

Statement to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's Faunal Extinction Crisis

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They say pain makes people change. I can attest it is true. The pain and loss of this year has tested my personal resilience and reshaped my beliefs. Last year, had I sat before you, I would have constructed a different statement. I would have urged Australia to commit to the important international targets of Paris and CBD.

I am a landholder—we have a farm and a vineyard. I am also a card-carrying member of the conservation movement. For thirty years my *raison d'être* has been as a voice for nature in human affairs. I am an author and have written a PhD about the international relations of wildlife conservation. I am a member of the IUCN WCPA Transboundary Conservation Specialist Group, the Joint IUCN SSC/WCPA Marine Mammal Taskforce, and the Planet Politics Institute. I am the Chair of the UNEP Convention on Migratory Species Aquatic Wildmeat Working Group, and I am the Publisher for Stormbird Press. Conservation is, literally, my life. But the pain of this year has stripped away a veil.

Knowing I commit my words to Hansard, I sit here today prepared to say in public it is too late. Too late to continue as we are. Too late to continue with our old plans.

And, I am done.

Division is dangerous

The decision that we have left it too late to implement outdated plans has woken a new insight in me. Steve Biko, a brave anti-apartheid activist, once said 'A community is easily divided when their perception of the same thing is different.' I'm finding the wisdom in this statement now. Division surrounds humankind right now. The uber-rich elite—in a quest for resource and power—benefit from us being separated into camps fuelling our divisions. The conservation sector further fuels that division by casting us into tribes—those for and those against nature.

Division ripples through governments, propping up the very systems that are driving the dual climate and extinction crises. Nowhere is this more apparent than amongst the fossil fuel industry that invests millions of dollars convincing both the public and politicians to make the same catastrophic mistakes we have been making for decades.

In the shadow of the CBD COP and the global pledge, last week my husband gave evidence to the Senate Inquiry into the impact of seismic testing on fisheries and the marine environment.^[1] Despite the depth of science, the miles of journal papers, and the wisdom of the fishing industry – despite the Back Summer travesty—some Senators on

the panel persisted with the myth that we could not substantiate the science of harm. That my husband was the lead author of CMS Family Guidelines on Environmental Impact Assessment for Marine Noise-generating Activities,^[2] endorsed in 2017 by nearly 130 countries, carried no weight. This inquiry was not about whales, or seals, or beautiful reefs. This was an inquiry into the impact of a devastating industry on fisheries and the environment on which those fisheries depend—it was about the fossil fuel industry. A juggernaut of power and privilege that is directly complicit in the changing climatic conditions that created the firestorm that devastated this island in January 2020. The inquiry should be a gift for change. It's being served on a plate. Yet both sides of politics protect the fossil fuel industry, even in the face of the laws and international commitments that say it must end.

Meanwhile, the conservation industry persists with the myth that we must lock away tracts of land for nature, because only that will save nature from climate change. Big conservation argues the people closest to the land are too ignorant. The powerful voice of the conservation industry fuels a distrust for anyone using the land and sea to grow or harvest food or fibre—dismissing the connections many in modern agriculture, horticulture, viticulture, and fisheries have to a healthy landscape—while blithely continuing in their roles as consumers who demand cheap food and fibre from the very production systems they vilify. They demonise those who depend on wild resources for their food, while speaking from the privileged access to city supermarkets filled with laden shelves of packaged goods. The conservation sector's mantra of 'parks and distrust' tolls like a drumbeat at a wake.

This year I saw firsthand when the chips are down, many in the conservation industry prioritize fundraising—foolishly forgetting that people are part of nature—collecting millions of dollars to support wildlife rescue and feeding stations, while farmers on Kangaroo Island bent their backs to destroying their suffering farm animals without a whiff of support. These were the men and women who had faced weeks of unrelenting firefighting.

Never have I felt so disconnected from my peers. Never has it been so clear how disconnected the conservation industry can be to people.

Division is dangerous.

We Were Warned

Never have I felt that politics served another master as deeply as I do now. They warned us this disaster was coming. Scientists have been telling us a changing global climate is affecting Australia's fire weather by modifying the underlying climate drivers.^[3] During the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, I watched the livestream of Karl Braganza from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology present with exquisite detail those climate drivers and predictions for the 2019/20 fire seasons. At the end of the presentation the Commission Chair, Mark Binskin, asked 'About mid 2019 when you were starting to provide advice to those committees that look at what's coming up in the fire season, how did it play out in real time?' Braganza's replied "Things really played out the way our forecast models, both in climate and weather, suggested they would."^[4]

We know State fire services were aware of the dangers and prepared as much as they could, but they have been systematically starved of funds and resources for years. The Commonwealth ignored direct appeals from people they should trust to address the situation early,^[5] and did almost nothing to get ready. Since, although the vast scale, intensity and destructiveness of Black Summer fires represents a major national security crisis for Australia in the sheer impact to biodiversity,^[6] the political response has been to fiddle at the margins.

Thirteen days after Geoff and I lost our home, farm, and wildlife sanctuary, academic Anthony Burke wrote that Australia's failure to prepare for the Black Summer's fires was a product of three things:

1. the narrow way we think about national security;
2. anthropocentric thinking that fails to value how humans are enmeshed in natural ecosystems; and
3. four decades in which our system of government has been vandalised for the benefit of the powerful at the expense of the rest.^[6]

Unspoken Truths

As a landholder stripped bare by the Black Summer fires I have moved, psychologically and physically, into the camp of people who are now living inside the grip of climate change. Climate change is not a theoretical or distant horizon. It is real. It is now. And it bites hard. I know, and my community knows, it threatens the future of the entire country, and the vast tapestry of biodiversity on which we depend. There is no question this threatens national security.

In this climate-changed bardo there are unspoken truths we must confront. We've just witnessed the might of fire to destroy decades of conservation in a single night, despite the razor wire in our minds we believed would protect it. Chris Dickman and Lily Van Eeden coordinated a study for WWF that found almost 3 billion wild animals—143 million mammals, 2.46 billion reptiles, 180 million birds, 51 million frogs—were killed or displaced in the Black Summer fires.^[7] Alongside these were 125,000 sheep and cattle.^[8] Nowhere was the livestock tragedy deeper than on Kangaroo Island. The full impacts on Kangaroo Island's biodiversity will not be fully understood for years to come, as extinction debts are slowly, painfully realised. Sure, trees will regrow. 'Nature will rebound' people are fond of saying, but we know these fires burned hotter, deeper, and were far more extreme than this landscape is adapted to.

Some coarse surrogates are being developed now. Brendan Wintle, Sarah Legge, and John Woinarski have projected that, across Australia, 327 (272 plants, and 55 animals, including five invertebrates) of the ~1800 listed threatened species in Australia had a significant portion (>10 percent) of their known distribution within the Black Summer fire footprint. Thirty-one of these were already critically endangered. Among the significantly impacted species, 114 have lost at least half of their habitat and 49 have lost over 80 percent.^[9]

Parks didn't protect them. Arguably, the misuse of environmental laws sealed their doom. And, who was it that stood in the face of the firestorms? Farmers and landholders

fought harder than anyone to save nature along with their farms. These are the same individuals that have been hampered for decades by a scientific bureaucracy administering land clearing laws that ‘count’ rather than ‘feel’, ‘prescribe’ rather than ‘support’, and have designed themselves into an impenetrable mess arguably designed to exclude landholders from managing the risk of fire to biodiversity on their own land—trees, and animals, and insects they cherish. Our balled-up, metric-driven interpretation of laws, suppressed cool, controlled fires that might have saved a significant portion of those species and habitats. Landholders were disempowered and bureaucracies invested because we don’t trust.

Adapting to Survive

The manifesto of the multi-disciplinary Planet Politics Institute^[12] calls for a ‘political imagination that can rise from the ashes of our canonical texts. It is about meditating on our failures and finding the will needed for our continued survival.’ ... ‘we must ask questions that are intimately connected to capitalism, modernity, and oppression. We must ensure that our diplomacy, our politics, and our institutions are open to those who will bear the brunt of ecological change.’^[12]

It’s too late for another round of argument and obfuscation. My small community, and the nature we love, must adapt on our own to survive. We feel our connection to this landscape; we understand we are a part of its ecosystems. We are those who ‘will bear the brunt of ecological change’ and we must banish the division and come together—all of us—conservation, farming, fishing, and forestry to work out how to carry on. We need to learn to hear and understand each other because we want the same thing. We want this landscape—one we all love deeply—to endure.

To prevail, our community and the wild landscape we love needs a tenure-blind plan for managing our collective future in the presence of climate change—a plan that empowers us all, together. A plan we develop to suit us and this landscape, not to a formula designed in Canberra, or New York, or Brussels. A community-based landscape plan that includes the proper application of land-use fires (weed control, wildfire prevention, and preparedness and suppression of wildfires) because we are the first to bear the losses from uncontrolled fires in our locality.

A few short years ago I wrote that the empowerment of communities, who depend on healthy ecosystems for their lives and livelihoods, makes them effective stewards.^[11] My words then were tuned to the ecological justice of communities in developing regions of the world, but those words now ring true for my community as well. This ethic is more than hiring local people as park rangers or ecotour guides or systematically enabling them to monitor and blow the whistle on illegal activities. It means truly acknowledging a community connection to a place and the wildlife they live with—recognising these forests, grassy plains, or wetlands are their home—can build powerful local conservation bonds. Our biodiversity is the most important element in our lives. It’s the life force that sustains us, the food that feeds us, and the context that enlivens our souls. We cannot survive without it.

Ironically, community-level land management is a mantra Australia finds easy to suggest for other places—developing countries where our aid and support is offered. In these other places we recognise that colonial fire suppression policies have caused conflicts, wildfire, and livelihood impacts. For these other places we suggest that fire policies should address adaptive, inclusive and integrative within land management.^[10] So why not here? Because we are divided.

Conservation goals should be set by governments, but the conservation form should be born of the community—our homes, our solutions, our management. Communities should have the power to speak for the wildlife that surrounds us in national and international environmental governance. We should be free to adapt, change, and evolve. We should have the liberty to choose if we want to pursue voluntary area closures, or to consider if new activities should start. The solutions we form should be born of our context.^[11]

This proposal requires a leap of faith and commitment from the conservation industry and government actors, to genuinely devolve decision making to the community level and to adapt the national and international political system to embrace a multitude of conservation expressions—a tapestry of conservation diversity.

To make it work, there will need to be a high degree of monitoring and transparency, supported capacity to take part in community-based landscape plan committees, and deep and sustained conservation science programmes.^[12] I appreciate the governance I propose is a complex and diffuse logistical programme, but its complexity mirrors life. It is what we must do.

Becoming Radically Local

I believed it before, but I know it now. We have run out of time. Climate change is already upon us. Our community cannot afford the opinions of people in a city far away dividing us—no community can. We cannot survive the scientific bureaucracy of Adelaide or Canberra that listens to a disconnected, distrustful conservation elite instead of us. We cannot persist if we are beholden to the budget cuts and sleight of hand as the priority of Federal and State Governments shift with the wind. We must control our own destiny and the destiny of the millions of souls we share this landscape with—the carpenter bees, the pygmy possums, the kangaroos, and the stringybarks. These are our neighbours and our kin.

If this Inquiry is serious, I urge it to consider radical change to how we operate; an adaptation to the climate changed world we have created. The big-picture, command-and-control system inherent in this Inquiry's own terms of reference—administration by distant government departments, the metrics of percentages—has not worked. Australia's laws are good when you compare them to other biodiverse regions of the world, yet both sides of politics have abused those laws and permitted the powerful to destroy nature, anyway. Nauseating as that track record is, a single fire season eclipsed its damage. This year, a vast network of the natural heritage estate became ash in the wind.

We killed three billion animals.

We are on the brink of losing everything. We have no choice left but to do what was obvious all along—to empower radically local conservation, immediately—not incrementally, aiming for ten- or twenty-years’ time. We need local roundtables of planning and decision, populated by those who carry the knowledge of our land, and of fire, flood, and drought—First Nations, farmers, fishers, and conservation landholders—with science there to educate and empower. We should seek agreement and understand compromise. We should banish division.

Kangaroo Island’s plans won’t be the same as Kangaroo Valley’s. We are different communities and different regions. We have different priorities. Devolving the power to communities to plan and manage means we must accept this mosaic of difference. We won’t be able to easily ‘measure and count’ anymore, and politics won’t like that. But we have no time left to pander to niceties. The time for slow action is past.

Remembering that our diplomacy, our politics, and our institutions must be open to those who will bear the brunt of ecological change, the Kangaroo Island community stands in that space, right now—we are living ecological change.

Recommendations

I strongly recommend the inquiry embraces radically local conservation, including:

1. National environment and land management laws that provide the guiding principles and baselines for the development of a mosaic of community landscape plans that are based on identifiable ecoregions.
2. Community-based landscape plans that are adaptive and embraced by the whole community, guiding how that community lives and uses their land, when they burn that land, what and where they grow and how they farm. Everyone should have a seat at the table and be accountable to each other.
3. Science that is nested, permanently into each community, providing deep support, rather than being abused as a regulatory tool.

This means when a plan is made, Federal and State government roles should be to support the plan implementation and manage outlier behaviour.

This year I’ve stood on the very cliff edge of my beliefs, tempted to jump for the shame. Three billion souls perished on our watch. I am done. Done with the plans. Done with the talk. I have become radically local.

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