

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Melbourne—Wednesday, 12 May 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

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Mr Matthew Jackson, Chief Executive Officer,

Ms Kylie Trott, Executive Director, Operations, and

Mr Stuart Hughes, Director, Park Planning and Policy, Parks Victoria.

The CHAIR: I advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's standing order 234.

Thank you very much for joining us today at this public hearing for the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations.

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 here today. I also extend a very warm welcome to any members of the public and the media watching us here today.

This is one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee will be conducting to inform itself about issues relevant to this inquiry. Before we begin, I need to point out a couple of things to you all. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and it is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without the 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 that you make outside this 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 both check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Again, Matthew, thank you to you and your team for taking the time to speak with the committee today. We really appreciate it. What I might start with is just an introduction from members of the committee, and then we will jump to Matthew and the team to introduce themselves. The best way to do these Zoom public hearings is if you have a 5-, 10-minute presentation or statement that you would like to deliver to the committee, that is fantastic, and then we usually just jump into questions and have a deeper discussion about your submission, statement or presentation.

My name is Sarah Connolly. I am the Chair of the committee and I am the Member for Tarneit.

Mr MORRIS: I am David Morris. I am the Deputy Chair of the committee, the Member for Mornington and also Shadow Minister for Local Government, for housing and for ageing.

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

Mr JACKSON: Thank you, Chair. Matthew Jackson, CEO of Parks Victoria. Can I introduce my colleagues: Stuart Hughes, the Director of Park Planning and Policy; and Kylie Trott, the Executive Director of Operations for Parks Victoria. We thank you for the opportunity to complement our submission that was through DELWP originally in September last year, and thank you for the opportunity to present further.

Can I also welcome and acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we are meeting digitally on here today across our great state of Victoria and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging and any other traditional owners that may be online today in the inquiry or have been involved in the inquiry. We take it as a great privilege in working with traditional owners on country.

Chair, if it is okay, Stuart will take us through a quick presentation, as you mentioned before. We are very comfortable if questions come along the way or at the end. I will leave that up to you, Chair, to organise. We will try and do that as briefly as possible and then get into any direct questions that the committee sees fit. Thank you again for the opportunity.

Mr HUGHES: Thanks, Matthew; thanks, Chair. Stuart Hughes. I will share my screen now to go through the presentation. I am very comfortable if committee members have questions throughout. I am happy to go through them, or if it piques some interesting questions, we can cover after the presentation.

Visual presentation.

Mr HUGHES: I will just into the slide mode. Excellent, thank you. I will be as brief as possible.

I also want to pay my respects to the traditional owners and the great privilege Parks Victoria has to work with traditional owners on the future of country and communities throughout Victoria.

The first few slides: I am just going to set the context about Parks Victoria, who we are and our purpose. This slide is great in showing the 4 million hectares of Victoria that Parks Victoria does manage. It ranges from significant world heritage areas such as Budj Bim, large significant national parks such as Kinglake or Mornington Peninsula or Point Nepean, and some of them even in a sort of peri-urban area like the Dandenong Ranges, and all the way through to large regional open space like Yarra Bend, Albert Park, Plenty Gorge, places like that.

So the diversity and spread across Victoria and the opportunity to work with communities across Victoria are outstanding. Eighty-five per cent of the land we manage is under the *National Parks Act*, so the purpose of that Act and those areas under the Act is to protect the natural and cultural value, so the largest footprint that we manage is of primacy for natural and cultural values protection. As I said, we manage World Heritage areas and places of international, national and regional significance, and then in a network sense it complements what other agencies like DELWP manage—the 4 million hectares of state forest—and through to what local councils and committees of management do that is locally relevant. The aim there is just to give a spread of the significance and the extent of the land that Parks Victoria manages.

This slide is just trying to give some fast facts that extend that. Importantly there is not just what we manage but the scale of the work we do with, say, licensed tour operators to provide quality nature-based tourism services in parks and the 222 000 hours that we partner with volunteers and community groups. So those people are connected to parks and are delivering great outcomes. The last point is about the economic benefits. Modelling shows there is \$2.1 billion worth of tourism expenditure relevant to the Parks estate, which generates over 20 000 direct and indirect jobs.

We work under the *Parks Victoria Act*, which creates us as a statutory authority as well as our role and contribution within government. This graphic is just showing the extent and the diversity of other Acts that come into play in protected areas and public land management, and the ones highlighted in blue are the ones that are, I guess, non-typical for parks agencies around the world, around things like ports management.

We have a significant role, and there were questions from the DELWP session about entities like Parks Victoria and our role in coastal and waterway management. We have got the privilege of managing 72 per cent of Victoria's coastline. I do not think that is probably widely known in community. That has come about through the protected areas we manage, like Croajingolong National Park and in an urban setting Point Cook Coastal Park, as well as the marine protected areas and the marine national parks and sanctuaries, so there is quite a significant extent of both coastal and marine based areas that we manage. We do manage three ports, so we have a very significant role obviously in Port Phillip, Western Port and also Port Campbell down in western Victoria. We have a very strong and active role as the recreation manager for the Yarra River, with things like making sure that we are managing berthing, dredging and the opportunity for enterprises to run services on the river all the way through to managing things like rowing. The final point there is just the scale and the value of the maritime infrastructure that we do manage.

Similarly to the previous slide, these are more fast facts. But what we are trying to do through this presentation is just to show the contribution to the Victorian community and the Victorian economy and the importance that it has for, I guess, economic stimulus, but most importantly how Victorians are connected to the marine and maritime areas as much as the terrestrial areas.

I am going to go through two key platforms that Parks Victoria's management is framed around. The first one is what we call 'managing country together', and that graphic is showing our framework. As I said at the outset, we are very privileged to be able to work with traditional owner communities across Victoria in managing the

future of country, in supporting traditional owners about what the future of the parks and reserves that are in our management is and also where we jointly manage them with traditional owner communities. We refer to cultural landscapes, so not just the parks and reserves and not just the flora and fauna, but how people and place form a cultural landscape.

This graphic, as part of that managing country together framework, is just showing some of the features that we aspire to about how places are being managed with traditional owners, in partnership with traditional owners. Values are being protected, and probably the cornerstone is traditional owner communities have a strong and stronger voice in the future directions for the parks, reserves and waterways in partnership with Parks Victoria.

I think a highly relevant point for the committee is the future of joint management and joint management as part of the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act* and the agreements under that. We have 26 parks and reserves that are currently in joint management, and that is where traditional owner communities, appointed through frameworks under the TOS Act, the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act*, set the future for country through the parks. So some places and some illustrative examples there: all the parks and reserves in Dja Dja Wurrung country, Barmah National Park as part of the Yorta Yorta country, and Gunnai/Kurnai down in eastern Victoria. So Parks Victoria is changing. We are changing to make sure that we are the ones delivering services and partnerships, but where the traditional owner communities are setting a new future for these parks and reserves. This will continue to evolve and apply over more and more of Victoria, so it is highly relevant to how in, I guess, a network sense, the future of parks and reserves is framed for the success of traditional owner communities.

The other key platform that Parks Victoria has worked on is being a world leader in the concept of ‘healthy parks, healthy people’. I have got on the screen there the four principles, and some of them are quite self-evident and obvious. But research shows the value to people’s health as well as their connection to nature, and I think COVID has been the greatest example to show what the importance is of people being healthy, their wellbeing and being connected with environmental infrastructure and open space. What Parks Victoria continues to do is lead the policy application of ‘healthy parks, healthy people’—so things like what it means for the 20-minute neighbourhood concept within *Plan Melbourne*, how the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan* applies in a parks and open space area and how communities are connected to their own health and the health of their community, all the way through to the Victorian government’s *Biodiversity 2037* and the importance of people being in nature and the importance of nature for preventative health outcomes all the way through to mental health and the like. So hopefully the committee has got a sense of how evident and writ large that has been during COVID and the value that open space has.

We do do a lot of programs too, which are in the submission. There are further examples I want to showcase—things like our junior ranger programs, which delivered last financial year 888 activities where community are able to connect with the open space areas and get a health outcome at the same time. I am trying to race along here.

A lot of the early work there was about what the estate is, what the attributes are and some of our principles, like managing country together and ‘healthy parks, healthy people’. Parks Victoria aspires to be a great partner. I have highlighted the role and importance of working and planning the future of country and parks and reserves with traditional owner communities. There are lots of other entities and significant parties that shape the future of the environmental infrastructure of Victoria—parties like catchment management authorities, Melbourne Water—and how collaborative and cross-tenure we are in delivering biodiversity programs and how we work across government with the challenge of the future of mountain biking or making sure we are supporting the future of fishing in Victoria.

The last point is how sort of intergovernmental it is. We work closely with things like precinct structure planning and how local governments are delivering change in local communities. We really prioritise how we work with community groups, such as through friends groups but also a lot of structured organisations and entities, especially where they are trying to provide connections to the parks for the diversity of communities that either are not connected with parks or where communities are under-represented at the moment in terms of their connection to open space. Some examples on the screen—like our park host program and volunteer track rangers. The next graphic—I am not going to go through all of these—is just an illustrative example of the diversity of structured partnerships and programs we have, and there is probably a health and recreation lens through those examples on the screen, so it is a bit about Parks Victoria and how we aspire to work with community and across government.

Parks Victoria has got a record program of initiatives to deliver in the post-COVID environment, in a mode to make sure that we are getting people into nature, and we are making sure that the nature-based tourism sector, as well as the parks and the facilities that people enjoy, are only stronger, enhanced and have a great future.

I am going to go through a few more slides in a minute about Victoria's great outdoors and the suburban parks program. The other initiatives are some across the state where we are investing in conservation programs. We are investing in renewal of critical infrastructure, like the St Kilda Pier—and all the way through to fire-impacted areas like Cape Conran, making sure there is a new future for how people enjoy Cape Conran, that the park is protected and loved further and importantly how it contributes to the future of eastern Victoria.

Victoria's Great Outdoors is one of the best programs for Parks Victoria. It is a diverse program that is about getting people into nature. It is renewing and upgrading and creating new campgrounds aimed at enabling people and communities to get into areas that they may not have in the past—so everything from peri-urban places to remote areas. We are investing in people to be there, to help support communities when they are in nature. So things like the seasonal ranger program, which is a real centrepiece of Parks Victoria, are rolling in the early creation and access into the Yallock-Bulluk Marine and Coastal Park, on the Bass Coast there. Seeking ideas and investing in innovation from volunteer communities and communities that work with us now or through further investment can only partner in new ideas—and cutting camping fees, removing a barrier to people being in nature. A multiyear program and election commitment of government and Parks Victoria is delivering \$64 million worth of that in excess of \$100 million program—just a fantastic program.

The other big one, and in particular in the context of the committee's work here, is the suburban parks program, and the suburban parks program has two key elements for us. One is renewing infrastructure, creating infrastructure, such as the Plenty River Trail. Plenty Gorge has been a park in development, in creation, for over 20 years, creating a new wave of people to go from end to end of the Plenty Gorge Park, connecting communities in the area and creating a longer journey beyond Plenty Gorge Park—so a massive \$19 million program, and we are powering through that. Another key one is Wattle Park. So the focus there is renewing the play and running facilities in the park. We are also taking a holistic lens to how we make sure that we are protecting the heritage values while creating more capacity and opportunity in a much-loved park in inner Melbourne.

And the ones I want to highlight in particular here are the three new regional parks and the refreshed planning for Werribee River and Toolern. These are all elements that carry from *Plan Melbourne* and are purposely aimed at creating new parks, new infrastructure and new opportunities in the growing parts of Melbourne. I am just going to quickly go through this. These are just graphics to show them. So Clyde is out in the City of Casey and adjoins other land under development for sporting infrastructure. So we are just starting a consult in the coming month. We are going to be starting the conversations with community about the future vision for Clyde. Similarly for Kororoit Creek, in the City of Melton. And lastly, the third new regional park is at the Werribee Township Regional Park, which will complement other public land and corridors through the growing Werribee area. And as I mentioned, we are about to start conversations with the community about what the vision is for those three new parks that will be created in those growing communities. We are also looking at the planning for Toolern Creek, in Melton, and also Werribee River regional park, so part of that broader corridor through Werribee and a really important precinct here, complementing the zoo, the treatment plant and a great connection to the bay. So that is really what we are charged with doing as part of the, I guess, *Plan Melbourne* implementation plan, and that is a massive program of planning for Parks Victoria at the moment.

Also a massive focus at the moment is making sure that our existing urban parks are renewed in a COVID era—they are able to handle the new love, demand, capacity. We are renewing the assets. We have got more rangers in those areas. We are increasing the cleaning of all the facilities with the importance of hygiene at the moment. So that slide is representing that investment. The previous slides were about planning new. This is very much about making sure we have got fit-for-purpose new facilities and a diversity across the greater Melbourne area.

Paul asked a question at the DELWP session about: how do we know when we are generating benefits from the programs and planning and policy work we do? I want to draw to the attention of the committee that it was noted in the submission, but a great project that DELWP and Parks Victoria did in 2015 was about using an environmental accounting framework to calculate, model the benefits that come from everything that is the parks and reserves. This spans everything from the role in water purification and water supply to Melbourne

and the value of ecosystem services for the privileged position Melbourne has got about the close catchments, all the way through to what amenity value there is in people living around and near parks and open space for their residential property values. The report also then goes into nature-based tourism jobs outcomes, as I said at the outset. That report, those calculations, go to everything like carbon storage, flood mitigation, pollination and coastal protection, so a very comprehensive framework that government can continue to apply in understanding and generating benefits.

Within Parks Victoria we also use our strategic pillars on the screen there. So for everything we do for planning, for designing programs, we calculate a benefit that each program has to make sure that we are delivering outcomes across those pillars on the screen, so a consistent, predictable way that we understand exactly what benefit we are generating for the community.

In the submission we highlighted our approach to planning and taking a landscape model for the planning. We have got 16 landscapes across Victoria where we are undertaking the landscape planning approach, which is trying to integrate conservation across the landscape and ecosystem, understanding community benefits that do go beyond the parks and reserves under our management, strategic fire management, all the way through to what experiences, journeys, facilities need to be within that landscape, so a broad scale. One of the ones on the screen is the river red gums. That planning area goes everywhere from Tallangatta to the South Australian border—all that beautiful Murray country. What we do there is similar to what catchment management authorities would do for regional catchment strategies, what DELWP do for strategic bushfire planning. We bring all that into an integrated plan. It sets a definition for what is the Parks estate, but it talks to community and partners about how that planning sits beyond boundaries.

We also do, and there are examples there such as Point Nepean and Plenty Gorge, take a master planning approach, where we need to really reset, understand, work with the community about the future of some of the really significant parts of Victoria. So we take a landscape level and then an applied level where we need to.

The last slide: that is going through the sort of place-by-place planning and the principles we apply. Parks Victoria is working hard at the moment to develop the inaugural land management strategy. So for the estate that we profiled at the outset there it is really important to be able to plan for change, from climate change, the growing Victoria, growing community. How do we make sure we are supporting nature-based tourism and strong, resilient local communities? How do we know that our partnerships are working well? So it is not a giant management plan for the whole state, but it is a strategy that we can monitor and talk to the community about—about what change may look like and when do we need to respond. So we are developing that at the moment. Again, just stressing that it is the inaugural one, so it is going to be fantastic to develop that, and, as it says on the screen, develop a draft and talk to the community about the future of the Parks estate later this year.

Then that land management strategy will be our underpinning framework for how we continue planning policy work and deliver programs and so the community knows what the future of the Parks estate is. I am ending on this slide because it is one of the most exciting things for Parks Victoria to be able to work with community and across government about the future of the Parks estate.

Chair, that was the end of the presentation. I am happy to go back to any matters there. Matt, Kylie and I can answer any questions that have come from that or other questions from the committee. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Stuart. That was a great presentation—very comprehensive. I love the last photo there. It looks like a beautiful sunset. I just want to jump into questions. I am just mindful of the time and that we might end up going a little bit over if that is okay. I love seeing all the plans that we have got for some really beautiful, amazing areas here in Victoria. I really want to get down to the nitty-gritty. What is the plan for outer suburbia in areas like mine? I know you talked a bit about Werribee. Werribee is very different to Tarneit and very different to Truganina, two of the fastest growing suburbs in this state, if not this country. What is the plan for these outer-suburbia-type areas that are experiencing enormous growth and we know are also experiencing things like the heat island effect? You know, Tarneit and Trug have some of the lowest tree canopy in the state—what is the plan for that?

Mr HUGHES: Thank you, Chair. We are doing conservation action planning across Melbourne, so it will cover, I guess, the western all the way through to the Bellarine part of Melbourne. We are understanding what the conservation assets are—what is the most significant, what is at threat, how do we keep on investing

in them? A lot of the areas that Parks Victoria manage are those large areas like the future western grasslands, Werribee township and the Werribee River, so our role is to make sure that they are strong. They are the backbone for things like the heat island effect, habitat and the like. We do keep that planning at a sort of landscape, strategic level, so what we have continued to do is work with partners like the VPA, councils and everyone else to make sure our activities complement the future planning, especially precinct structure planning and the like. As I outlined at the start, a lot of our charter is to protect the natural and cultural values, so our default mode is to make sure of that. Take the western grasslands, I know it is beyond Tarneit—

The CHAIR: It is not beyond Tarneit; it is sitting there in Truganina, and I believe that part of that western grasslands was very much infested with serrated tussock, which you would have seen with the season just gone was causing mayhem for many people across local communities with all the—I do not know how to describe—

Mr HUGHES: Seed heads?

The CHAIR: Yes, in the air. We were dealing with that quite recently, so we certainly do have protected grasslands there in Truganina, amongst other areas.

Mr HUGHES: So I am just highlighting that, yes, our mode is to make sure that our conservation action planning is making sure we are protecting the best assets and attributes. Our programs go to that. Just through you, Chair, Kylie, is there anything that you wanted to add there?

Ms TROTT: Thanks, Stu. Yes, it is a long-term program that we have for implementing the new grasslands that are coming on board, and with things like the serrated tussock we are making sure that we have got management plans in place where we are spraying the weeds as they are coming up. This year was quite unfortunate with the COVID restrictions and not being able to get the contractors in to spray the weeds before they seeded or to put up that temporary fencing to contain the seed heads. As we saw, it was quite an unfortunate event that occurred. But we will continue to be spraying those weeds and putting up temporary fencing in future years to try to minimise that impact on the community. But with the former private land coming into the park it is an ongoing program for us in managing things like the serrated tussock within those former properties that are now part of the park.

The CHAIR: Would you agree that there is a responsibility for Parks Victoria to be educating the local community about the importance of grasslands and the infestation? I know the communities in Trug were really appreciative of that sort of community education. We talked about healthy parks and healthy people and stakeholders being local residents. Do you think there is a sort of role of community education, for Parks Victoria to be spreading the messages about the areas they are responsible for and the wonderful little creatures that are sitting in these grasslands and why they are protected?

Ms TROTT: I absolutely agree. Grasslands are really special places but can be undervalued by people because they are different to a normal type of park that you might see, so we certainly have got a role in community engagement and working with community to understand the parks that are in their neighbourhood and how we can work together to make sure that we are creating those environments to protect those little critters.

Mr HUGHES: We want people to love growling grass frogs as much as things that they are less familiar with—the things that they may not see on a daily basis. We want the growing community to understand and value those things. I think there is a tremendous opportunity through establishing things like Werribee Township and the growling grass frog habitat and the western grassland as more and more of that is secured. As I mentioned at the outset, they will be future national parks, so we will be able to connect the community to those values and provide the opportunities for them to experience those values. At the moment it is securing land, and over time we will be turning it into a national park. That is a continual process. But you are right, we need to make sure that the community—the current community and the future community—grow to love what is special about things like frogs and grasslands.

The CHAIR: Just before I throw to David, I really have one question. I really hope that you might have, maybe, a top three and you would be able to hit us with your top three. Out of this public hearing, what are the top three things that you think state government could do to improve upon delivering environmental infrastructure to growing populations? Surely you must be able to see where the gaps and the bottlenecks are. What do you want to see us take away and you would hope would be in the recommendations?

Mr JACKSON: I can start off, Stuart.

Mr HUGHES: Please, Matthew.

Mr JACKSON: Thanks, Chair. Chair, look, if I can say two things just briefly. If you look at the magnitude of the estate Parks Victoria manages, critically we do get a lot of tied funding for programs, whether that is biodiversity programs, to look at a function of an ongoing funding program. Grasslands is one example—when that becomes a national park, it will need the conservation action planning behind that and the resources to manage the grasslands to the right level as we deal with a national park. So forecasting those sorts of investments in rangers and/or science and protection for communities—fire programs—is what we do and what we build into all of our park management programs. That would be one. An ongoing asset management program of significance—we manage over 45 000 assets across the estate alone—and obviously looking at where the criticality is through master planning, through community feedback and conservation outcomes; we would prioritise those. But some form of long-term funding program of asset maintenance and recurrent programs would be critical. Those would be two major initiatives we could look at for the long term, noting that we have had the most significant investments in our portfolio in the last years that have ever been done since Parks Victoria has been established.

Mr HUGHES: Chair, can I add the third one? It is really the approach of managing country together and across the Melbourne landscape. There has been some great work through things like the Yarra strategic plan about how the voice of Wurundjeri, Woiwurrung and other traditional owners will keep on playing out. It is the role for the community to go on a journey about traditional owners having a greater role and influence in self-determination mode about the future of the parks and reserves and waterways in the greater Melbourne area. That would be my other one there.

The CHAIR: Do you have anything you would like to add, Kylie?

Ms TROTT: I think they are the good three. Obviously there is planning the parks for the future as the community is growing and making sure that that level of investment, as Matt was talking about, is there for the management of those new parks as well as putting in the infrastructure that meets the community's needs.

The CHAIR: That is fantastic. Thank you. We are going to throw to David.

Mr MORRIS: Thank you, Sarah. Matt, if I can sort of pick up on the theme that you started there and just ask you about funding because, not surprisingly to me, we have had, probably too many times to count in terms of the evidence we have heard from the committee—whether it was from individuals, from interest organisations, from local councils—witness after witness saying Parks do not have enough money to do their job. Now, the slide show that Stuart took us through I think reminded us of the breadth of country that you manage and the disparity of the sort of tasks that you have to undertake as well. The secretariat are keen for me to ask you whether you have in place strategies about best value for money, and they were also keen to know—and this is probably a little bit cheeky—where you feel an increase in funding could have an outsized effect on your ability to maintain and provide environmental infrastructure. Now, recognising that that is probably advice you might give to a minister but that you are probably not going to give to a parliamentary committee, can I come at it from a slightly different perspective? The point was made in the last few minutes about the amount of money that has been put into Parks, but it is going into big output initiatives basically, and when I looked at funding over an extended period it seemed to me that base funding may not be declining but is not necessarily keeping pace with the role that Parks is required to undertake. So I think, given that we probably cannot ask you to talk about where more money would be helpful, it would probably be useful for the committee to get an idea of—and I am happy to go back, say, over the last 10 years; 20, 10, whatever is easier—what is happening in terms of base funding, you know, the money you have got to do the day-to-day stuff, because that is where the commentary/criticism has come from in this inquiry.

Mr JACKSON: Sure, and thank you for the question, David. It is a very broad question. If I can reflect on the first point you made and the first two slides from Stuart. So Parks Victoria is a very diverse entity, and that brings it strength because we are having a lot of touchpoints, a lot of—over 130 million—visits to our parks, across waterways, national parks and urban parks. But it brings a lot of asset risk. Again, we have got 45 000 assets, as I mentioned before, which come first, and we have got heritage assets, waterways, national parks and biodiversity programs. So it is really the way we are structured, which is a good thing. What we do—

if I comment on a bit of the history, then—what we have got better at doing as Parks Victoria is doing a better evidence-based asset management program. We were funded from the government four years ago—I think, off the top of my head now—to get an asset management system in place so we could understand our cost of service modelling. We have rebuilt—the bottom up of—what Parks Victoria is, and we are at record investment levels but also we are back to record staffing levels. So as the compliance obligations under different Acts—whether it is the Aboriginal cultural heritage Act, the *National Parks Act* and other legislation—are put in place, we have further obligations to deliver, as government delivers on legislation, which is a good thing but it brings a resource constraint as well.

And our model of resourcing is under fire. As you know, we are a significant part of Forest Fire Management Victoria and about 25 per cent of our business across the whole organisation—and putting it on the last fires, we had over 850 staff on a daily basis fighting the fires. So that takes us off BAU, that takes us off other areas of commitment. They are campaign fires, they do not happen all the time, but they are just some of the ways we are structured, and we have to prioritise some of those responses with community safety and/or other ways.

I mentioned the ongoing—which is fine for government to look at—longitudinal programs. So how do we continue asset programs that do not—tied for certain projects, unless we are rebuilding, for example, the St Kilda Pier? They can come to the end of their life, the assets, but we have got a large asset portfolio, whether they are heritage assets, built-form assets or conservation assets. We just need some longitudinal funding, and again we are at the record number. Four years ago we put a cost of service model up to government, and we got \$79 million over four years and ongoing of 57 rangers to put back into our organisation that were not previously in the organisation back in 2010.

If I look at the overall organisation, we were sitting at about \$205 million in 2010 and we are just under \$400 million today. Now, significantly that is capital works delivering a significant multiportfolio. I mean that we are delivering for ports, we are delivering for the visitor economy, we are delivering for DJPR, RDV and obviously for the department of environment. So whilst the large capital comes in great—it is fantastic—the two issues will be ongoing opex to manage those large assets as they come to life, that is one question, and then, again, just our prioritisation of things that happen along the way. But we certainly understand some of the feedback, and we cannot manage 3000 reserves and have a ranger in every single place in Victoria, which is always a challenge.

Mr MORRIS: Which I very much appreciate. I am just trying to get some transparency around this in the context of making recommendations to government. But is it possible to get an annual figure over, say, the last 10 years for base operational funding, so excluding extraordinary capital investment and excluding extraordinary output investment, just so we can see what the day-to-day resources that are available to Parks are and how they are tracking?

Mr JACKSON: Yes, we can do that, David. And again, there are two things that have to be taken into consideration. Our fire program is involved in that BAU funding as well because, for example, a ranger in Gippsland might be doing fire programs. What Parks Victoria is also very good at is emergency management programming, so we are pulled off or we do other IMTs across the state or search and rescue, flooding and other areas. So certainly we can do that. If we pulled that capital out—whilst our capital has grown significantly, as I mentioned before, four years ago we redid our baseline cost of service modelling, and the government committed again to, as I call them, ‘the 57 rangers’ that have come in, and those rangers were put on board to fill a gap that was from our previous operating models—that were obviously cost initiatives from former governments’ decision-making. So we can certainly provide that.

Mr MORRIS: Look, I think that would be useful. I think also the firefighting aspect is important, because while the future is uncertain, I think we can be relatively confident that we are going to have more fires rather than less.

Mr JACKSON: Yes.

Mr MORRIS: The impact of fire on the capacity to do the day-to-day stuff—if it has been significant, it is certainly not extraordinary. So we really need to build that in for the future, which is another reason I am keen to sort of unpick it if we can.

Mr JACKSON: Sure. Chair, if I can just respond once more to David on that. The campaign is there. Also fire is a land management tool, so we have to look at cultural burning in partnership with traditional owners. There is recovery, response and planning for fire and then there are campaign fires that you have seen obviously in 2019–20 and the Black Saturday fires, so certainly recurrent fire in PV is also there because it is a land management tool to restore country, and obviously you have seen the growth in traditional owner burning. But certainly we can provide those figures.

Mr MORRIS: That would be great. Thank you very much, mate. Thanks, Sarah.

The CHAIR: Thanks, David. I am going to throw to Paul.

Mr HAMER: Thanks, Sarah. Just as a starting question, which is just more about some information, I was surprised when you had your map out of the estate at just how many what appear to be relatively small parcels of land are distributed throughout the state. Now, obviously the national parks and state parks, the big estates, are the ones that are the most visible. Could you just give a bit of an explanation of what those really small parcels are, what sort of size they are and what maybe are the management responsibilities? Are they generally run by committees of management, local councils et cetera?

Mr HUGHES: I will handle that. Thanks, Paul. It is Stuart here. A lot of our parks and reserves are generated from VEAC investigations into the principles of comprehensiveness, adequate and representative model for natural values and cultural values across the estate. What it leads to is—and that image was for the parks and reserves Parks Victoria manage—areas that might be as small as—where I live the 2 hectares next to me is a bushland reserve because it is protecting something that in that vegetation community and in that bioregion was under-represented. So what we do have are the large places like Alpine National Park or Murray-Sunset and the like and what has been based on a values protection model and making sure that you have got that representativeness of values across those bioregions. It does lead to things like having a small 1-hectare, 5-hectare, 10-hectare area. The ones that Parks Victoria traditionally manage are those ones that are protecting the natural and cultural values, less the ones that are there for community services and the like. The underpinning is we manage land that is identified through VEAC investigations, and then we manage them. We do do a management model, as Matt was saying. It is not park by park. It is often at landscape level, making sure that we are dealing with pests, providing access to the community for those small or large facilities. It is a great connection to the community having so many reserves in community and surrounding communities.

Mr HAMER: I guess it is just an interesting model because in our area, in Whitehorse, there are a number of bushland parks. Some of them have been to an extent artificially created by, say, damming the Gardiners Creek but since that time have been deliberately planted with natural bushland, and then there are other pockets which I believe are natural bushland. But they are all owned and controlled by councils. That is still within, I guess, Parks Victoria's remit, even at that low level of maybe even 1 or 2 hectares of site. If there is some remnant vegetation, Parks would have that as its own estate. Is that what you are saying?

Mr HUGHES: Yes. Probably for more urban and metropolitan areas the default is that we manage the large regional parks and some of the ones like I was talking about, the new ones like Clyde or existing ones like Brimbank Park or Yarra Bend Park. So usually the smaller reserves are where they are protecting values, and I would characterise them as more regional or peri-urban areas. The smaller metropolitan areas are more traditionally local government or committee of management or other means. The default or the traditional is where you have got the larger regional parks.

Mr HAMER: Okay. You talked quite a lot about the involvement with the local Indigenous communities, and there has been quite a noticeable, I guess, transition over the last, say, generation in terms of engaging with the traditional owners in the forward development of the park. Now, as you would be quite aware, that has come into conflict with some other users who might have traditionally used the parks for other purposes, other recreational purposes, not just necessarily bushwalking but other things that may be a bit more invasive. I was just wondering, I guess in your mind, how is the best way to strike that balance? Obviously we are wanting to try and encourage the use of a park and the visitation of parks, and I guess particularly from a policy perspective whether we have the balance right or whether there are other avenues that we should be looking at?

Mr HUGHES: Matt and Kylie, I am happy to.

Mr JACKSON: Yes. If you would like to start, Stuart.

Mr HUGHES: Yes, thanks. So obviously highlighting where joint management and traditional owner communities are really framing the future of country, probably the example I would like to give is the Greater Gariwerd planning we are doing at the moment. The conflict is characterised as protection of Aboriginal values, such as rock art and significant places, with things like rock climbing and bushwalking and the like. The model Parks Victoria has applied is a true partnership with the three traditional owner communities in that landscape and an evidence-based one. So we have spent a significant amount of time researching the environmental values, researching the tangible and intangible cultural values in the landscape, and relaying that information—where it is culturally appropriate—to the community, so they can get a broader understanding about what is significant as a cultural landscape but also what is significant for how people currently use somewhere like Gariwerd.

We are now working through a planning process where the feedback to Parks Victoria is still around that it is great that the values are coming to the fore. It is based on evidence, not anything else, and we are taking the Victorian community on a journey about what is the protection of values in a mode where it still enables access, recreation and nature-based tourism to occur. So that is probably the best example I am thinking of at the moment. But again that is based on that partnership with traditional owners, and that is the future of, I guess, land management in Victoria as more and more joint management arrangements and *Traditional Owner Settlement Act* outcomes arise. Matt, I may not have done that justice, I was seeing if there was anything you wanted to add.

Mr JACKSON: No thanks, Stuart. And, Paul, it is a great question, and we continually look at the balance between recreation and conservation, noting that our view is obviously conservation—the reservation and purpose of the land. But clearly in the Act, and in our belief—so ‘healthy parks, healthy people’—getting people out in nature is great for you and great for the economy.

Stuart mentioned that partnership approach. We need to get better at understanding the assets and doing more detailed assessment. We have just spent significant time mapping the Grampians to make sure we have all the intangible and tangible Aboriginal cultural assets there. We do have the legislation and we have to strike the right balance. But some of those groups—

For example, rock climbing has gone from a smaller activity many, many years ago to an Olympic sport. Mountain biking is going that way. So we have got some large growth in areas of recreation, which is great for community, but it also puts pressure on the natural and cultural values of this state, and we need to just get that balance right. But certainly it will be an ongoing challenge. We need to be transparent, talk to community, provide the data-driven, evidence-based decision-making where we can, so that we bring people along the journey that we have to protect this state for future generations at same time, allowing access for all Victorians to enjoy our national parks and reserve system. So it is an ongoing challenge.

Mr HAMER: Thanks, Stuart. Thanks, Matt. I did not have any other questions, Sarah.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Paul. Just touching off that point on mountain biking, interestingly enough the committee has heard in particular from one witness that stated there is currently no statewide mountain biking strategy, and several other witnesses have raised concerns about potential negative effects of unregulated mountain biking on Parks Victoria assets. It sounds to me like a very dangerous hobby, so you can probably tell that I am not involved in it. Are you able to give a couple of comments on whether Parks Victoria is actually going to be organising a strategy on mountain biking? Because I know there are a lot of people that do really like it and enjoy it, and the uptake has probably increased during COVID. And how might you approach the development of such a strategy if you were tasked to?

Mr JACKSON: Would you like to start off, Stu? You are working on that. And then I can complement.

Mr HUGHES: Please, Matt.

The CHAIR: Are you a mountain biker?

Mr JACKSON: No, I am not a mountain biker, not that I have anything against mountain biking. I protect my body. It is hurt enough from older days, let alone mountain bikes. And I mentioned before, Chair, that the growth in mountain biking is significant now there is value. So we formally manage the You Yangs and Lysterfield Park, so some really decent mountain biking tracks. There is a significant investment by federal,

state and local government into mountain biking, and I think the question—you are right, there—is also, unfortunately, a significant growth in illegal and/or unauthorised mountain biking. Now that is not just an issue for Parks Victoria; that is in state forests and local councils, and—you are quite correct, Chair—some of the urban parks copped a bit of a beating on mountain biking during COVID because of restrictions and little kids and other people enjoying the nature that is there. However, not all know that they are doing the wrong thing, mind you. But it is a growth sport.

I think the first point—please complement me at the end, Stuart—is there is no real statewide mountain biking organisation that looks after mountain biking. So there are unofficial groups that we work with—volunteering. They are riding mountain bikes well. Then we have got family members, and then we have got cycling BMX groups, so we are working at a state government level, a multiple agency level, to try and coordinate one through sport and rec—but it is RDV, DELWP, Parks Victoria, local council—to look at a statewide approach to mountain biking. And you are quite correct, there is not one in Victoria. There are in other states, and we need to work as a combined part of government to make sure that we get something similar to protect this state for future generations, realise the effects that mountain biking can have, positive and negative, and then have a plan to roll out what that frame looks like into Victoria.

But we do have, in partnership with DELWP, some mountain biking principles on public land that have been refreshed, so if somebody was to look at those they would get a guide before they can develop and/or make or propose to make a mountain biking course. But we do have large programs at the moment going through multiple councils with successful mountain biking tracks bringing economic activity, so we do recognise that that is something that needs to be put in place. Stuart, did you want to—or Kylie?

Mr HUGHES: Great job, Matt. Nothing more to add, thanks.

Ms TROTT: Probably just to highlight that, as Stuart talked about earlier, the Parks estate is about a representative network to protect those rare ecological communities that need to be protected, so the balance and the appropriateness of the area that is being selected for a potential mountain bike facility is what is really important, because what might be perceived as only a narrow track for a mountain bike can have quite a detrimental impact on the environmental values that that park is there for. It is about selecting the appropriate parcels of land, and a forest might be more appropriate than a national park, for instance, for development of facilities. So that public land mountain biking strategy is a really important bit of work to be done on helping guide those selections as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. It is all very interesting. It came up quite a few times. David, I am just going to go around the table again. No final questions? No final questions from you, Paul? Matthew, Kylie and Stuart, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today. That was fantastic.

Mr JACKSON: Thank you, committee. We really appreciate the opportunity.

Mr MORRIS: Thanks very much. It was very useful.

Mr JACKSON: Thank you.

Ms TROTT: Thanks for your time.

Mr HUGHES: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.