

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Melbourne—Tuesday, 20 April 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Sarah Connolly—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

WITNESS

Ms Lisa Palma, Chief Executive Officer, Wildlife Victoria.

The CHAIR: I advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website and rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with Legislative Assembly standing order 234. Thank you very much, Lisa, for joining us today at this public hearing for the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations.

Ms PALMA: Thank you for having me.

The CHAIR: On behalf of the committee I acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of this land, and we pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future, and elders from other communities who may be joining us today. I also extend a warm welcome to any members of the public or the media that have rejoined us this afternoon and are watching this public inquiry. This is one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee will be conducting to inform itself about the issues relevant to the inquiry.

Now, before we begin I need to point out to you that all evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and it is protected by parliamentary privilege. What this means is that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is very important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing, even if you are just simply restating what you said here today. You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so to check and to approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

We thank you again, Lisa, for taking the time to talk to us this afternoon. What I might do is I will introduce myself and members of the committee and then I will throw to you. You can introduce yourself and maybe talk for 5 minutes about your submission—if you have got a PowerPoint presentation, great; if you do not, no worries—and then we will jump to questions and have a bit of a broader discussion. My name is Sarah Connolly. I am the Chair of this committee. I am also the very lucky Member for Tarneit, and Tarneit is in Melbourne's western suburbs and sits within one of the largest growth corridors both in Victoria and in this country.

Mr FOWLES: I normally go fourth, so my apologies, Lisa. My name is Will Fowles. I am the Member for Burwood.

Ms PALMA: Hi, Will.

Mr FOWLES: Danielle is here.

Ms GREEN: Here I am. I am Danielle Green, and I am the Member for Yan Yean, which is also in a big northern growth corridor, and I am also the Parliamentary Secretary for Sport and for regional Victoria.

Mr HAMER: And I am Paul Hamer. I am the Member for Box Hill.

Ms PALMA: Hi, Paul.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Over to you, Lisa.

Ms PALMA: Great. Thanks, everyone. I am Lisa Palma, the CEO of Wildlife Victoria. I will, as you suggest, Sarah, give a 5-minute or so summary of our submission and also share with you some key statistics to support the submission.

In a nutshell the Wildlife Victoria submission for this inquiry really focuses on the intersection of growing human populations and our native wildlife and its habitat and balancing the needs of the two, and we do contend that active management is required of this intersection both at the proactive and strategic end and at the reactive end once larger populations of humans are in place.

Wildlife Victoria contends that growing human populations have direct impacts on our wildlife. In Wildlife Victoria's role in providing a wildlife emergency response rescue service to the Victorian community we are in a really unique position to be able to see the direct correlation between growing human populations and the detrimental impacts on our wildlife and its habitat. In considering the amenity of human populations it is important to understand and appreciate that wildlife play an important role in their contribution to ecological balance, so their loss or substantial reduction can have quite a significant detrimental flow-on effect on the ecosystem and hence the overall living conditions of growing human populations. We believe there is scope and opportunity for wildlife to live in harmony with growing human populations and the focus should be on such versus eradicating or killing indigenous wildlife populations to make way for humans.

In our submission we really focused on three key areas associated with growing human populations and impacts on wildlife. Those three are increasing domestic pet populations, increasing usage of bushland reserves and an increase in fishing and hunting. I will just touch briefly on each.

With a growing human population we also anticipate a growing number of domestic pets as well, and attacks by domestic pets on native animals are having a very, very serious impact. From 2011 to the end of March this year Wildlife Victoria had 9211 native animals across multiple species reported into our emergency response service by the Victorian public as injured due to cat attack. For the same period 7709 native animals were reported into our emergency service by the Victorian public as injured due to dog attack, and these are across multiple species. The dog attacks encompassed nearly 400 koalas and nearly 50 grey-headed flying foxes, which are a threatened species. The outcome for these animals as a result of cat attack and dog attack is not good. In the majority of cases the outcome was death or euthanasia, and a substantive number of pouch young et cetera were left orphaned and needed to go into care. So we propose that measures are put into place to anticipate rising numbers of pets and better protect our wildlife as larger human populations encroach further into the territory and homes of our native animals.

I next want to touch on increasing usage of bushland reserves, and the key here really is preservation of wildlife corridors and remnant habitat that comprise the homes and food source of our native animals. This is absolutely critical for two key reasons: one, to enable wildlife the ability to move throughout their territory with minimal impact for humans and with minimal need to encroach onto roads and other human-made edifices, and secondly, to encourage continued genetic diversity of species to ensure their preservation over the longer term. With increasing human populations and greater usage of bushland reserves for recreational activity that would correspondingly be expected, there is a range of things like mountain bike riding and other outdoor pursuits we can expect to increase. So we propose that bushland reserves are afforded greater policing and protection with regard to usage and that special purpose areas are set aside for human use to preserve sensitive wildlife areas. We also encourage greater public education and awareness and planting indigenous vegetation and native gardens in new households as a vital food source and habitat for our wildlife.

The final area that we covered in our submission was fishing and hunting. Fishing and hunting are human activities, and with growing numbers of humans we anticipate a rise also in this, particularly where human populations encroach further into and closer to wildlife habitat. The impacts on native animals as the result of these activities are not only significant but also associated with extreme pain and suffering. Annually we have circa 500 native birds—that is more than one per day—reported into the Wildlife Victoria emergency response service by the Victorian public suffering horrific injuries as the result of entanglement in fishing line and fishing hooks. These actually span a range of species from larger species such as pelicans and swans through to smaller species such as magpies. Native mammals are also impacted, and we also receive reports into our emergency response service of seals and grey-headed flying foxes impaled with fishing hooks. Wildlife Victoria's emergency response service also receives a number of reports of native animals suffering horrifically after being illegally shot with both firearms and crossbows.

So with expected increased usage of bushland reserves and parklands by growing human populations, the usage of such should be redefined to permit safe and general purpose usage that respects wildlife, enables the public to live in co-harmony with and enjoy wildlife and prevents wildlife suffering. I will leave it there for my opening statement.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Lisa. They are some really interesting statistics and stuff that you have talked about just now. I really want to focus on your submission in talking about reducing dog attacks on wildlife. I am interested to know: are these sorts of dog attacks happening in particular suburbs and areas that you can narrow down and drill down to? Also I am thinking your submission makes several recommendations and they are

aimed at reducing incidents of dog attacks on wildlife, including the installation of effective signage, the provision of more fenced dog exercise areas, the creation of no-dog zones in sensitive wildlife areas and increases in monitoring and compliance. Who is currently responsible for all of these measures, and do you think there is a case for greater involvement by the state government, particularly in relation to monitoring and compliance?

Ms PALMA: Yes, I do. I will just address the first couple of questions. With regard to statistics around attacks by suburb, I do not have that at hand. However, what I can tell you is it is widespread across the state across both metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. So that is a question I will have to take on notice, albeit the calls are not coming in from one specific place but across the state. With regard to who has current accountability for managing that, it is actually spread quite widely in my observation. The primary accountability for pets is with local councils, so local municipalities, with regard to licensing. However, you know, attacks can span a range of agencies is my understanding. So there could be scope for a more centralised and coordinated approach to the management of domestic pets and their interaction with wildlife in my opinion. Yes, they would be my key points.

The CHAIR: Do you think that state government should be leading that and coordinating the different bodies like councils—that state government should take a leadership role?

Ms PALMA: I think someone needs to take a leadership role. The key here is having legislative authority and power to deal with breaches and appropriate resources around policing. In my opening statement I talked about proactive measures and reactive measures. While a lot can be done around education and activities in local communities, fenced-off parks and promoting responsible pet ownership, on fundamentally breaching the rules the monitoring and compliance and potential subsequent prosecution if it gets to that stage does need to be appropriately resourced, and it would logically make sense that that is a state government responsibility as it can centrally manage and control those resources.

The CHAIR: I have got just one quick last question. Fenced-off parks and fenced-off areas—in the reporting that you are getting is there a correlation between reduced wildlife attacks in areas that have more fenced-off parks? Is it fair to say that?

Ms PALMA: No. I do not have that data, so I cannot answer either way, sorry.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. I am going to throw to Will.

Mr FOWLES: Thanks, Lisa, and thanks very much for your presentation. It is certainly a bit different to some of the other ones we have had, and I think it is always good to have an eye on some of these issues that arise from human use of all the environmental infrastructure we have got out there. I was wondering if you could put to us what you think the most important thing is or the thing that would be the most impactful in protecting native wildlife in terms of our recommendations back to government? I think she has frozen. No, you are back.

Ms PALMA: I think I am back.

Mr FOWLES: Would you like me to repeat the question?

Ms PALMA: Yes, please, because I did not catch it all.

Mr FOWLES: I am sure Hansard will later highlight how different my re-ask was from the original, but basically I was saying I would be interested to know what you think the most impactful changes would be, or the most impactful recommendation we could make to government to protect native wildlife.

Ms PALMA: The most impactful thing would be preservation of bushland and wildlife corridors, without question. Our wildlife are under attack from a range of measures, but frankly if they have no habitat left to live in, no corridors to enable movement in search of food, no corridors available to breed and facilitate genetic diversity, we will lose them. So that would be the most impactful thing.

Mr FOWLES: Thank you. So are there specific recommendations around wildlife corridors in your submission? I do not recall seeing anything on it, but I am sort of interested to know to what extent there has been research done on their efficacy. There are kind of some lay opinions out there that would suggest that

wildlife corridors sometimes are not as effective, particularly if the corridor itself ends up interacting with a higher risk piece of infrastructure like a road or whatever. Do you have a view on any of that?

Ms PALMA: No, our submission was very much at the very tactical end in terms of recommendations around fenced dog parks et cetera, you are correct. But fundamentally habitat loss is such a serious issue that I felt it was worth mentioning today. In terms of research on efficacy of corridors, I do not have that at hand, albeit I suspect that there may be some good data embedded in some local councils where active management has taken place of local wildlife and conservation of indigenous vegetation et cetera. I do not have it at hand, though, no, and you are right, that submission was focused very much at the tactical end.

Mr FOWLES: Sure, and if I can just finally ask you to give us a sense of the extent you are seeing trends in terms of either which species are being most represented in the data you collected, or what mode of injury or attack or what piece of interface with humans is causing the most problems. Are there any trends in there that might be of interest to us?

Ms PALMA: Yes, there are trends. There are trends across a range of reasons, but the number one reason is being hit by cars, closely followed by attacks by cats and dogs, closely followed by habitat destruction. The number one species that is called in to our emergency response service each year is eastern grey kangaroos, so macropods, followed thereafter by ringtail possums, brushtail possums, birds et cetera. That is the range of species but they are the key reasons for the trends we are seeing.

Mr FOWLES: And do you think the kangaroo representation in that is because they are perhaps more likely to survive, let us say, a glancing blow from a car, as opposed to other species, or is that actually a function of them being in high-risk areas or just being in bigger numbers more broadly?

Ms PALMA: No, both are incorrect. A glancing blow by a car does cause very serious injury in macropods; however, their response is to flee in fear and typically die or require intervention from us to assist them afterwards. It is not a function of increasing numbers. The primary reason they are coming onto roads is habitat destruction and urbanisation, so things like new housing estates that are being built on the land where the kangaroos live is a key issue. But where we have corridors—and there certainly are some that I can think of where we see kangaroos knowing exactly where they live and exactly where they are going to go, and if they can avoid roads they will—the provision of that green corridor for them to move about safely and avoid having to cross busy roads is really a key issue.

Mr FOWLES: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Will. I am going to throw to Danielle.

Ms GREEN: Thanks, Sarah, and thanks, Lisa. Lisa, parliamentary committees like this are one way to get your organisation's viewpoints across, but we are a creature of the Parliament, not the government, so because the Minister for Agriculture is just going through a process of review of the animal welfare Act, which has not been done for 20 years, I am hoping that Wildlife Victoria has put these sorts of viewpoints in response to the directions paper. That closed in December so if Wildlife Victoria did not, if you want to cc me into an email to the agriculture minister I would be happy to follow those things up, because often people think animal welfare is about companion animals and farm animals but it is across the board.

I did want to commend you on your recommendations about signage, and I think given how people have been using public open space so much more in COVID and dog parks and things like that—and I will say I am a dog owner and I live in an environmentally sensitive area in Diamond Creek—I am actually shocked that there were so many dog attacks. I have always thought that cats were the enemy, but I had not realised that dogs were so high in it as well. I think most dog owners do want to do the right thing so I am attracted to the idea of a recommendation that talks about uniform signage across our parks and across local government that explains why on-leash is so important. I really like that, so thank you.

Ms PALMA: Thank you, Danielle.

Ms GREEN: But also in relation to this, did Wildlife Victoria make submissions in the directions paper for the new animal welfare Act?

Ms PALMA: That is something I will have to follow up because I started as CEO in December so my predecessor would have submitted that if so, so I will chase that up and if not, circle back with you.

Ms GREEN: Yes, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Danielle. I will throw to Paul.

Mr HAMER: Thanks, Sarah. Thanks, Lisa. Just a quick one from me. You talked in your submission about fishing zones, and I suppose creating specific areas in which fishing could occur and then excluding any other areas. Would you have examples, I am not sure from other states or other countries, where that would be implemented or that approach has been implemented, and what some of the implications are as well?

Ms PALMA: No, I do not have any specific examples from other countries to share with you, albeit the data that we have of course is the number of animals that are entangled in fishing line and impaled with hooks and where. A good example of where a fishing ban would be absolutely relevant and would need to be policed would be where the threatened grey-headed flying foxes roost, because they typically roost along water and take flight. We have had a number of cases recently where that species has been entangled in fishing line hanging above the water, so we have got localised examples but no, I do not have any data from other countries to be able to share.

Mr HAMER: And just following on from that, if there were, which sites in Victoria would you be using as an example for that?

Ms PALMA: Well, it depends on the species. But if we are talking grey-headed flying foxes, it would be Yarra Bend Park in Kew, it would be the camp at Sale; there is another camp at Tatura. There are about four to six key grey-headed flying fox camps across the state that are all on water. We would recommend, for example, that fishing should be absolutely excluded.

Mr HAMER: Are people actually fishing in Yarra Bend Park?

Ms PALMA: I do not know. What often happens is there is illegal fishing. In parkland there are zones where fishing is prohibited, and that is managed by Parks Victoria. The key as well is my point on compliance and policing. Where people are fishing illegally, it is having sufficient resources to actually monitor for that, the appropriate penalties for that occurring and the resources to take it the whole way along the process. So, yes, there are a number of zones across the state where fishing is prohibited, but the issue is always compliance and policing.

Mr HAMER: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Paul. Lisa, we have just got a couple of minutes left before we have to hear from the next witness. Is there anything that you want to tell us to wrap up your submission—any final thoughts, things that you think, ‘You absolutely need to know this’?

Ms PALMA: Yes. Look, the key message that I would give is: it is absolutely possible to live in harmony with wildlife where it is strategically and proactively managed in conjunction with human population growth, and the impacts of humans on our native animals are absolutely tangible. The statistics are there: it is absolutely tangible. The scale of the impacts and the expected future impacts absolutely warrant appropriate planning and subsequent monitoring and compliance.

The CHAIR: Some very important final words. Will?

Mr FOWLES: Sorry, Sarah. Just going back quickly to the bats at Yarra Bend, some have suggested that they ought to be relocated or culled, and I wondered if you had a view on that matter?

Ms PALMA: Absolutely not. What a lot of people do not understand is that grey-headed flying foxes are a threatened species and play a vital role in the pollination of our native forests. Grey-headed flying foxes are in fact our only long-range pollinator in this country, so their role in the health of our eucalypt forests is absolutely vital. The species is migratory, in a sense, and then what you are looking at at Yarra Bend is a part of a population across the eastern seaboard, and we know that the numbers are declining year on year. Above 42 degrees is beyond the species’ physiological limit, and we have seen mass deaths in the species to cause us

considerable alarm about its long-term longevity and the corresponding impacts on the health of our eucalypt forests as a result.

Mr FOWLES: And are there things we can do or ought to be doing to further protect that species?

Ms PALMA: Yes, there are a number of things we should be doing. We should stop killing them. They should be afforded greater protection. There should be statewide management plans in place to support the species through increasing temperatures. There is a really, really significant need to improve public education, and in a multilingual and cross-cultural sense as well, about the species. There is a very wrong perception of the species out there in the public. They are actually quite gentle animals and really just like flying puppies actually. I think the species is much misunderstood and its important role in the ecosystem is also not understood well enough either.

Mr FOWLES: Terrific. Thanks. Sorry, Chair.

The CHAIR: A very insightful description indeed, Lisa. Thank you for that.

Lisa, thank you again for joining us. We really appreciate it. It is fantastic—some really great comments as well that we have not heard from someone like yourself.

Ms PALMA: Thanks. Look, some of those questions I can take on notice, as I have only been CEO for four months. This paper was written by my predecessor, so I added some additional points in today.

The CHAIR: That is great. Anything that you want to send through—thank you.

Witness withdrew.