate change adaptation to conserve our most vulnerable remaining ecosystems – such as those in our alpine environments – will require considerable focus.

Statewide Collaboration for Local Action

A key barrier to people taking action is a lack of expertise, direction and assistance with addressing the biodiversity crisis at a local or regional scale. People need information about how to be involved through consumer choices, behaviour changes, and participation in citizen science programs focused on ecological renewal.

Ultimately, every positive action collectively adds up to protect Victoria's natural systems. Leadership and participation by a range of local groups and industries are essential to build the long-term, cultural commitment to the ecological health of each region. Such commitment is necessary to drive and sustain local action, so people with a personal stake in regional outcomes are best placed to advise on priorities for action by a local community. The key to sustaining action is to demonstrate the direct and cumulative effects of even the smallest project to participants, which builds ownership, pride in accomplishment, and a commitment to further beneficial work.

Action will need to be informed by measures to conserve and restore ecological health within and between each particular region, guided by robust policy, and informed by Traditional Owners, scientists and natural resource managers holding expertise.

Resourcing Biodiversity Recovery and Conservation

Biodiversity conservation is a public good. Work on recovery needs to scale up dramatically and immediately. This means understanding the real scale of investment required for ongoing engagement, coordination and delivery, then identifying sources of civic and business leadership, financing and labour.

Diversifying sources of investment in biodiversity recovery is vital to riding out the political ebb and flow of public sentiment over the long term.

Collective Actions

The scale of the current collective effort remains inadequate for the task at hand. Transformation is urgently required in how we think and talk about biodiversity, how we fund its restoration and conservation, how we change our behaviours to support it, and how we connect our collective efforts.

The following actions aim to:

- > elevate recognition of the biodiversity crisis in Victoria and Australia as a political, social, and economic priority, parallel to addressing climate change and environmental pollution
- > inspire cross-sector leadership of a series of regulatory, research, funding and communication activities to drive the effective conservation and recovery of native plants, animals and ecosystems in Victoria and Australia.

Action 1: RECOGNISE First Nations' Leadership in Ecological Management

Significant cultural change is required; our uniquely adapted ecosystems must inform the regional identities of all Victorians. Acknowledging the Treaty process underway, the Royal Society of Victoria calls on:

- > politicians, public servants, businesses, academics, non-government organisations, community groups, and the people of Victoria to recognise and respect the claim of First Peoples to cultural custodianship of our State's many landscapes and ecosystems

- > First Nations' knowledge holders to lead and engage others in regional action to help balance the many demands on Country, recovering and sustaining healthy ecological communities
- > the Victorian Government, local governments and local industries to resource Indigenous leadership capacity in species conservation and environmental health on Country for all Victorians.

Action 2: RESOURCE Local Ownership & Leadership of Restoration Ecology Projects

There are few materials available that summarise government-funded research findings into tractable, accessible guides for land managers seeking to restore ecological values in their specific region.

Given the private ownership of most affected land, we seek investment in creating field guides and other materials for local people to initiate ecological restoration projects as citizen scientists and conservation volunteers, matched with recognised expertise in restoration ecology who can offer professional consultation and guidance on projects as required.

Action 3: APPOINT an Independent Regulator to Govern Biodiversity Values in Victoria

Half of Victoria's land area has been cleared since European colonisation. An ombudsman must be appointed with due powers of review and veto in the state's planning system to protect what remains through the following measures:

1. Adding a Conservation Significance classification layer to the State's planning system
2. Regulation of the finance sector to restrict biodiversity negative investment
3. No Net Loss: Reform and constrain offset programs to operate within sites of impact

Action 4: ESTABLISH Funding Diversity for an Intersectoral Nature Fund

We seek the appointment of influential leaders within the research, business, community, First Nations, and philanthropic sectors as Trustees to govern a science-backed Nature Fund for Victoria, financing pilot projects that seek to restore and recover the State's biodiversity, operating with full transparency to sustain trust in the Fund's governance, priorities, and actions.

Action 5: PROVIDE Effective Investment Instruments for the Business Sector

Instruments must be developed that help businesses and governments to track their performance as an element of cost accounting, demonstrating the value of a transparent investment in biodiversity conservation and recovery. These can also help identify what governments need to do to stimulate further investment and provide confidence to communities of concern that investment is made in projects that demonstrate a genuine contribution to Victoria's ecological health.

5.1: Reform the Treasury Corporation of Victoria's Sustainability Bond Framework

We seek the reform of the Treasury Corporation of Victoria's Sustainability Bonds guidelines and governance to prioritise projects and programs addressing the biodiversity crisis, opening a line of impact investment to the private sector.

5.2: Create a Model Business Case for Nature-Positive Measures

To lay the foundation for business leaders to assess investment in nature-positive schemes, we seek the development of a model business case that accounts for:

- > Tangible Biodiversity Outcomes
- > Tangible Economic Outcomes
- > Intangible Corporate Leadership Outcomes

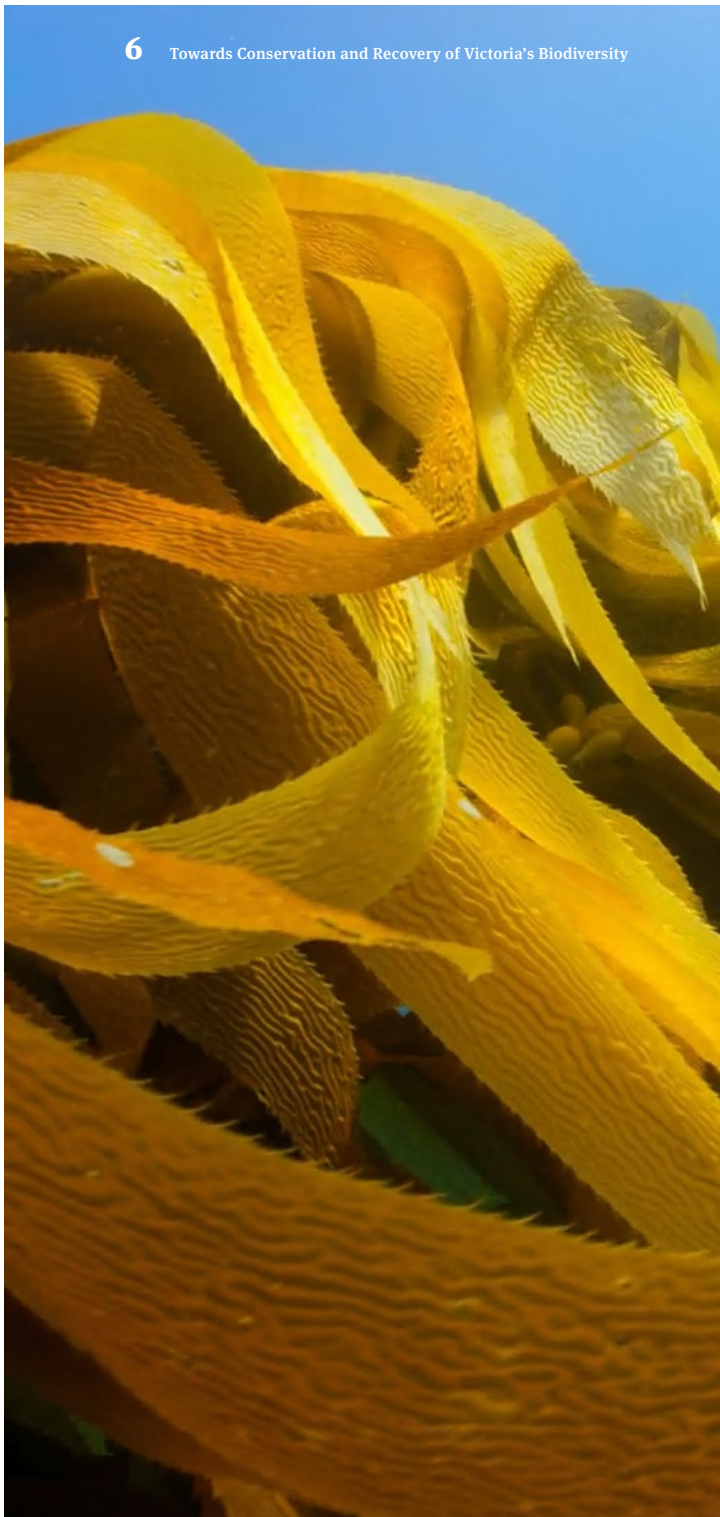
5.3: Develop and Deliver Business Awareness and Engagement Campaigns

We call on leading Victorian companies to help us convene a community of practice with like-minded partners and corporates to drive awareness-raising campaigns for the private sector, including calls to action, industry guides, and fundraising for the Intersectoral Nature Fund.

Action 6: CREATE an Independent, Intersectoral Taskforce for Biodiversity Recovery and Conservation in Victoria

Recognising a whole-of-society crisis requires a whole-of-society response, the Royal Society of Victoria seeks resourcing to establish an independent, intersectoral taskforce on biodiversity recovery and conservation to oversee the implementation of these and further actions, operating as an open and authentic partnership between all sectors.





Endnotes

ⁱ IPBES (2019): Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. E. S. Brondizio, J. Settele, S. Díaz, and H. T. Ngo (editors). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. 1148 pages. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3831673>

ⁱⁱ Commonwealth of Australia. (2020, December). Tackling the feral cat pandemic: a plan to save Australian wildlife. Retrieved from Parliament of Australia: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Former_Committees/Environment_and_Energy/Feralanddomesticcats/Report

ⁱⁱⁱ Bekessy, S., & Wintle, B. (2022, April 29). Fail: our report card on the government's handling of Australia's extinction crisis. Retrieved from The Conversation: <https://theconversation.com/fail-our-report-card-on-the-governments-handling-of-australias-extinction-crisis-181786>

^{iv} Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022, July 26). Value of Agricultural Commodities Produced, Australia. Retrieved from Australian Bureau of Statistics: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/agriculture/value-agricultural-commodities-produced-australia/latest-release>

^v Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability. (2021, December 15). State of the Environment Biodiversity Update 2021 Report. Retrieved from Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria: <https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/publications-library/state-environment-biodiversity-update-2021-report>

This Position in Brief summarises the Royal Society of Victoria's analysis of the current operational context and calls to action from two larger, referenced reports - these provide a one-page position and also a fulsome articulation of the Society's assessment of the status quo in Victoria and Australia, these being:

1. **At a Glance:** Position on a Page
2. **Report for Changemakers:** Towards Conservation and Recovery of Victoria's Biodiversity

These papers are available from the Royal Society of Victoria's website at <https://rsv.org.au/biodiversity-recovery/>