

Forum takes first steps to address the state of our environment

By SANDI MILLER

IN DECEMBER 2021, the latest *State of the Environment Report* was received by the Australian Government.

The incoming Albanese Government tabled it in July 2022; the report showed that Australia's environment is in a parlous state.

The report found the health of Australia's environment is "poor", with 19 of our ecosystems, including the Great Barrier Reef, showing signs of — or nearing — collapse.

Seven and a half million hectares of threatened species habitat were cleared in the last decade — about the size of Tasmania.

Shamefully, Australia is a world leader in extinction, adding 200 plants and animals to the extinction list since the last *State of the Environment Report* in 2016.

Sarah Bekessy from RMIT University called it a real wake-up call.

"I think this is the first time many Australians realised that the environment is not okay."

The report states:

"Overall, the state and trend of the environment of Australia are poor and deteriorating as a result of increasing pressures from climate change, habitat loss, invasive species, pollution, and resource extraction. Changing environmental conditions mean that many species and ecosystems are increasingly threatened.

Multiple pressures create cumulative impacts that amplify threats to our environment, and abrupt changes in ecological systems have been recorded in the past five years.

Our inability to adequately manage pressures will continue to result in species extinctions and deteriorating ecosystem conditions, reducing the environmental capital on which current and future economies depend. Social, environmental and economic impacts are already apparent."

As the new Federal Environment Minister Tania Plibersek said, "It is bad, and it's getting worse."

But, all is not yet lost; the report said that immediate action with innovative management and collaboration can turn things around.

"Australian individuals, communities, non-government organisations and businesses are engaging with nature and supporting biodiversity and heritage," the report said.

One such group is the Nillumbik-based environment group, Nillumbio, who, along with Edendale Farm, recently facilitated the first in a series of forums to seek solutions to address and combat environmental degradation in Nillumbik and discuss ways to reverse biodiversity decline.

Biodiversity forum

The well-attended forum was moved online as a COVID-safe measure but still managed a lively discussion of how local grass-roots efforts can produce the type of world we want for the future.

The forum explored ways that the everyday person can make a difference and provided a starting point for those who might not know where to begin.

The forum heard from Wurundjeri Elder Uncle Dave, who discussed the Indigenous concepts around caring for country for over 65,000 years.

Uncle Dave encouraged us all to embrace Indigenous care of country and said we should all consider ourselves custodians of the land.

"Bunjil, our creator, our father who gave us the laws of this land, didn't give us the land; he gave us custody and responsibility to care for the land.

"He said it is not yours to trade; it is not yours to sell, it is not yours to abuse, it is your custodial responsibility to care, not only for your community, but as you extract the resources you need for your food, your fibre, your

medicine, and your shelter, your sustenance — you must remember that what you are taking; you are also taking from the plants, the trees, the animals, the birds, and the fish, the waterways the sky, and the soils, and it must return that at some stage."

Uncle Dave said that each Aboriginal child is given a totem and explained its significance.

"Their totems are areas of responsibility; with my totem, which is the Ringtail Possum, it is my obligation that when I am out, walking on country, if I see habitat where I should expect to find Ringtail Possums, I should look for the Ringtail Possum, and see whether the habitat is healthy to support the possum.

And that's the circle of my area of responsibility for the Ringtail Possum. My youngest grandson's totem, given to him by his father, is the Powerful Owl.

Many people would think the relationship between the Powerful Owl and the Ringtail Possum would put my grandson and me at odds because the Powerful Owl's favourite food is the Ringtail Possum.

But that strengthens my relationship because I have to understand that the possum takes something out of the land, but something else will take the possum.

It's my responsibility to ensure my totem is healthy, as it could be predated upon by my grandson's.

As he grows older, he will understand that the Powerful Owl needs different types of trees to live in and make its nest; it needs to be able to find food, so he becomes responsible for the different resources for the Powerful Owl.

He has a little circle of knowledge, and all the other totems become interlinking circles.

Just like we say the Olympic Games celebrate human endeavour, we look at ecological endeavour.

We have been breaking those circles; those rings aren't linked anymore.

The reality is that there are not enough of our people to do what needs to be done.

We have got to stop calling ourselves Indigenous and non-Indigenous; we all need to think about and care about ecology.

What can we do as individuals — not what the government and science can do — but what can we do?

Think today about what you do in your life, then you take on a totem and make that your responsibility, share what you can learn with your children and your community, ask other people what their totem is, and see how those circles connect.

But I believe that by creating these circles and these links, we can slow down biodiversity decline — by taking individual responsibility for where you live and what is important to you, that is not based on economics, but it's based on the country that you have taken on the responsibility for.

You pay for your house, and you are in debt to the bank for the rest of your life, and you hope you pay it off before you pass away, so you can pass it on to your children so that they don't have to work so hard.

The reality is, it's not long-term sustainable, but if you can leave behind a legacy of not a house, but a legacy of an animal, or fish, or a plant, or water, or the air, then we can truly learn to walk country together.

And in that way, we will begin to heal country together.

Once we begin that journey, we can all call ourselves Australians."

The forum also heard from Sarah Bekessy from RMIT University, who co-developed the biodiversity-sensitive urban design protocol that has now been used by numerous developers, governments, and non-government

AUSTRALIA'S BROKEN BOUNDARIES



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SOURCES: IPCC, STOCKHOLM RESILIENCE CENTRE, UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS, DANAH BERKESTON ET AL.



organisations to design innovative urban biodiversity strategies.

She discussed how these strategies could help create greener cities and healthier populations.

"We know that just trying to keep people healthy, happy, connected, stress-free, and illness-free in cities is becoming more and more challenging. And we know that people are looking towards nature as a key part of the solution, a way of cooling our cities — delivering health benefits to our children.

Biodiversity is delivering some of the important benefits that nature can provide in cities.

If you are lucky enough to have biodiversity in your street, you are more likely to live healthier and longer.

The health benefits alone are compelling enough reason for wanting to embed nature in our cities; we also know that it's an important way to try and combat the extreme weather events that we're going to see in cities. It's such a critical way of enchanting people with nature, reconnecting people with nature, and connecting with Indigenous history and culture.

And of course, you know, the idea that we can allow some threatened species to survive and thrive is another key motivator."

She said one project she is working on is nature-based prescribing for treating mental, well-being, and loneliness in cities — to go to the doctor and get a prescription to enjoy nature.

Sarah said we need to think about how we develop a city that is different from the McMansion idea.

She said we often see biodiversity as a problem we must deal with — and probably just clear and offset — we do not see it as a massive asset, the asset that we should try to maximise during every step of development or renovation.

"We need to get away from offsetting and reframe nature as an asset we want to enhance, restore and regenerate."

She provided some simple ideas for people to consider when building, renovating or landscaping.

"If you're going to renovate a house, you'll often have a six-star energy rating, five-star water rating objective, but do you think about what birds, animals, plants, and ecosystems we are going to try and be regenerative for?"

"Thinking not just in a broad way but getting specific.

"Think about species that are ecologically feasible, so they're going to be able to survive on a site and

Photo: STEPHEN TAFRA (UNSPLASH)



might have conservation value or provide ecosystem services — such as microbats to help with mosquitoes — or with cultural significance — or you could link it to a human experience, for example, to have swimmable rivers."

She said the way forward was not just having nature alongside cities but as part of the urban fabric, and every person in a city being part of a solution by playing their bit, looking at the design of their homes, their street, and their gardens.

She said much of the work she has been doing is focusing on working systematically through all the obstacles — "what about the leaves in my gutter, the tree roots causing damage to infrastructure or fire safety?" for example.

"There are many barriers and obstacles; however, there are design solutions for every single one of these problems — we haven't found anything yet that we can't find a design for — so it's actually about thinking through those obstacles and finding innovative ways forward."

Basha Stasak, nature campaign manager at the Australian Conservation Foundation, discussed what all levels of government could and should be doing in the wake of the *State of the Environment Report*, including enshrining stronger laws and enforcing them.

In terms of businesses, she said the

most obvious and simple thing is to "stop investing in nature destruction."

"For major banks and super funds to stop putting money into activities that are destroying nature, such as land clearing, and transform those investments into things that will help nature is a critical and simple step they can take."

Another is eliminating nature destruction from supply chains, such as deforestation.

"We've paid a lot of attention in the last few decades to the role that governments play, but we have paid far less attention to the roles that businesses can play — and that's what we need to shift," she said.

The forum was treated to the screening of a short film, *Regenerating Australia*, produced by Damon Gameau for Regenerate Australia, which showed how Australia could be if we began regenerating our landscapes, our infrastructure, our politics, and our relationship with indigenous Australia.

theregenerators.co/regenerating-australia/see-the-film.

Organiser Vicky Shukuroglou stressed that this first forum was the start of the conversation, and Nillumbio will hold other forums in the future.

If you would like to learn more, or get involved, visit www.nillumbio.org and sign up to their mailing list to keep up to date with future events.