Walawaani. You're listening to Earth Matters. Produced in the studios of 3cr on Wurundjeri country, and broadcast nationally across the community radio network.

My name is Keiran, and i'll be your host today.

So today I wanted to take it back to the basics. Today I am going to be having a quick look at the current state of affairs broadly, and then have a bit of a yarn about where we go from here, some practical steps people can take.

Across this continent, ecosystems are under immense pressure.
The impacts are measurable, ongoing, and accelerating.

Here in Victoria, the Victorian Volcanic Plains are one of the clearest examples.
These grasslands once stretched across more than 22,000 square kilometres of western and north-western Victoria.
Today, less than 2% remains.

Most people drive past these places without even recognising them as grasslands anymore.
What survives is often fragmented into roadside patches, rail corridors, cemeteries, reserves, and isolated pockets surrounded by agriculture and urban development.

Victoria is also the most cleared state on the continent proportionally.
More than half of the original native vegetation has been removed since invasion and colonisation.
On private land, only around 21% remains.

That destruction has consequences for everything else.
For soil health.
For waterways.
For pollinators.
For native grasses and wildflowers.
For reptiles, birds and mammals that rely on connected habitat to survive.

Across the continent, Australia now has one of the worst extinction rates in the world for mammals.
Around 10% of endemic terrestrial mammal species have gone extinct in roughly the last 200 years.

The threatened species list continues to grow.
More than two thousand species are now formally listed as threatened nationally, and climate change is becoming a major driver of decline alongside land clearing, invasive species, mining, urban expansion and industrial agriculture.

Feral cats alone kill billions of native animals every year.
Wetlands continue to disappear.
River systems are under pressure from extraction, contamination and warming temperatures.
Fish kill events in the Murray-Darling Basin have become increasingly common during periods of drought and poor water quality.

Marine ecosystems are also being hit hard.
The Great Barrier Reef experienced another mass bleaching event in 2024, following repeated bleaching events over recent years linked to rising ocean temperatures.

2025 seen a massive algal bloom across South Australia that resulted in the death of over 87,000 animals from more than 390 species.

Climate change is intensifying all of this.
Victoria is becoming hotter and drier overall, while extreme weather events become more severe and more frequent.
Longer fire seasons, drought, flooding events, coastal erosion and biodiversity collapse are all connected pressures rather than isolated issues.

And importantly, none of this damage exists in isolation from colonisation.
The destruction of ecosystems here came through the clearing of forests and grasslands, draining of wetlands, introduction of invasive species, extraction of resources, disruption of cultural land management practices, and the treatment of land primarily as a commodity to be exploited.

What we are living through now is the long-term ecological outcome of those systems and priorities.

FROGS PLAY

The environmental crisis also raises another question.
What obligations do people have in response to this?

For First Nations peoples, obligations to Country are not new ideas that emerged from environmental movements or climate debates.
They are longstanding responsibilities grounded in lore, kinship systems, cultural practice and survival.

Caring for Country is practical work.
It involves maintaining ecosystems, protecting waterways, understanding seasonal cycles, carrying cultural knowledge, protecting species and passing knowledge between generations.

For many communities, these responsibilities are also spiritual responsibilities.
Country is not understood simply as a resource or a piece of property.

Land, waters, plants, animals and people exist within relationships of responsibility and interdependence.

Totemic relationships are part of this as well.
For many Aboriginal people, particular species, places or ecological systems are connected through kinship obligations and cultural responsibility.
When species disappear, or ecosystems collapse, there are cultural consequences alongside ecological ones.

These obligations did not disappear with colonisation.
What changed was the ability of communities to carry them out freely and continuously.

Across the continent, invasion and colonisation disrupted cultural land management practices, removed communities from Country, criminalised cultural practices, cleared ecosystems and fractured systems of intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Despite this, many First Nations communities continue this work today.
Cultural burning programs continue to grow.
Communities continue revegetation projects, seed collection, water protection work, species monitoring and land care initiatives grounded in local knowledge and responsibility to Country.

But obligations to ecosystems are not limited only to First Nations communities.

Everybody depends on functioning ecosystems whether they think about it consciously or not.

Fresh water depends on healthy catchments.
Food systems depend on pollinators, healthy soils and stable climate conditions.
Breathable air, temperature regulation and biodiversity all depend on functioning ecosystems.

Environmental decline is already affecting people materially.
It affects food prices, insurance costs, disaster recovery, housing stability, public health and access to water.

There is also responsibility that comes from benefit.

Modern cities, industries, infrastructure and wealth on this continent were built through large-scale extraction and ecological destruction.
Forests were cleared.
Grasslands were ploughed or paved over.
Wetlands were drained.
Rivers were diverted and over-extracted.

People living within these systems inherit both the benefits and the consequences of that process.

There is also responsibility to future generations.

Most people already think about the future in practical terms.
Parents think about what conditions their children will grow up in.
Grandparents think about what kind of world they are leaving behind.
People want clean water, stable housing, affordable food and safety from worsening disasters.

Environmental collapse directly affects all of those things.

Living somewhere also creates responsibility toward that place.
People do not need to be experts to learn about local ecosystems, local species, local waterways and local environmental pressures.

And importantly, awareness on its own is not enough.

Knowing there is a problem does not restore ecosystems.
Concern alone does not regenerate habitat, reduce extinction rates or protect waterways.

Repair requires participation.

Some responsibilities sit at the level of governments and corporations because the scale of destruction and extraction is enormous.
But there are also responsibilities that exist at the community and individual level.

Ecological restoration is practical work.
It involves planting, weeding, seed saving, cultural burning, habitat restoration, monitoring species, protecting waterways, community organising and long-term care.

And increasingly, many people are recognising that this work cannot be left for somebody else to eventually deal with.

FROGS PLAY

Understanding those obligations also raises another question.
What does acting on those obligations actually look like in practice?

Because environmental repair is not only something that happens through governments, large NGOs or major policy announcements.
A great deal of it happens locally, collectively and often quietly through ongoing practical work.

People do not need to become experts overnight to contribute meaningfully, you don’t need a degree or experience with plants and animals to start getting involved.

Also a lot of people feel overwhelmed when confronting the scale of ecological destruction across this continent.
The extinction crisis is severe.
Climate change is accelerating.
Large areas of ecosystem have already been permanently altered or destroyed.

Some species are already gone forever.
Some ecosystems will never fully return to what they once were.

But that just makes getting involved sooner rather than later even more important. We are constantly losing new species of plants and animals to extinction, let their loss spur you to actually do something and prevent the loss of more life.

Every area protected from further clearing still matters.
Every patch of habitat restored, Every waterway protected from pollution, Every native species successfully reintroduced or protected makes a world of difference.

Environmental repair is often cumulative work as well.
And It happens through thousands of practical actions carried out consistently over time by communities, workers, volunteers, Traditional Owners, researchers and everyday people.

And many people already have the capacity to begin participating in that work where they live right now.

One of the most important starting points is education.

A lot of environmental destruction becomes normalised because people inherit heavily degraded landscapes and grow up seeing them as natural.

Many people living in Melbourne today, for example, have never seen the Victorian Volcanic Plains in anything close to their original condition.
They see roadsides, industrial estates, fragmented paddocks or suburban developments and often do not realise these areas were once dense native grasslands supporting enormous biodiversity.

The same thing exists across much of the continent.
Wetlands that were drained generations ago disappear from public memory.
Rivers that were heavily modified become accepted as normal.
Cleared forests, polluted waterways and fragmented ecosystems become familiar landscapes.

Learning about local ecosystems helps break that disconnect.

People can start by learning the names of local plants, animals, waterways and ecosystems in their area.
Learning which species are indigenous locally.
Learning what species are threatened.
Learning what environmental pressures exist nearby.

That knowledge changes how people move through places.
It changes how people understand parks, waterways, coastlines and urban areas around them.

It also helps people recognise that environmental destruction is not only something happening somewhere distant.
It is often happening locally and continuously.

Learning from First Nations knowledge systems is also important here.

Aboriginal communities across the continent maintained and cared for ecosystems over thousands of years through ongoing observation, seasonal knowledge, cultural burning, harvesting practices and systems of responsibility to Country.

A growing number of people are now recognising that many environmental crises here are connected not only to climate change and industrial extraction, but also to the disruption and suppression of those land management systems through colonisation.

That does not mean treating First Nations knowledge as symbolic or aesthetic.
It means recognising it as practical ecological knowledge developed over long periods of direct relationship with Country.

Education also helps people move beyond seeing environmentalism only as consumer choices or individual lifestyle branding.

Environmental protection is material work.
It involves ecosystems, species survival, water systems, soil health, land management and long-term community participation.

And importantly, education should lead somewhere practical.

The goal is not simply accumulating information.
The goal is building enough understanding to participate more effectively in protecting and restoring ecosystems where people live.

Once people begin understanding the ecosystems around them, the next step is practical participation.

And a lot of this work is far more accessible than people sometimes assume.

One of the simplest and most useful things people can do is begin planting local indigenous or native species where possible.

That might mean replacing sections of lawn.
It might mean removing introduced ornamental plants and replacing them gradually over time.
It might mean planting native grasses, shrubs, groundcovers or flowering species that provide habitat and food for local birds, insects and pollinators.

Even relatively small suburban gardens can contribute to habitat connectivity.
Balconies, courtyards and nature strips can also provide food sources and refuge for native species when planted thoughtfully.

Local indigenous species are particularly important because they have evolved within local ecosystems and support local wildlife more effectively than many introduced plants.

And importantly, restoration work is not limited to private property.

Across the continent there are volunteer conservation groups carrying out practical environmental work every week.

Landcare groups.
Friends groups.
Creek committees.
Revegetation collectives.
Community nurseries.
Seed collection groups.
Wildlife rescue organisations.

A lot of this work is hands-on and community based.

People participate in tree planting days, weed removal, seed propagation, waterway restoration, habitat monitoring and species surveys.

Citizen science projects are another important area.
People can contribute to biodiversity monitoring through bird counts, frog monitoring, plant mapping and recording local species observations.

These projects help build ecological data while also reconnecting people with local environments.

And for people living in areas without established groups, it is still possible to begin locally.

Sometimes restoration starts with a few neighbours deciding to rehabilitate a neglected area, revegetate a creek edge or organise regular clean-up and planting days.

Environmental repair often grows through these smaller local relationships and collective efforts.

There are also broader structural struggles connected to this work.

People can support stronger environmental protections, oppose destructive developments, push councils toward indigenous planting and advocate for stronger protections against land clearing and habitat destruction.

Because while individual and community action matters, large-scale destruction is still being driven primarily through industrial extraction, urban expansion and weak environmental protections.

Both levels matter.
Practical local participation and broader systemic pressure are not separate things.
They reinforce each other over time.

It is also important to approach this work realistically.

The scale of ecological destruction across this continent is severe.
Many ecosystems have been heavily fragmented or permanently altered.
Some species have already gone extinct and cannot be brought back.

There are places where old growth forests are gone.
Wetlands have been drained.
Grasslands have been reduced to tiny remnants surrounded by roads, industry and agriculture.

Climate change is also locking in further pressures that will continue affecting ecosystems for decades.

People should be honest about that reality.

But realism should not become passivity.

The fact that some damage cannot be reversed does not mean further destruction becomes acceptable or unavoidable.

Every ecosystem protected from clearing still matters.
Every remnant grassland still matters.
Every functioning wetland, healthy river system and connected habitat corridor still matters.

And importantly, ecosystems can recover significantly when pressure is reduced and restoration work is carried out consistently over time.

People working in conservation, revegetation and land management regularly see damaged areas recover.
Native grasses return.
Bird species reappear.
Pollinators increase.
Waterways stabilise.
Habitat connectivity improves.

Recovery is often slow, uneven and incomplete, but it is still materially important.

A lot of people also experience ecological grief or environmental despair when confronting the scale of destruction.

That response is understandable.
People are witnessing extinction, ecosystem collapse and worsening climate impacts in real time.

But despair can also become paralysing if it convinces people that participation no longer matters.

Environmental repair is cumulative work.
No single person is going to solve the ecological crisis individually.
But large-scale restoration also does not happen without large numbers of people participating consistently over time.

And many of the environmental protections that still exist today survived because communities fought to defend them.

There are forests that still stand because people organised against logging.
Wetlands that still exist because communities resisted development.
Species that still survive because people carried out long-term protection and recovery work.

That history matters as well.

The scale of destruction should encourage participation rather than resignation.

There are also forms of environmental damage that people can reduce quite directly within their own homes and communities.

One major issue is the impact of roaming domestic pets, particularly cats.

As discussed in a previous Earth Matters episode, both feral and domestic cats kill enormous numbers of native animals every year across this continent.
And importantly, domestic cats do not stop hunting simply because they are fed.

Birds, reptiles, frogs and small mammals are all affected.
For already fragmented ecosystems and threatened species populations, this additional pressure can be significant.

Keeping cats indoors, or within enclosed outdoor cat runs, dramatically reduces wildlife deaths while also protecting cats themselves from cars, disease, injury and poisoning.

Dogs can also create impacts when allowed off leash in sensitive ecological areas.
Ground nesting birds, reptiles and small mammals are especially vulnerable to disturbance.

Another major issue is the spread of invasive garden plants.

A lot of people do not realise that many serious environmental weeds originally entered ecosystems as ornamental garden species.

Plants escape from gardens into waterways, roadsides, bushland and reserves, where they spread aggressively and outcompete native vegetation.

Lantana is one of the best known examples.
But there are many others.

Blackberry.
English ivy.
Boneseed.
Bridal creeper.
Pampas grass.
Willows spreading through waterways.
Gazania spreading through coastal ecosystems.
Agapanthus escaping into bushland.

Many of these species alter soil conditions, suppress native regeneration, increase fire risks or choke waterways and habitat areas.

And despite the damage they cause, some invasive species are still sold commercially through nurseries and landscaping suppliers.

People should not assume that every plant available for sale is environmentally safe.

Researching species before planting is important, particularly when planting near bushland, waterways or coastal areas.

Where possible, people can also gradually remove invasive species from their gardens and replace them with locally indigenous or native plants.

That transition does not need to happen all at once.
Environmental repair is often gradual work carried out over long periods of time.

And importantly, local indigenous planting provides practical ecological benefits.

Native plants provide food and habitat for local birds, insects, reptiles and pollinators.
They are often better adapted to local rainfall and climate conditions.
And they help restore ecological relationships that many introduced species do not support.

Small local decisions accumulate over time.
What people plant, what species they introduce into ecosystems, and how they manage domestic animals all have material ecological consequences.