



Submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

August 2020



Jesuit
Social Services
Building a Just Society

Summary

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation. Our mission is to build a just society where all people can live to their full potential. We have over 40 years' experience working at the hard end of social justice, working in solidarity with people experiencing disadvantage and working to change policies, practices, ideas and values that perpetuate inequality, prejudice and exclusion.

As we have seen through the 2019-2020 bushfire crisis, and in the current overlapping health and economic crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, those who are already marginalised suffer the most and this extends to the impacts of biodiversity loss and degradation.

The community services sector is increasingly recognising the effects that ecological impacts are having on the people with whom we work: people who are more vulnerable to the current and predicted impacts because of where they live, their income, age, health conditions, disabilities, or where they work. The work we have done in addressing the root drivers of vulnerability and marginalisation is even more important now in the face of accelerating environmental and climate threats, as disasters and emergencies starkly reveal the existing fissures and inequalities in our society.

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria*, as loss of healthy biodiversity and habitat has ramifications for all Victorians. The impacts of climate change and ecological injustice are rising and, as we attempt to address these impacts, this time of multiple crises is also opportune to address the root drivers of marginalisation and vulnerability environmentally, economically and socially.

We look forward to further engagement with a recovery grounded in principles of justice and equity. For more information about this submission, please contact:

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Introduction

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria*.

Our submission acknowledges that this Inquiry is occurring simultaneously with a state of disaster and emergency due to COVID-19 and the Inquiry into Victoria's 2019-2020 bushfire season. As predictions of climate change impacts are becoming more evident, there are realistic concerns that we are facing a series of emergencies and crises, all interconnected to our relationship with the environments we live within. It is increasingly apparent, as has been articulated for decades now, that the burdens of ecosystem stress and destruction will not be borne equally.

Our submission emphasises the need to connect biodiversity impacts upon those most marginalised in our communities. Without specific protective and preventative action by governments and policy makers, it is already disadvantaged people and communities who bear the brunt of climate impacts and other emergencies.¹ It is also the same communities that went through the 2019-2020 bushfires that remain at risk of further fires into the future. The protection of healthy ecosystems and restorative approaches to healing broken ecological relationships is fundamental to the realisation of social equity and justice. We call for an equitable, just and holistic response to protect our common home.

Jesuit Social Services and ecological justice

For more than forty years, Jesuit Social Services has been committed to building a just society. In an increasingly complex era of climate crisis, public health emergencies, environmental degradation, economic pressures and rising social inequity, new challenges towards building a just society are appearing. Jesuit Social Services works with the most marginalised and vulnerable who are the least responsible for ecological and economic risks and threats but are the most affected by their emergence.

Recognising that environmental challenges pose particular risks to the communities with whom we work, since 2012, Jesuit Social Services has sought to bring an ecological perspective to all our operations. The interconnection between environmental and social justice has influenced our practice, policy, advocacy and organisational identity. It has shaped our strategy to ensure we are equipped to address justice issues of the future, and to lead peer organisations around issues of ecological justice. With VCOSS and RMIT, we are now engaged in sector trainings on issues of ecological justice and responding to community sector concerns about climate change impacts, which is part of ecological justice.

¹ See Jesuit Social Services (2018). *Climate Change Discussion Paper: Submission to the Northern Territory Government, November 2018* ([online](#)).

Our 2017 paper, [Ecological Justice – Expanding the Conversation](#), outlines this journey and the commitment to building a just society inclusive of both social and environmental justice. As Pope Francis put it in Laudato Si:

Today we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

Our commitment to ecological justice is now embedded and integrated across each of our key priority areas:

- **Justice and crime prevention** – people involved with the justice system.
- **Mental health and wellbeing** – people with complex and multiple needs, including mental illness, trauma, homelessness and complex bereavement.
- **Settlement and community building** – recently arrived immigrants and refugees, and disadvantaged communities.
- **Education, training and employment** – people with barriers to sustainable employment.
- **Gender and culture** – providing leadership on the reduction of violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men and building new approaches to improve their wellbeing and keep families and communities safe.

Our pioneering program and advocacy actions include:

- the integration of ecological considerations into *Our Way of Proceeding* across the three domains of human spirit, our practice framework and business processes.
- the establishment of the Ecological Justice Hub in Brunswick, Victoria, that provides a range of community education and advocacy activities; skills, training and employment support into green economy jobs for people experiencing barriers to employment; and green living demonstration projects for the wider community that support climate change transformations and environmental restoration.
- an ongoing series of cross-sector symposia focused on climate justice, including the NT Climate Justice Symposium hosted in Darwin and Alice Springs, in partnership with NTCOSS and the Environment Centre NT; and Just Transitions and Ecological Justice forums conducted in Victoria with VCOSS, DWELP, RMIT University, Victorian Trades Hall, plus other contributors.
- delivering a suite of training for the community services sector, designed in collaboration with VCOSS and RMIT Climate Change Exchange, on climate change adaptation and ecological justice, with a focus upon organisational change and sector responses to the most marginalised in the community.
- the incorporation of indicators of environmental risks and threats into our nation-wide research and work on place-based disadvantage, *Dropping of the Edge (DOTE)*.
- increasing our focus on how to minimise the unfairness inherent in ecological injustice, climate change and associated disasters by exploring the concept of a ‘just transition’ – that is, how to move from current untenable economic and social systems to an ecologically sustainable, zero greenhouse gas emissions world in a way that ensures those least able to cope with climate change receive the help they need to successfully adapt.

For more detail, see our most recent discussion paper in our ecological justice series on [just transitions](#).

1. Ecosystem health and impacts on the most marginalised

As the Victorian Government recognises, the 2009 and 2019-2020 bushfires are linked to decades of unrestricted global warming and climate change. This was acknowledged in the 2009 Royal Commission into the Black Saturday fires and, subsequently, has been followed up with the *Climate Change Act 2017*, and a concerted effort to invest in climate change mitigation and adaptation in Victoria. The unprecedented and destructive impacts of climate change across Australia, inclusive of the extreme heat and drought which fuel unprecedented bushfires and smoke haze, sit alongside and compound other sources of environmental degradation and ecological injustice from which people and planet are suffering.

The foundation of ecological justice is care of our common home. Ecological justice understands that healthy relationships between human communities and the ecosystems and built environments they live with is central to the realisation of justice. Biodiversity includes all components of the living world: the health and variety of native plants, animals and other living things across our land, rivers, coast and oceans. Healthy biodiversity includes genetic diversity, species diversity and ecosystem diversity. Victoria's natural environment is richly diverse and unique and its health has an impact upon all Victorian's livelihoods and lives.

Jesuit Social Services supports the objectives of the Victorian Government's plan *Protecting Victoria's Environment - Biodiversity 2037*. This plan recognises that there is continued decline in the quality and extent of habitat of native species. Threats to biodiversity include habitat loss, weeds, pest animals and changed fire and water regimes – all of which will be exacerbated by the effects of climate change. Biodiversity has been historically undervalued and is not accounted for in the economy, yet it provides enormous benefits to society. As the plan recognises, healthy biodiversity is fundamental to the health, wellbeing and prosperity of current and future generations; reduces the impacts of climate change; is vital to tourism; is fundamental to the cultural practices of First Nations Victorians; and, importantly, has intrinsic value and a right to exist, regardless of human considerations. Jesuit Social Services commends the Victorian Government's commitment to the implementation of *Biodiversity 2037* and looks forward to further developments in this area. It remains that healthy biodiversity is the ultimate safety net for all communities but is under threat due to the overwhelming impact of human activity that is not protective or respectful of these essential relationships.

[Biodiversity and Marginalised Communities](#)

Jesuit Social Services' expertise lies in addressing and anticipating the impacts upon those we work with, who are those most marginalised in our community. We have expertise in speaking to the social, economic and ecological impacts upon those we work with. Therefore, we rely upon scientific experts to advise on the extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity and the most appropriate way to protect and restore its integrity. Of concern are the findings of the [Victorian State of the Environment 2018 Report](#) which revealed most biodiversity indicators are poor and trending downwards.

Threats of concern in the report were the following:

- Changes to fire and disaster frequency and intensity

- Invasive plants and animals
- Habitat loss and fragmentation
- Changes to riverflows, wetlands and floodplains.

The impacts of ecosystem stress and degradation are immediately evidenced in rural areas. However, the causes and secondary impacts (such as extreme heat, smoke and depletion of soil and water health) impacted very heavily upon our participants living in urban and peri-urban areas, particularly the homeless and those living in substandard housing.

The bushfires impacted on the delivery of community services beyond organisations working on the front line with emergency services, such as Red Cross and St Vincent de Paul Society. The longer-term impacts are being evidenced in increased health vulnerability due to smoke and extreme heat impacts, energy insecurity, increased livelihood costs, internally displaced population movement, and family violence, as well as significant mental health impacts. Our staff have seen a rise in secondary stresses with their participants, as well as stretching services they normally rely upon and being diverted elsewhere. This has been exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-19 upon service delivery. These unprecedented and compounding challenges will create new classes of vulnerable people. But they will also disproportionately affect people who are already vulnerable due to poverty, housing insecurity, mental illness, disability, or age, as well as marginalised people who already face discrimination.

Biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation is a threat multiplier; the impacts are often unexpected and can collide with each other. The stressors of ecological degradation include extreme heat, low humidity, built environment and natural environment loss and devastation, health and life threats, telecommunications fragility, energy shortages, food and medicine shortages, and widespread smoke haze and air pollution. The secondary impacts are systemic, inclusive of economic, infrastructure, defence and emergency management resources, monetary systems, unpredictable population movements, food security, energy fragility, mental health, occupational health and safety concerns, family violence and biosecurity risks.

These lists are not exhaustive and are being compounded by COVID-19 impacts. It is currently overwhelming for policy makers and research experts to quantify the impacts. In light of such uncertainty, it is difficult to predict what the impacts upon our participants will be.

That is why our collective response to ecosystem loss in Victoria should encompass five phases:

1. Immediate emergency responses in the event of disasters and urgent stressors to save lives, property, and flora and fauna.
2. Short, medium and long-term community and environmental restoration commitments that realise place-based approaches and ecological skill-building.
3. Building community resilience and response capacity to help prevent future biodiversity loss.
4. Investment in increasing ecological literacy in Victorian communities to further understanding of the intimate connection between ecosystem and human health.
5. Commitment to policies that reduce or mitigate against the effects of biodiversity loss and climate change and their intersection with other emergencies and disaster risks, such as pandemics, systemic economic fragility, etc.

Ecosystem Health and Community Resilience

Jesuit Social Services' commitment to ecological justice, the interconnected social and environmental justice, sees First Nations' care for country, land-care and social responses as inextricably linked. Ecosystem vulnerability illustrates the need for building community resilience that is proactive in protecting our common home. The threat of climate change and the need for healthy relationships with our environment are integral to the long-term concerns in these times of multiple stressors. In these times of compounding disasters, hazards and threats, we need to ensure that our institutions and social, justice, environmental management and economic systems are resilient for all in our communities.

The new body Resilience NSW was announced on the 9th of April 2020 to be headed by Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons. While the terms of reference for this new agency have not yet been announced, the intent of the agency is to ensure that the state of New South Wales is prepared to respond to major crises from COVID-19, climate change, floods and storms through to cybersecurity. Biodiversity health and ecosystem resilience are implicit within any definition of resilience, as it is the foundation from which all communities and institutions function.

The resilience approach is well-established and embedded in many local councils, climate change adaptation bodies, aid agencies and infrastructure entities. Resilience can be interpreted as individualised with a focus on the capacity of individuals to 'bounce back' and survive threats. Community resilience is a more systemic and localised approach. It is a response to disasters, public health emergencies, biodiversity protection and climate change adaptation, and to long-term issues and threats. It encompasses individual preparedness in unison with enabling the conditions for a supportive and collaborative context so that communities can withstand and recover from disasters and thrive in the interim. Biodiversity protection and restoration is central to community resilience for all Victorian communities regardless of where they live. Also core to community resilience is the incorporation of equity and social justice principles and considerations in preparedness, planning and responses.

Community resilience is not 'disaster' focused as its primary consideration. It requires long-term reflection and implementation of the pre-conditions that allow resilience to grow and be maintained within communities and the ecosystems they rely upon, so that they both thrive and equitably adapt when stressors or emergency events occur.

Elements of Community Resilience:

- Supportive of healthy social and ecological systems prior to adverse event.
- Public trust and sustainable engagement with communities, community sector and neighbourhood level organisations assist in building a just recovery.
- Focus on vulnerabilities of human communities and ecosystems with an assessment and support of a strengths-based approach.
- Localised economies and supply chain resilience prior and post emergency.

It is becoming more apparent that healthy ecosystems rely upon community resilience and healthy relationships with all Victorians: those that live in close proximity to threatened ecosystems and also those who rely upon healthy ecosystems within supply chains and shared resources like healthy air and water. There are profound social, economic and equity implications to living within ecosystems under stress and degradation. This includes impacts such as sustainable long-term employment, heat

vulnerability and access to cool zones, food security, access to healthy water and sanitation systems and considerations of intergenerational justice – that is, concern for future generations’ ability to live with healthy ecosystems.

Our work seeks to address the key drivers of marginalisation and vulnerability in social communities. Ecosystem vulnerability and degradation impacts upon the community resilience and healthy livelihoods of all. Therefore, to address the key drivers of social marginalisation and economic inequity means also addressing the key drivers of ecosystem harm and degradation.

Recommendation 1

That the Victorian Government explore best practice models to adopt a whole of government approach to embedding community resilience within Victorian communities and eco-systems that prioritises community participation and engagement. This will build upon the Bushfire Recovery Victoria with insights from the emerging Resilience NSW, with a view towards eventual national coordination.

2. Just transitions and restorative justice

Jesuit Social Services is committed to restorative justice and this extends to supporting restoration initiatives and programs towards healthy biodiversity. Jesuit Social Services works with the most marginalised in our society. As threats, stressors and challenges accelerate, new populations of marginalisation appear and the risks of exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and marginalisation rise, exposing social fissures and inequalities. As with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon Victorian communities and economies, the responses to emergencies raise concerns for the long-term impact on criminal justice, family violence and the rule of law, as well as future economic livelihoods. It is an extraordinary challenge for all governments at this time.

However, within this new paradigm there are also many opportunities for a restorative approach to just transitions, just recoveries and building long-term community resilience. As often observed, emergencies can increase social cooperation and governance systems can prove to compassionately adjust to the increasing demands of the social and ecological contract. There are opportunities to invest in and prioritise projects that are both socially and environmentally restorative which also contribute to long-term and sustainable economic security for all.

Just transitions and place-based approaches

Climate change adaptation planning, place-based solutions and just recovery for degraded ecosystems must be done through the lens of a just transition, prioritising actions to mitigate the risks for communities most vulnerable to the impacts of biodiversity loss, directly engaging and listening carefully to communities and supporting locally-driven solutions that are both ecologically and economically viable.

Just transitions: a fair, inclusive and transformative process

The concept of ‘just transition’ has been commonly understood to focus on ensuring that workers’ rights and livelihoods are secured in the transition to ecologically sustainable economies. However,

climate justice coalitions internationally and locally have articulated a wider vision of what is needed for a just transition that extends beyond labour practices and industry transitions.

In its wider sense, a just transition can be understood as the process by which we move from current untenable economic and social systems to an ecologically sustainable, zero greenhouse gas emissions world in a way that ensures those least able to cope with ecological stressors and disasters receive the help they need to successfully adapt.

Just Transition is a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy. This means approaching production and consumption cycles holistically and waste-free. The transition itself must be just and equitable, redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations. If the process of transition is not just, the outcome will never be.²

This wider vision speaks clearly to the transformational potential of a just transition, and the need to ensure that the transition to a clean energy and low-carbon future does not replicate existing power structures that are harmful or exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities. It also speaks to an opportunity to heal the damage done to ecosystems in the past by investing in restorative practices and policies that can also support emerging sustainable industries.

As Victoria faces economic uncertainty and systemic challenges in the coming years due to the heavy impacts of COVID-19 on our state, there is a need to generate trainings, skills and employment as part of any stimulus policy approach. A funded program to train and support more ecosystem regeneration and restoration practitioners should be part of a COVID-19 stimulus package in order to engage communities facing employment stress and reskilling in jobs appropriate for our altered and shared future.

Proposals for increased investment in training and employment areas include:

Recommendation 2

That programs and training in weed and invasive species eradication be funded and implemented.

Recommendation 3

That a tree and species planting workforce to restore habitat be funded and trained.

Recommendation 4

That more programs of ecological literacy for marginalised communities and individuals to increase engagement, employment prospects and livelihoods be funded and implemented.

² See <https://climatejusticealliance.org/>.

Recommendation 5

That there be increased funding for land, water and ecosystem management, skills training and funded employment programs for those living within degraded and at-risk ecosystems.

A just recovery and restoration

A just recovery includes approaches committed to a just transition (energy and employment), community resilience, place-based approaches, ecological justice and intersectoral collaboration. Vital within these approaches is a commitment to ecological restoration and care for the health of the ecosystems upon which all economies and communities are dependent.

The model of a Just Recovery initially emerged from lessons learnt from Hurricane Katrina in the US, and subsequent disasters and emergencies. It is influencing the development of policies of the United Nations Development Programme, as well as other development agencies. A just recovery can be described as holding the following principles: addressing root cause remedies, supporting localised self-governance, asserting community-based organising, negotiating appropriate reparations and public infrastructure support, and advancing ecological restoration for resilience. Like ecological justice, Just Recovery emphasises the interdependence of the whole web of life and our interdependence within it. It also views policy and implementation through a lens that prioritises supporting healthy relationships that respect this interdependence. Implicit within a Just Recovery is respect and recognition for a socio-ecological approach that can address whole web of life solutions in a regenerative way.

If Just Recovery efforts deploy root cause remedies that set us up for a regenerative, more resilient future, then that demands a sense of ecological wisdom at the forefront. We cannot replicate the human development patterns that have historically stripped communities of their resilience, that have bulldozed our historical, ancestral connections to the lands we depend on. Instead, rebuilding home offers an opportunity to integrate and honour traditional ecological knowledge, regenerative design, and to build infrastructures with the goal of restoring balance for seven generations to come by relying on the wisdom of the seven generations before.³

Jesuit Social Services highlights and advocates approaches that can support a restorative just recovery and can be imbedded into both localised and state responses.

Place based ecological justice

Central to effective restorative approaches to protecting Victorian biodiversity and community resilience is a place-based approach. This approach combines the participatory inclusion of both social

³ Source: <https://commonslibrary.org/a-critical-framework-for-just-recovery/>.

and environmental actors in localised geographies or areas of concern. Jesuit Social Services has significant experience and commitment to well researched place-based responses to entrenched and locational disadvantage, as evidenced by our *Dropping Off the Edge (DOTE)* body of work.

Often local practical solutions to economic and ecological challenges in some areas outpace regulatory, policy and legislative settings and reform processes. In a policy and market environment subject to marked disruption and volatility, it is critical that emerging innovative and community-led projects are supported and funded alongside the development of longer-term structural changes. Place-based and community-led solutions are supported by the Victorian Government. However, in order to ensure an inclusive and just response, the appointment of marginalised voices or consultation with local community groups and specialised community services organisations adds to the realisation of holistic solutions for both economic and ecological recovery. Ecological justice sees environmental and social justice as inextricably linked, and Jesuit Social Services supports further engagement between those working in environmental care – such as Water Authorities, land care groups, First Nation leaders – with those working at the front line of social justice.

Recommendation 6

That the Victorian Government commit to a restorative and protective **strategy** within the Biodiversity plan for all Victorians. The strategy should:

- focus on public investment in environmental services, renewable energy supply and low-carbon economic development opportunities;
- support community-led biodiversity protection and restoration projects;
- ensure jobs and income from biodiversity projects flow to local communities;
- outline a plan for a just transition for workers and communities away from gas and diesel power generation to jobs and economic development opportunities in ecologically sustainable industries; and
- invest in training and education in just transition and ecological literacy for communities impacted by biodiversity degradation, as well as those who can assist in restoration projects, such as experts in biodiversity science and First Nations knowledge holders.

3. Laws that protect and restore healthy ecological relationships

Jesuit Social Services intimately understands the importance of good laws to protect all relationships, including protecting and restoring healthy ecosystems.

Jesuit Social Services supports the review and support of strong laws to address the unique and specific vulnerabilities of Victorian ecosystems.

We support Environmental Justice Australia’s recommendations to address these concerns, as follows:

Victoria's environmental laws should be the foundation for addressing ecosystem decline in the state which has been a steady and ongoing process since colonisation. Key contributing drivers include land clearing, impacts of urban expansion, over extraction of natural resources such as water and timber, and the introduction of invasive species. Further to this climate change is now amplifying these threats which makes addressing this issue much more urgent.

The Inquiry into ecosystems decline in Victoria should take into account the following reforms to help ensure that we make the most of this opportunity:

1. Resource and implement the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 to be implemented. The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act is the centrepiece of Victoria's biodiversity conservation legislation. Reforms last year have "refreshed and modernised" the Act, updating the objectives, adding a new duty for public authorities, and introducing new conservation tools.

2. Make sure our nature protection laws are climate ready. The past summer's devastating bushfires demonstrate the impact that climate change can have on our wonderful natural places and wildlife. Climate change presents a massive challenge to Victorian ecosystems. Failing to address climate change stops our laws working effectively. Climate adaption must be a part of our legal frameworks.

3. Improve compliance and enforcement with our environmental laws. A significant change was made last year when, following a review of timber harvesting regulation in Victoria, the government established the Office of the Conservation Regulator. This move, while a welcome recognition that the implementation and enforcement of our nature protection laws needs to be improved, does not go far enough. We need an independent conservation regulator with a clear legislative foundation and all the legal powers needed to ensure Victoria's conservation laws are complied with.

4. Protect Victoria's precious wildlife. Victoria's Wildlife Act 1975 is out of date and no longer meets community expectations when it comes to protecting our precious wildlife. It should be reformed to make sure that it meets the Victorian community's expectations for how our valued wildlife will be protected and preserved for future generations.

5. Prevent the harmful impacts of new development. While the Federal government wishes to handover responsibilities under our national environmental law - the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act - to state governments, we know that Victorian laws are not yet fit for purpose. Victoria's planning laws and environmental impact assessment laws need to be brought up to date to make sure that infrastructure projects properly account for their impacts on Victoria's biodiversity before handing over responsibilities.

6. Stop the drivers of ecosystem decline. Nature protection laws should be a safety net. We need to address the pressure on Victorian biodiversity protection laws by removing key drivers of ecosystem decline, such as native forest logging, unsustainable use of water resources, and the impact of invasive species. Stopping native forest logging sooner rather than later, more sustainable water resource management, and new fit for purpose invasive species management legislation are needed if ecosystem decline is to be turned around.

7. Boost ecosystem restoration. Nature protection laws alone will not be enough – our laws must also guide and encourage the restoration of Victoria's ecosystems. With climate change already having a terrible impact on Victorian flora and fauna, the challenge is urgent. Whether it be on public land or private land, our land management must be subject to appropriate obligations to ensure that ecological processes and natural assets are there for future generations to enjoy.

We support the expertise of Environmental Justice Australia in their above recommendations so that strong nature protection laws provide the backbone for a healthier future for Victoria's ecosystems, ensuring the people, places and wildlife we love can thrive for generations to come.

The impacts of past refusal to mitigate against climate change impacts and an unbalanced relationship with our environment means that there are changes and feedback loops already built into our present and immediate futures. For Victorians, this has become front and centre through the bushfire season of 2019-2020. Climate change means that longer, and more intense, bushfires are the new normal – with short, medium and long-term effects on all our Victorian communities that are yet to be fully realised.

The push for production and consumption without regulatory frameworks to protect ecosystem resources from harm has caused habitat destruction, introduction of invasive species, pollution, human induced climate change and the over-exploitation of ecosystems.

Recommendation 7

That Traditional Custodians be consulted to lead the embedding of a First Nations informed approach into all decision making in land and water management and funded to be engaged in central decision-making roles in relation to all decisions impacting Country in Victoria.

Recommendation 8

That the Victorian Government further engage the role of community services sector and social change organisations with long-term planning for marginalised populations that address the root causes of their vulnerabilities to ecosystem degradation, climate change impacts and natural disasters.

Recommendation 9

That the Victorian Government build on and support the implementation of Victoria's Climate Change Framework by:

- increasing funding and resources for organisations and communities seeking to trial, test and implement climate change adaptation, mitigation and transformation activities;
- increasing access to and translation of latest research and evidence-based practice relevant to the community services sector; and
- supporting actions to increase awareness within the community services sector of ecological justice and how to minimise environmental injustice and inequity, with a focus on restorative ecological practices.

Recommendation 10

That the Victorian Government:

- update Victoria's Environmental Protection laws to world's best practice to ensure cessation of unnecessary development into vital ecosystems; and

- further embed processes regarding prior and informed consent of both First Nations communities and local communities within the environmental approvals processes.

Recommendation 11

That the Victorian Government commit to, and be accountable for achieving, the Sustainable Development Goals by including holistic balancing and interconnection of social, environmental and economic goals.

Recommendation 12

That social change organisations and place-based approaches to recovery and restoration are available to, or engaged in, wider government policy development.

Recommendation 13

That the Victorian Government commit to an **equitable, clean, low-carbon economic development strategy within a restorative and protective plan for areas under ecosystem and ecological stress and degradation**. The strategy should:

- focus on public investment in renewable energy supply and low-carbon economic development opportunities;
- support community-controlled ecosystem restoration projects;
- strengthen community resilience by prioritising place-based projects that foster healthy, participatory and equitable outcomes; and
- outline a plan for a just transition for workers and communities that includes support for industries and sectors that build ecosystem health and restoration.

Conclusion

Jesuit Social Services acknowledges the public health, environmental, social and economic challenges and complexities currently facing Victoria. We recognise there are no simple solutions to these multiple crises and are committed to working with government and others towards grounded and actionable solutions supported by the best practice and evidence. We support all measures, policies and laws that protect and restore healthy ecosystems and the communities that rely upon them. Going forward, we see place-based transitional and restorative approaches as integral to emergency responses and economic and community resilience, especially in areas impacted by ecological loss and degradation. We are committed to enabling and empowering communities in training and ecological literacy, so they can equally participate in the emerging sustainable industries and ecosystem health. This requires leadership and participation from multiple and various sectors, in particular, the inclusion of First Nations and the most marginalised in decision-making processes in order to protect people, place and planet.