



Thursday 21 May 2020

Hon Sussan Ley MP  
PO Box 6022  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

To the Hon. Sussan Ley MP and the Independent Review Panel

We the undersigned are health and medical professionals and organisations who work to protect and promote human health. We wish to draw attention to the current review of the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and its importance to the health of Australians.

Human health and wellbeing are fundamentally dependent on the health of the natural world. Healthy, biodiverse ecosystems provide us with clean air and water, food and fibre; regulate our climate, pests and diseases; and are the source of most of the medicines we rely on. They also provide places for recreation, psychological rejuvenation and spiritual connection. Connecting with nature leads to happier, healthier communities<sup>1</sup>.

Conversely, as biodiversity and ecosystems decline or are lost, the benefits that nature provides to humans are compromised and human health and wellbeing suffer.

We note that the EPBC Act review is occurring during a period where Australia has experienced back-to-back crises of extraordinary scale in the 2019-2020 'Black Summer' bushfires and now the COVID-19 pandemic. These events highlight the fundamental interdependence between humans and the natural world and the consequences for human health when this is ignored.

It is widely accepted that the summer's fires were in large part fuelled by human induced climate change.

The fires caused unprecedented loss of animal life and ecological devastation, but also direct loss of human life, physical injuries and the displacement of many thousands of people. The prolonged smoke pollution over eastern Australia is estimated to have resulted in over 1300 presentations to emergency departments with asthma, more than 3000 hospitalisations for heart and lung problems and 417 excess deaths<sup>2</sup>. The mental health impacts are likely to be evident for decades.

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<sup>1</sup> Victorian State Government Department of Environment Land Water and Planning. Victorian Memorandum for Health and Nature. <https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/biodiversityvictorian-memorandum-for-health-and-nature> (2017)

<sup>2</sup> Borchers Arriagada, N. et al. Unprecedented smoke-related health burden associated with the 2019–20 bushfires in eastern Australia. *Med J Aust*. doi: 10.5694/mja2.50545. [Epub ahead of print]

Climate change, biodiversity loss and human health were not widely considered to be related at the time the EPBC Act was enacted in 1999. However, it is now understood they are inextricably linked.

The devastating COVID-19 pandemic is thought to have originated in pathogens from other species, as with other infectious diseases before it such as Ebola, SARS and Hendra virus. At the heart of this transmission is a disregard for animal welfare and destruction of habitats, with wildlife treated as a commodity and human communities encroaching on previously undeveloped areas.

We must protect the natural environment in order to prevent further and potentially even more deadly pandemics.

The EPBC Act has failed to achieve its objectives of protecting Australia's environment and promoting ecologically sustainable development and biodiversity conservation. Australia currently has the second highest rate of biodiversity loss in the world<sup>3</sup> and is globally recognised as a land clearing and deforestation 'hotspot'<sup>4</sup>.

Our scarce water resources are in decline, threatening the survival of numerous rural and regional communities, our agricultural productivity and our food security. Some of our marine habitats, including the Great Barrier Reef, face collapse.

Climate change, one of the biggest threats to our natural environment, biodiversity and to human health, is not considered by the EPBC Act at all.

The degradation of Australia's natural environment and loss of our unique biodiversity is in effect a dismantling of our life support systems.

By failing to properly protect our environment, we fail to protect ourselves.

In reforming Australia's environmental laws, we urge that:

- **Human health considerations are kept front and centre.** While our precious natural environment deserves protection for its own sake, human health and wellbeing also depend upon it.
- **An entirely new generation of environmental law is considered, as developed by the Australian Panel of Experts on Environmental Law.** Much greater and more robust environmental protections will be required if we are to survive and thrive as a community into the future.
- **The institutions responsible for developing and delivering national environmental law include individuals with public health expertise.** This will ensure our environment and our health are seen as an integrated and indivisible whole

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<sup>3</sup> Waldron A., Miller D.C., Redding D., et al. Reductions in global biodiversity loss predicted from conservation spending. *Nature*. 551; 364-367 (2017)

<sup>4</sup> World Wildlife Fund. WWF Living Forests Report: Chapter 5: Saving Forests at Risk. <https://c402277.ssl.cf1.rackcdn.com/publications/793/files/original/Report.pdf?1430147305> (2015)

Yours Sincerely,

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 Public Health Association of Victoria  
 Health Nature & Sustainability Research Group  
 Deakin University  
 Women's Health in the North  
 Central Australian Rural Practitioners Association  
 Gender and Disaster Pod  
 Australian Association of Social Workers  
 Australian Healthcare & Hospitals Association

Australasian Epidemiological Association  
 Australian Health Promotion Association  
 Children's Healthcare Australasia  
 Victorian Medical Women's Society  
 Australian Health Care Reform Alliance  
 Australian Medical Students' Association  
 Australian Federation of Medical Women  
 Australian Institute of Health Innovation  
 Doctors Reform Society



Gender & Disaster Pod  
 An initiative of WHGNE, WHIN & MUDRI



Australian Institute of Health Innovation (AIHI)

