T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 24 February 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair
Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair
Dr Matthew Bach
Ms Melina Bath
Dr Catherine Cumming
Mr Stuart Grimley
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Dr Tien Kieu
Mrs Beverley McArthur
Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESS

Mr Barry Howlett, Executive Officer, Australian Deer Association.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Environment and Planning Committee public hearing into the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the various lands which each of us are gathered on today and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I would also like to welcome any members of the public who may be watching via the live broadcast today.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues participating today and to thank those who have provided apologies. At this juncture I will just introduce members of the committee to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra; I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Mr Cliff Hayes has just left us for a moment—he is the Deputy Chair; he will be back momentarily—and we have Dr Samantha Ratnam, Bev McArthur, Stuart Grimley joining us via live screen, Andy Meddick, Matthew Bach and Melina Bath.

All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

At this juncture I will invite you to make your opening comments. If you could please keep your comments to a maximum of 10 minutes, that will allow plenty of questions from committee members. You have about 45 minutes in total, and you can see we try and keep things on track as much as possible. Thanks for coming along today, and over to you for your opening comments.

Mr HOWLETT: Thank you, Chair. Thanks to the committee for considering our submission and for the invitation to present. Ecosystem decline is obviously of concern to a large number of Victorians, as is evidenced by the massive number of submissions to this inquiry. Our organisation primarily represents the interests of Australia's recreational deer hunters. In Victoria that is 40 000 hunters and growing—a fivefold increase since the mid-1990s.

The cumulative total number of deer taken by all recreational hunters across the state is significant. As many as 213 000 deer were killed by recreational hunters in Victoria in 2019. We do not know what impact that harvest has on biodiversity. In some areas it will likely be marked and in others it will be negligible. Research conducted by the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries in 2016 made some important conclusions about recreational hunting's role in this. I quote:

> Most of the claims made by pro- and anti-hunting campaigners remain hypothetical and unsubstantiated …
>
> Good management of recreational hunting and pest animal populations and impacts is only possible if management agencies take a more active and strategic role. Furthermore, transparency and credibility are important foundations for the ongoing maintenance of recreational hunters' social license to operate on public land. We therefore urge management agencies to take a more strategic approach to recreational hunting which will enhance the benefits of public investment for public land managers, hunters and the broader community.

The average active deer hunter spends 14 days a year in the bush and kills around seven deer a year. We highlight that fact because it underlines what a small part actually pulling the trigger is of the overall hunting experience. Most of that fortnight that the average hunter spends in the field every year is spent conversing with nature. We are naturalists who take the odd bit of venison home for our troubles. We are camo-clad ecotourists. When I look on the Facebook pages of my deer-hunting friends, I am more likely to see snaps of encounters with echidnas or goannas or helmeted honeyeaters or azure kingfishers than I am to see the stereotypical grip and grin with a dead deer.

We also have an awful lot in common with our cousins in the environment movement. We seek to work on those areas of common ground wherever we can. We do feel obliged, however, to call out misinformation when we hear it. For the most part, misinformation tends to take the form of deliberate omission rather than blatant mistruth. An example of this is in the submission to this inquiry from the Invasive Species Council, and I quote:

> All other mainland states have designated all deer as a pest species.

Whilst wild deer are present throughout Australia, they have well-established populations in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. Of these five states, three—New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania—enable recreational hunting to public land and hunting through game licensing. In the two outliers, Queensland and South Australia, there is no public land access for hunters. Beyond that, land managers are totally in the dark about hunter effort, and they lack the ability to properly regulate hunting and educate hunters in those states. There is a folly in trying to seek rhetorical solutions for physical problems. Game licensing is a means of managing the hunters, not the deer. Efforts to dismantle game licensing are, logically, seen by hunters as back door efforts to dismantle public land hunting. It certainly smacks of an undisclosed agenda.

Ideology and political expediency cloud the effective management of overabundant wildlife in Victoria, typically to the detriment of natural values. The hunting community are as prone as any other stakeholder group to enter conversations with an ideological bias. It is incumbent on all of us to be aware of our own biases and to look objectively at issues based on facts, data and evidence. There are great examples of hunters and hunting groups making significant contributions to improving biodiversity and addressing ecosystem decline in Victoria, both through what we might term as the conventional deer control programs—that is, volunteers killing deer in a coordinated and targeted way—and through other initiatives such as the extensive deer-monitoring programs in the alps, the erection of exclusion fencing around alpine bogs, revegetation of degraded state game reserves to rehabilitate habitat and restore biodiversity and innovative hunter-funded weed removal programs to protect nationally listed threatened plant species and improve hunting opportunities at the same time.

In New Zealand's beech forests ongoing management of wild sika deer to acceptable densities is achieved using helicopter culling above a density threshold, and recreational hunting is the management tool below that threshold. The two tools are seen as complementary, not contradictory. This approach allows for resources to be applied for the best use and for hunters and regional economies to benefit from the recreational opportunity.

On Wilsons Promontory there is a concerted effort to reduce the population of wild hog deer on the basis that they are impacting on natural values—that is, the browsing of regenerating flora—and cultural values, including Aboriginal shell middens. Our organisation, along with the Sporting Shooters Association, has been involved in a program to reduce the density of hog deer on the Prom for the past six years. Hog deer were introduced to the area by the acclimatisation society in the 1860s. Wilsons Prom is a unique and valuable environment which has evolved over eons in their absence. But here is the kicker: the same natural and cultural values are also—or likely more so—being impacted by overabundant eastern grey kangaroos and the common wombat. The eastern grey kangaroos are descendants of nine animals released to the park in 1910 and 1912, the common wombat from five animals released in 1910. Wilsons Prom is a unique and valuable environment which has evolved over eons in their absence too. The positive impact achieved by removing hog deer but not kangaroos and wombats will be negligible. It is difficult in that regard to conclude anything other than that ecosystem decline takes a back seat to political expediency. It is hunting that acts as a gateway for all these efforts for hunters. All effective hunters share a deep curiosity about the natural world and an intuitive need to participate in it. The interests and commitment to conservation is far more complex than simply having things to hunt and kill.

There is an opportunity cost, too, to poorly scoped or bureaucratically burdened government control programs. Government agencies have displayed a tendency in recent times to focus control efforts onto paid contractors and aerial culling. The level of secrecy surrounding these arrangements makes it impossible to gauge their effectiveness on anything other than a superficial level. The Victorian government's budget commitment in 2020 of $18 million over four years for deer control is significant. If it is going to make a long-term difference to high-value environmental, cultural and agricultural assets, the spending will need to be exceptionally well targeted and focus on evidence-based approaches and in some cases brutal prioritisation of control.

Before public resources are expended on programs, some simple questions should be asked and answered, such as: is the problem clearly quantified; is there a clear understanding of what is required to address the problem; is

treatment possible or feasible through simply opening the area in question up to recreational hunting; is there robust monitoring of all species of wildlife involved in the undesired impact; is there robust monitoring of the asset that is being impacted; is there adequate resourcing to achieve the desired outcomes; and is there monitoring of stakeholder sentiment?

Thank you again for the opportunity to present today.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Howlett, for those opening comments. I might kick off with a question to get everyone started. It seems, especially from your closing remarks there—and we have had a bit of a theme through other witnesses appearing as well—that data seems to be not as good as it could be. And I think that is essentially what you are implying there as well, that perhaps we need to clearly define the problem and then monitor things. Is that something that you would recommend, that we have better data collection around these things as well?

Mr HOWLETT: Yes, there should certainly be really clear criteria on what triggers government spending on programs. How we monitor success and failure is very rarely monitored, and that is not unique to Victoria—it is not unique to Australia, it is a global situation—but we would argue that best practice is that we understand what we are doing and we understand whether we have been successful or not.

The CHAIR: And also—I was just looking at your submission as well—you talk about what they do in New Zealand for the ongoing management of—what is it—the wild sika deer. Do you think that approach is a good approach or not? Could it be improved? What is your—

Mr HOWLETT: I think it is a good approach in the beech forests in New Zealand. What we tend to lose in these discussions is the granularity. We tend to look at 'deer', and when you are talking about deer in Australia you are talking about six species in a diverse range of environments. I think it is an example of an approach that works in a place, but I think trying to apply a one-size-fits-all solution to such a broad, complex problem is just setting us up for failure.

The CHAIR: Okay. So there needs to be a more granular or targeted approach, depending.

Mr HOWLETT: Very much so.

The CHAIR: Right. Thank you. Mrs McArthur, I might throw to you for a question.

Mrs McARTHUR: I will pass at this stage.

The CHAIR: You are right for the moment? Mr Grimley, a question?

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Howlett, for your presentation. In your submission you note your willingness to participate in deer management programs which have hunter skill development elements. Can you elaborate, please, to the committee on this, and how do you envisage that this would be implemented?

Mr HOWLETT: Ongoing training of hunters. Most of our hunters who participate in the programs we already accredit—all of them we already accredit. So we test primarily their knowledge of game management and of animal welfare. We also do a short shooting test at the end of it. And what we find is that the more we invest in these programs, the more we get out of people, so we are upskilling people. A number of years ago we sent a number of our participants to a short course at the University of Queensland on game management. So it is more about getting those people to be very, very highly skilled in recognising not just the killing animals aspect of the programs but how to really properly establish a program to get the best effect.

Mr GRIMLEY: Okay. Thank you. Just one more if I can, Chair, quickly. You also note that volunteer or recreational hunters are often subjected to bias and stigma by, and I quote:

> … those opposed to recreational hunting, animal rights groups and sections of the pest-service industry …

In your experience, how feasible is a common-ground collaboration between recreational hunters and environmental groups? Can this be achieved, or would it be a case of trying to herd feral cats together, I suppose?

Mr HOWLETT: No, it can achieved. It is horses for courses, but certainly in places like Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve, where we have been operating for a number of years, there is a great alignment with the

environment groups that work in that reserve. There is also paid control going on and our members working on property around there. So there is an alliance of the environment groups, of the private landholders, of Parks Victoria, of the paid contractors and of the volunteers all trying to achieve a common aim. So it certainly can be achieved, but it is a matter of—once you get to a local level, things seem a lot easier than when it is people like me and people representing the other peak organisations trading blows through the broadsheets.

Mr GRIMLEY: Okay. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Dr Bach.

Dr BACH: Thanks, Chair. And thanks, Mr Howlett. It is good to hear from you this morning. As the Chair said, I was interested in the serious questions that you posed at the end of your presentation to us, largely because, again as you said, Chair, there are some themes emerging. I was just taking down some notes as you were talking. You thought that one of the questions—and I do not want to misquote you—was whether or not there is robust monitoring.

You also posed a question about: once we have a fulsome understanding of the issues at play—and it seems to be that you are implying that we do not at present—we should ask something like whether we can make some strides forward in dealing with those issues through opening up to recreational hunting. I wonder if you might talk to us, if I have paraphrased you correctly there, about some of the scenarios that you think, noting our terms of reference, may be able to be 'treated'—I think that was your word—through an opening up to recreational hunting.

Mr HOWLETT: As Andrew Cox touched on, that invasion curve—so if you are looking at areas where deer are just beginning to establish populations, there is certainly the opportunity there to open those areas of public land, even in quite a balloted or targeted way, to recreational hunters, stating, 'Hey, the objective here is to stop the deer from populating the area to begin with', and allowing local hunters in there to have access to simply do that. It would need targeting, but it would also strip just about all of the costs out of it for government.

Dr BACH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Mr Howlett. It is probably an unfortunate by-product of a committee situation like this that it is reflective of a lot of people in the community. You touched on it yourself, that there are very divergent views, and sometimes, no matter how good the intentions are, never the twain shall meet. I want to bring up a couple of things that are more specific around data. I think that is the best place for us to sit here. We did have the Invasive Species Council talking about—in his estimation 1 million deer perhaps already out in the broader landscape and probably more than that, but there is not sufficient data to actually say that that is the case. Would you say that that is somewhat accurate? I am just seeking some broader opinions, if you like, of how you feel some of the points he would have raised, because I know you were here for most of his presentation.

Mr HOWLETT: It is quite possibly accurate, but if you are talking about management and if you are talking about addressing impacts on the environment, it is actually the wrong question to be asking. It does not matter how many deer there are in Victoria. It matters what damage deer are doing in particular places and what the density of the deer is in those places. It is great for people who seek headlines—'A million deer' is a great headline—but it is completely meaningless from a management perspective.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you. That is exactly the answer I was looking for, because I was looking to see if they were concentrated in particular areas and if damage was concentrated in that respect.

A question that I also asked, and it is brought up by the fact that your submission talks a lot and you have spoken here a lot about environmental concerns and eco concerns, if you like. Given that the Invasive Species Council would probably see that complete deer eradication from the landscape is the desired outcome, is that a position—let us take into account all practicalities of how many there might be and how long that might take; is that an outcome that you would like to see as well, given that by your own admission they are impacting certain areas?

Mr HOWLETT: It is a real hypothetical. We do not believe eradication is a feasible aim. We certainly do not want to see deer populations come into areas where they do not currently exist. Where they do currently exist we want to see them reduced to a density that is sustainable for the environment. If we were to jump in our TARDIS and go back to 1860, then, yes, we would tell the acclimatisation society not to let the deer off the boats.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Mr Howlett, for your presentation. I have many questions, but I will just ask two and may put some others on notice. The first one is, I think, would you like to respond to the ISC? Mr Cox today has mentioned that the deer as a species should become a pest. So that is the first one: what is the ADA's opinion on that? And I will go to the second one. You also mentioned in your presentation things that hunters do as environmentalists, and I think you mentioned a weed eradication program. As a rule, can you elaborate on some of the work that volunteer hunters do to support environment and habitat?

Mr HOWLETT: Yes, certainly. On the pest thing, I think Mr Cox is probably about eight years late to the party in Victoria. In 2013 the Victorian government declared wild deer unprotected on private land in Victoria, which basically addressed all of those concerns. Deer are, as Mr Cox said, protected by the *Wildlife Act* in Victoria. It is a 365-day-a-year open season, public land access with no bag limit, so if that is what he thinks is protection, I certainly would not want him protecting me. But it is an issue that has actually been addressed. The Invasive Species Council came out two years ago on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph* lauding the New South Wales government for basically following Victoria's lead in unprotecting deer on private land and then allowing them to be hunted under game licensing on public land, so it is a very confused position that they have put. There is no practical benefit in dismantling what we have got in Victoria now.

With the conservation stuff, yes, there is stuff that hunters do all over the place. Our organisation completely revegetated the Clydebank Morass State Game Reserve, which would be in your area. It was degraded former farmland, and over the space of about 10 years we have transformed that into a living forest. Obviously our impetus for that was it would make really good habitat for the few hog deer in the area. It is crawling with kangaroos and all sorts of other wildlife.

The weed one is one—we have balloted hog deer hunting on public land in Victoria, and hunters pay $30 to go into that ballot. That is administered by an advisory group, and the advisory group then spends that money directly targeting the balloted hunting areas. One of them is the Blond Bay State Game Reserve, which has been overrun by invasive native weed, burgan—

Ms BATH: Yes, it is not good news, burgan.

Mr HOWLETT: It is choking the environment. There are three nationally listed plant species, metallic sun-orchid, swamp everlasting and I am going to have a bloke in Bairnsdale shaking his fist because I cannot remember the third one.

Ms BATH: Take it on notice

Mr HOWLETT: But we have been able to use that balloted hunting money to go to Parks Victoria and say, 'Hey, look, we know that you don't have the resources, but we do', and get permission to go in and pay—it is about $20 000 we are paying contractors to go in and spray that weed, which will open those areas up and make it better for our hog deer hunting but it will also protect those two nationally listed plant species.

Ms BATH: It is also a fuel source, burgan. It is highly volatile.

Mr HOWLETT: Yes, and it is highly invasive. It is a native weed we would call it.

Ms BATH: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: I will come back to you. Dr Ratnam?

Dr RATNAM: Thank you very much, Mr Howlett, for your presentation. Just picking up on your remarks earlier about the protection given to deer. Technically deer is considered protected wildlife. You are now claiming that in effect it is not protected in Victoria and saying there is no value in changing the system by

which we operate in Victoria. Obviously you represent a particular interest, which is ensuring hunting continues. I am just curious to know whether you support the removal of this legal protection, because technically it is legally a protected species.

Mr HOWLETT: I suppose so, as it is in other states. So it is the same in New South Wales. In effect that protection does not inhibit land managers from doing whatever. It does not inhibit Parks Victoria from running aerial deer culls, it does not inhibit land managers in any way and it does not inhibit private land managers because they are unprotected on private land. What it does is enable game hunting on public land. There are a couple of elements to that. There is the licensing element—the Game Management Authority and the licensing element—and there is an element where we like that deer hunters value deer. We believe it leads to better animal welfare outcomes. Unfortunately, and it should not be the case—we should apply the same standard of animal welfare to killing a mouse as we do to killing a deer, but we do not. We can walk into Bunnings and buy a fairly cruel poison for a mouse that would not meet the legal obligations for killing something like a deer. That game status, that elevation in the eyes of hunters, what people would argue is a bad thing, actually engenders a bit of respect for the animal and in our view engenders better animal welfare outcomes. I get the oxymoronic bit about shooting them having an animal welfare outcome, but it makes people respect the animal they are taking and take it down cleanly.

Dr RATNAM: Okay. And I guess there is a counterargument that there are a whole tranche of other kinds of policy settings and policy initiatives that would be enacted should the status be changed, as we have heard from the previous speaker, from game status to pest status. So that is the counterargument to that—that if you are actually thinking about an invasive species that is having quite a dramatic impact on the ecosystem, you would have to—

Mr HOWLETT: That has not been the experience in other states. So in Queensland where they were declared a pest in the early 2000s and in South Australia probably in the 1980s what we find is, quite unsurprisingly, private landholders will manage deer to the point where it makes economic sense for them to do so. There is no compulsion for people to do anything more than what makes sense. Some of those states have government regulation that theoretically compels the landholder to manage the deer, but you go to the south-east of South Australia and the practical reality is they will keep the deer density to the point where it does not have a negative impact on their agricultural operation and no more.

Dr RATNAM: That sounds like it is a bit of a failure of policy then in terms of what the actual overarching goal is. If it is not resourced properly to actually achieve the outcome around invasive species, you probably get that stalling or repeat effort to—

Mr HOWLETT: I do not think in a practical sense any government in Australia is actually going to go on and force agriculturalists to do stuff that they do not want to do at their own expense. I just cannot see that ever happening.

Dr RATNAM: No, not at their own expense. Just picking up one other point that you just raised in terms of an example, you talked about DELWP using some of the money from your own organisation to go and manage an invasive plant species, the weed. That is quite stark to me in terms of if a government agency does not have the resources—you are going to the government and saying 'You don't have the resources'—to manage something that I would say would be in the purview of the government agency to manage and it has to go to an organisation that is funded variously to be able to do that, that is quite a stark example of a lack of resourcing for invasive species management from a systems level, I would say.

Mr HOWLETT: I would absolutely agree, but you will find that in national parks throughout the state. Hunter groups are a tiny part of that. You will find friends groups and Landcare groups taking on government's role throughout the state on public land.

Dr RATNAM: And has that been your experience across the board in terms of government response and how much of a reliance there is on then non-government organisations and agencies to do that work?

Mr HOWLETT: Yes. I do not think there is ever going to be the resource for it to be any other way.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Howlett. How much would you save the government by being able to be more active in reducing deer numbers if Parks Victoria or whoever is responsible for reducing the deer numbers are not able to do it or do not do it effectively? I would like you to comment on that. Secondly, what is your view on aerial shooting? If an agency uses aerial shooting to eradicate any so-called pest—it might be a horse as well—and it is left in an inaccessible area of forest, isn't that feed for wild dogs and cats and foxes, so aren't you actually exacerbating another vermin population? Is shooting better than aerial shooting? And where do you sit in relation to wild horses being declared vermin while deer are declared game?

Mr HOWLETT: The cost one, look, we do not know. We look at those couple of hundred thousand deer taken by recreational hunters in Victoria every year, and certainly there is a net economic gain to the state from that. Were the government to pay us to do that, it would be millions and millions of dollars, but what is the opportunity cost? What is the ecological cost of those deer not being removed? We really do not know. It is very poorly quantified.

Aerial shooting has its place, in our view. It can be very effective. The way it is conducted in Victoria at the moment, there is no accountability whatsoever. When it first came in in Victoria we asked Parks Victoria, 'Will there be observers?' Will there be vets observing? Will you be filming flights and making the video available?'. We cannot even get any accountability on how much it is costing. We get some really, really vague reports on, 'Oh, we killed X amount of animals per minute', which might be a valuable measure had they gone out before the program and told us how many animals per minute they were looking to kill.

Mrs McARTHUR: Or how many were there in the first place.

Mr HOWLETT: Yes, precisely. How many were there in the first place, because that is the really important question: how many do you need to remove in order to have an impact?

The other thing with aerial shooting is we do not know about the animal welfare outcomes. We certainly know, just from a pure biology perspective, it has not got the efficacy of ground shooting. You are shooting downwards—the trajectory, the fact that it is a moving target from a moving platform. Your actual target, your kill zone, is very small when you are shooting from above. Broadside is going to be give you your best kill zone; it is going to give you your largest kill zone. We know that they are shooting every animal multiple times as a redundancy, but we do not know the animal welfare outcomes on it. The status of horses is really one that I will duck, because we are here to talk about deer. We are interested in the management of wild deer, and that is our area of expertise.

Mrs McARTHUR: You could form an alliance.

Mr HOWLETT: Yes, we—

The CHAIR: He likes deer.

Mr HOWLETT: Yes. We have done half a century just doing the deer.

Mrs McARTHUR: We will talk about it.

The CHAIR: Mr Hayes, your question.

Mr HAYES: Hello, Mr Howlett. Thanks very much for your presentation. I just wanted to ask you to possibly outline a scenario for us. Given that the deer numbers, as you state, have been significantly reduced after the bushfires, I am just wondering, could you outline to me what sort of appropriate control measure, which I would imagine would involve yourselves, could be taken to, as you say here, 'reduce exponential repopulation'? I will probably get you to elaborate on what you mean by reduce exponential repopulation too. Do you mean bring it to a steady state or actually see numbers increase again but at a slower rate?

Mr HOWLETT: As I said in my earlier presentation, I think the reality in Victoria now is that we need to pick winners essentially. So we need to understand which high-value environmental assets are likely to be impacted and really pick winners and target our efforts at protecting those high-value assets. There is stuff—the Littoral Rainforest along the coast in East Gippsland is of particular concern from deer, because they break through the Littoral Rainforest and really damage the structure of that plant community. Yellowwood trees in

jungle gullies is another one, and of course alpine bogs and peatlands. So I think it is actually a matter of really targeting our efforts on those high-value assets rather than trying to do this landscape-scale approach.

Mr HAYES: So would it be just the shooters, just your organisation, doing the culling, or would you be involved with the government, and how would you see that working?

Mr HOWLETT: It is absolutely horses for courses. There would be areas where that would involve paid contractors. There would be areas where that involves us. There would be areas—as was the advice we gave that was not very warmly received but actually acted on—in some of those Littoral Rainforest areas, where it involved putting up fences. If the plant community is that rare and that special and that vulnerable, the expense of fencing was justified rather than trying to kill deer. The problem with deer, the problem with most wildlife, is they will repopulate. That is what we found at the Yellingbo state game reserve. Professional cullers have gone in there and they have done a really effective knockdown of deer, but in order for those plant communities to get up and survive—some of them again are threatened; it is the last extant habitat for the helmeted honeyeater, for example, so it is a really important place. The deer are just going to keep coming in from the Yarra Valley, so that is where our volunteers sort of hit their sweet spot, where we can keep the population at a density that is sustainable.

Mr HAYES: Do you see exponential growth being inevitable, that deer numbers will continue to increase?

Mr HOWLETT: Not exponential. What wildlife management tells us around the world is that you will reach carrying capacity and then you will see a sharp decline in wildlife numbers. People cannot see it happening with deer because they are not looking. We think deer are great, but there are nothing special. They are wildlife, and every wildlife population around the world follows exactly the same curve, including the wildlife that is sitting around this room.

Mr HAYES: Including the human. It is happening now.

Mr HOWLETT: We will follow exactly the same curve. We will overpopulate, and the population will decline.

Mrs McARTHUR: We have got a virus fixing that.

Mr HAYES: Yes, looks like it. Thanks, Mr Howlett.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Howlett, for your presentation today, and best wishes for the rest of the day.

Mr HOWLETT: Thanks a lot.

Witness withdrew.