

**Legislative Council**  
**Hansard**  
**Tuesday 29 October 2024**

*[excerpt...]*

**MOTION**

**State of the Environment Report 2024 - Noting**

[6.39 p.m.]

**Ms WEBB** (Nelson) - I am very pleased to rise to speak to this motion and thank the member for Hobart for giving us the opportunity to do so. However, given the time, I am, going to, in the first instance, move to adjourn the debate for the purposes of a dinner break and make my substantial contribution or not very substantial contribution when we get back from that.

**Debate adjourned.**

**SUSPENSION OF SITTING**

**Resumed from above.**

[7.35 p.m.]

**Ms WEBB** (Nelson) - Mr President, I will pick up where I left off, which is right at the beginning of my contribution to the motion where I was thanking the Member for Hobart for bringing the motion for us to consider and welcoming the opportunity to contribute to this important critical debate, noting the State of the Environment Report 2024 and calling for a formal response from the government to its findings and recommendations.

It would be interesting to ask who, of the members in this Chamber, can recall the predecessor of this year's State of the Environment report? Who here would remember the release of, and findings of, the State of the Environment Report 2009? It certainly predates me in this Chamber, and many others, although not all. There would be current teenagers in our state who were not born when the last State of the Environment report appeared in this place. Within that period, what we see now in this report is a mapping of a stark and worrying decline in the ecology of the home of those teenagers I just mentioned.

Members may recall that there have been growing calls over the last five years demanding the government act to resource the production of an independent and comprehensive state of the environment report in accordance with section 29 of the State Policies and Projects Act 1993. I was one which repeated those calls, and have followed progress of this debate with keen interest on behalf of concerned members of my electorate and the broader Tasmanian community.

It is worth noting that it took the EDO (Environmental Defenders Office), acting on behalf of the Australia Institute in 2022, to compel the then Planning minister, Michael Ferguson, to direct the Tasmanian Planning Commission to prepare the State of the Environment report by no later than June 2024.

Due to the huge backlog of research required, combined with inadequate resourcing over a considerable period of time, the Tasmanian Planning Commission required an extension, finally delivering the State of the Environment report to the minister for Planning on 30 August this year. Then, ironically, the government decided to be a stickler by the act, with the minister refusing to publicly release the report until November - sorry, not November, October, I think it was. What was the date it was released?

**Ms O'Connor** - Second-last week of the last session downstairs. It was 4 October.

**Ms WEBB** - We digress, Mr President, until later.

Citing section 29, subsection (3), which requires that :

The Minister must cause a State of the Environment Report to be laid on the table of each House of parliament within the first 15 sitting days of the House after the Report is received by the Minister.

Of course, that provision requires a tabling of the report within that specified time frame. It does not decree the report cannot be made public until 15 sitting days have expired. However, that seemed like intransigence and misreading of the broader Tasmanian community's room. It is symptomatic of the attitude which strived to ignore its legislated responsibility to produce and implement findings of a State of the Environment report in the first place.

Changing this attitude, which required NGO stakeholders to add to the political voices who had been making repeated calls - NGOs including The Australia Institute and the EDO - having to pursue potential legal action in order to have the government act in accordance with Tasmanian law. It is possibly going to be as big a challenge as it is acting on the State of the Environment report's findings, that we now see in front of us.

After 15 years of a long wait, there are many hard truths detailed in the State of the Environment Report 2024. The member for Hobart has highlighted and presented a thorough precis of the report's 16 key recommendations, 29 indicators, and their combined ramifications. I do not intend to repeat that exercise now. I thank her for doing that and getting it on the record.

As stated by the EDO managing lawyer Claire Bookless upon the release of the State of the Environment report:

Over the past decade, and in the face of climate pollution and extinction crises, the Tasmanian Government has been systematically undermining the environmental protections and community rights provided under the RMPS laws.

The jury has now delivered its verdict on those changes. The long-awaited SoE report provides a sobering assessment of the abject failure of the RMPS and decision-makers to conserve our precious and life-supporting natural systems.

The State of the Environment report paints an alarming picture of an environment under significant strain and facing multiple threats. There are no two ways about it. It is unequivocal that of the 29 environmental categories this report assessed, 16 were found to be getting worse, and 11 were in poor condition. Further, the list of Tasmanian threatened plants and animals is spiralling in the wrong direction, with an ever-increasing number joining that list. Our unique and sensitive island state ecosystems are being decimated by climate change, vegetation loss and invasive species.

Of grave concern is the State of the Environment Report's findings that over the last 15 years since the last report was published, our native vegetation decreased by at least 3 per cent, becoming far more fragmented. Approximately one-third of Tasmania's native plants are now classified as threatened; 154 species are listed as endangered and at risk of extinction, and on our watch, over the last 15 years, 20 species became extinct.

The report also confirms that which many of us had feared. Our island is experiencing significant impacts from climate change, including the warmings of seas around Tasmania - which are heating faster than the global average, beach erosion due to rising sea levels, and the disappearance of the state's unique kelp forests.

This must be heeded as a wake-up call. In fact, it is as piercing a local, evidence-based emergency alarm as we have ever received. It should shatter any complacency or ideologically based denial. Whether convenient or not, our island home is not immune from climate change. Our beach borders, currently the focus of much populist characterisation as being the epitome of the Tasmanian lifestyle, are eroding on our watch. We cannot pretend our marine, freshwater or terrestrial ecosystems are robust and can keep providing for us when all we do is take while returning so little and protecting so little. That is what the State of the Environment Report 2024's 29 indicators and 16 recommendations tell us, based on rigorous, peer-reviewed, and evidence-based research.

Where to from here? Since 2009, it took us 15 years to wrangle, argue for, pursue, demand, and finally obtain this mandated State of the Environment Report. For 15 years, Tasmanians were kept in the dark about the true condition of their home, and all the other species with which we share it. Sadly, as the evidence tells us and the scientists keep reminding us, ignorance is not bliss. The failure of successive governments to produce, regularly, every five years, such a report as prescribed under section 29 of the State Policies and Projects Act 1993, was a breach of the law. To now ignore the findings of this report is to breach Tasmanians' trust and confidence.

It would be a breach of any government's moral compass to put it on the shelf and consign it to either the 'too hard basket' or the 'disinterested' category. It would be an unconscionable betrayal of current and future generations to fail to act to protect our home, this island of lutruwita/Tasmania. The State of the Environment Report 2024 should not be regarded or treated as a full stop. Its purpose is not merely to serve as a tick box to indicate section 29 of the act has finally been complied with. Indeed, it is nothing less than an urgent call for action.

As highlighted again by the EDO:

Luckily, the report provides a roadmap out of this disastrous situation. The Tasmanian Government must accept and act on all the expert recommendations outlined in the SoE report.

Specifically, we need to tackle the identified key drivers for declines, including climate change, vegetation and habitat loss, pollution and waste. The report's roadmap out of this decline is structured around its 16 recommendations for better management of Tasmania's environment, which can be summarised as prioritising the following.

First, the development of a long-term vision for the Tasmanian environment and a strategy to implement that vision and reporting to parliament on progress towards goals and targets of the strategy every two years.

Second, identifying opportunities to collaborate with Tasmanian Aboriginal groups and incorporating Aboriginal knowledge and values into better care of the environment.

Third, development of an environmental data management strategy to ensure the best information is available to inform environmental decision making.

Fourth, Tasmania's resource management and planning system legislation needs to be amended to align with Australia's international legal obligations and ensure it provides for contemporary and effective decision making.

Critically, we are still waiting for the government's formal response to the State of the Environment report. That will tell us whether the emergency alarm is being heeded or whether we are going to continue on a crash course to ecological disaster. When we do see the government's formal response to the report and its recommendations, as a bare minimum, it must include benchmarks by which each of the 29 indicators can be monitored and reported against in a consistent and robust manner throughout the period between now and the next State of the Environment report.

Further, there must be a comprehensive implementation plan for each of its 16 recommendations. I would go as far as saying we have a precedent and prototype for prioritising, in an accountable manner, serious recommendations that have a collective intergenerational impact on the Tasmanian community and action plans to ensure both their delivery and scrutiny of their delivery. I am talking about the catalogue of findings and recommendations arising from the state commission of inquiry into the government's response to child sexual abuse. Following the delivery of those recommendations, we have a formal whole of government response, including a tabulated breakdown of departmental responsibilities against each of the findings and recommendations, indicative timeframes and required actions detailed.

The parliament then, with the government's agreement, also established a dedicated Joint House Committee by which to provide transparent and accountable scrutiny of how well the delivery of the action plan is consistent with the intent of the findings and recommendations of the commission of inquiry. This is all appropriate apparatus, exercising responsible oversight of significant public policy implementation to address an identified crisis within our community. In that particular example's case, that of institutionalised child abuse in the public interest.

In the face of the current global climate crisis, our national and state biodiversity crisis in an ideal Tasmania, we would immediately establish similar parliamentary oversight apparatus to ensure and monitor the delivery of the State of the Environment report's findings and recommendations to counter the identified drivers of ecological decline and securing the

intergenerational health of our island home. I believe it warrants such parliamentary oversight, yet that may be a debate for another day.

One last point I would make, however, is to place clearly on the public record now that when the government does provide its formal response to the State of the Environment Report 2024, that response must also include a clear and funded plan for the preparation of the next State of the Environment report in accordance with section 29 of the act. We cannot allow a repeat of another 15-year delay.

I note the following comment made by the TPC Executive Commission, Mr John Ramsay, in the opening pages of the State of the Environment Report 2024, in which he states:

In conjunction with the preparation of this report, the Commission has given consideration to the developments that have occurred in relation to the SOE reporting since the Tasmanian requirement for SOE reporting was established in 1993. The Commission would be pleased to provide further advice on contemporary and timely SOE reporting during the course of the next five-yearly reporting cycle.

I hope and expect the government's formal response to the 2024 report reflects the fact that they have taken up the commissioner's offer and acted upon the offered advice.

To conclude, I thank the Tasmanian Planning Commission, the State of the Environment Report steering committee, especially the independent expert authors and theme coordinators, the case-study authors, the policy reference group, the peer-review experts, and all others who assisted in this endeavour. However, the best way to thank and to pay genuine respect to all those who contributed to this timely and critical State of the Environment Report 2024, is to not just thank them in a forum such as this, but to heed their findings, actively listen and interrogate their findings and act on all 16 recommendations with rigour and without fear or favour. That would be the most meaningful acknowledgement and all the thanks needed, I am imagining, for those who put their blood, sweat and tears into providing Tasmania's first State of the Environment Report in approximately 15 years.

I thank the member for Hobart for ensuring this place addresses the long-awaited and critical Tasmanian State of the Environment Report 2024.

I note the report and I support the call for the government to implement all of its recommendations for the health of our environment, the health of our people, the health of our economy, and the future of lutruwita, Tasmania. I support the motion.