

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Melbourne – Friday 16 June 2023

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Jeff Bourman

Katherine Copsey

Bev McArthur

Evan Mulholland

Georgie Purcell

Sheena Watt

WITNESSES

Mr Lucas Cooke, Chief Executive Officer, and

Mr Danny Ryan, Chairman, Field and Game Australia; and

Dr Michael O'Kane, Anthropologist.

The CHAIR: I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements. Can we all please ensure that mobile phones are switched to silent and that background noise is minimised for the purposes of the broadcast.

Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we are meeting on here today and pay my respects to elders past and present. I do acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who are joining the committee in these proceedings or who are watching on the broadcast. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery here in Parliament House or watching via the live broadcast.

For those of us all in the room, I would like to remind everyone that we are endeavouring to conduct these proceedings with respect. I ask that all participants show respect to their fellow committee members, witnesses and members of the public and ask that those in the gallery remain silent at all times.

All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that witnesses provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the 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. 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.

For the Hansard record, can you all please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Danny RYAN: Good morning, Chair. Danny Ryan, Chair, Field and Game Australia.

Lucas COOKE: Good morning, committee. Lucas Cooke, CEO of Field and Game Australia.

Michael O'KANE: Morning, committee. Michael O'Kane, Anthropologist, Field and Game Australia.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. What I might do now is get you to make an opening statement of 5 or so minutes. Then I will get the members of the committee to introduce themselves, and we will start asking you questions for the next hour, if that is okay.

Lucas COOKE: Okay. No worries. We will launch into it. I think Field and Game Australia is pretty well known to everybody in the room already, so I will not take too much time. The general gist of the organisation: obviously we have a very proud history in conservation and hunting established many, many years ago back in the 1950s with the purview of conserving, hunting, habitat and fostering responsible and sustainable hunting in Victoria. We take great pride in the state game reserve system that was set up off the back of Field and Game's actions right back then and our continued involvement in the hunting, clay target and conservation spaces.

I think we are basically pretty well ready to launch in and see what the committee would like to hear. Our position I think has been pretty well expressed in the submission we put forward and in previous discussions with you, so happy to hand over.

The CHAIR: I am up for that too. I might go down the table and ask members of the committee to introduce themselves, and then we will start the questioning. Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

Jeff BOURMAN: You know who I am, but Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Michael GALEA: Michael Galea, South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey, Southern Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: And I am Ryan Batchelor, Chair of the committee and Member for Southern Metropolitan Region. I am going to ask the first set of questions. We will each have a block of time and we will just rotate that through members of the committee. Yes, that is how it is going to go.

There is obviously a lot to cover, and thank you very much for your submission. One of the things I am interested in getting your perspective on is in the course of the practice of hunting of native birds in Victoria, how many threatened or non-game bird species do you think is an acceptable level to be harmed during the hunting season?

Lucas COOKE: We obviously aim for zero. We work pretty hard to educate our members as much as we possibly can. We are probably not going to sit here and say it should be okay if it is five or 10 or 50. I think the aim should always be zero.

The CHAIR: How well do you think we go about that task collectively – you as an organisation, the hunting community and the government? How well do you think we go about that task?

Lucas COOKE: I think, generally speaking, very well. Certainly historically this was not the case. Perhaps there was not the care or engagement from hunters in the past. There are certainly some stories from the annals of history of not a lot of care being taken. But currently, right now in 2023, I think hunters are very attuned to needing to take care in this thing. Unfortunately, this year we have still seen instances where obviously people did not take enough care, and we would hope to continue working to reduce those people and remove them from the hunting community or educate them to the point where they do take the utmost care and we could sit here, hopefully, in future years and say zero threatened species have been harmed.

Danny RYAN: It is important to remember, Chair, that the regulator does provide that function with the waterfowl identification testing process. Also in the process of that there is the actual licensing process to get a game licence. Of course as an organisation we work very hard and very diligently on making sure we get that information out to the wider hunting community, and our education processes are quite robust.

The CHAIR: As an organisation, do you or your members report the presence of threatened or non-game birds on wetlands to the GMA?

Lucas COOKE: I think that during the season we are always very closely engaged. Yes, definitely, if large numbers of birds are reported to us, we will have conversations backwards and forwards and we will let the GMA know.

The CHAIR: So your organisation proactively reports the presence of non-game species and threatened species to the GMA?

Lucas COOKE: Certainly if we become aware of large numbers of species in a certain spot, we will have that conversation, yes.

The CHAIR: Okay.

Danny RYAN: The hunting community is very interconnected. We have a large amount of members not only nationwide but with the majority in Victoria, and we constantly get reports in the lead-up to the season in particular, because that is always an issue that the hunting community looks at and tries to second-guess and work out where they will be going and what potential closures there may be. And then in turn, in our lead-up discussions with the GMA we often bring up those particular points, particularly where they are large quantities of protected birds or congregations of protected birds.

The CHAIR: There has been a large number this year.

Lucas COOKE: We have certainly had conversations with the GMA in the past around closures and the like. When we know –

The CHAIR: You are saying conversations, so you advised you think a wetland should be closed because of the presence of –

Lucas COOKE: We have certainly supported those decisions or, yes, said those things in the past. If there are 200 blue-billed ducks there, close it. We do not want an accident any more than anybody else does, so yes, we will have those conversations.

The CHAIR: And what do you think about the closures of wetlands during this season? Do you think it was acceptable or unacceptable?

Lucas COOKE: I think this season they certainly went too far. There were some very questionable closures for very questionable reasons this year.

The CHAIR: I just want to turn briefly to the question of – obviously you mentioned earlier that some hunters do do the wrong thing. This submission infers that last year around 62 per cent of the infringements issued by the GMA were to hunters. Does it concern you? And what more do you think needs to be done to reduce the level of infractions that are made to hunters in the community?

Lucas COOKE: I think the continued work to actually engage hunters. Obviously with 26,000 Victorians registered or licensed to hunt game birds, Field and Game only has 16,000 members, so there is certainly a portion of the community out there that either belong to other organisations or do not belong to any organisations. We would say obviously we can speak on behalf of a large number of hunters, but we would attest that the ones out there that are doing the wrong thing are probably not the ones that are engaged and involved in our conservation work and engaged with the education material actively and learning.

The CHAIR: You think it is largely not your members that are the ones who are doing the wrong thing?

Lucas COOKE: We think they are probably more likely to be the less engaged individuals in the community, for sure. As with anything, obviously if you are a well-engaged road user you are probably not the one that is out there driving unroadworthy cars and doing those sorts of things.

The CHAIR: So how do we engage those members of the community?

Lucas COOKE: I think there is a two-pronged approach to that. I think we have to engage the ones that we can by keeping on doing what we are doing and trying to increase our reach within the hunting community – get hunters to bring those people into the fold. And I know this is going to be controversial, even with my own organisation, but I think ultimately if they refuse to be engaged, they probably need to be charged within the law and banned from partaking.

The CHAIR: All right. That is the end of my time.

Danny RYAN: Sorry. Can I just jump in there, Ryan? When we drill down into the non-compliance issues from last year, you said 62 per cent of the non-compliance issues were hunters. I think that if you drill down into the numbers of protected species, I think there were three, or somewhere around there. I will take that on notice and provide that further information back. But we are not talking about hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of incidents of this. Those days are well and truly gone. The education process and the general knowledge of Victorian hunters is very good, so we are not talking about thousands of incidents of that.

The CHAIR: Okay. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, gentleman for appearing today. I have got a number of questions, and I could ask all day, but I will direct my first question to Dr Michael O'Kane. Thank you for your presence here today. The RSPCA in its report states it is opposed to the hunting of any animal for sport; that is its position. Your paper that you have provided to us talks about hunting very differently from sport, the

cultural element of it, and I would like you to speak to that. I would like you to share your perspective of what it means for Indigenous communities and the importance of it, or non-importance of it, as you see fit to answer.

Michael O’KANE: So just to clarify – and thank you for the question – this is from the Field and Game submission?

Melina BATH: No. So the RSPCA –

Michael O’KANE: No, from my paper.

Melina BATH: Your paper that we have got here.

Michael O’KANE: As in my personal submission, or –

Melina BATH: Yes.

Michael O’KANE: Oh, okay. Yes. No worries. The way we hunt in my family, it is a family tradition. My grandfather did it. He taught my father, he taught me and I am teaching my children. Probably my grandfather’s father taught him. In fact I am fairly sure of that, although I could not swear on it because I was not there. It is a way of harvesting food from the environment that was traditionally extremely important for the survival of people, particularly working-class people who were agrarian workers, who were not rich people. That was a part of, I suppose, the economy of food for people. It still is for a lot of people, although clearly hunting, particularly duck hunting, can be a very expensive thing to do. I have never looked at it as a sport. I do not think anyone in my family has ever looked at it as a sport, and I have never really met anyone that says, ‘Hey, I’m going to go and do this sport.’ I mean, probably clay targets – that is definitely a sport, and it –

Melina BATH: Totally different, isn’t it?

Michael O’KANE: It is a great sport, yes, but it is not the same thing. We invest and are invested in it. It is part of our identity as country people, and it is part of our family identities. Case in point – at every duck opening all of my aunties are on the phone with each other trying to find out who got what, where they got it, and what species they were. That happens every season, and it has been going on since well before I was born. My mother used to shoot. My aunties shoot. They do not so much anymore, because they are all about 80, but they do. I suppose I want to say it is not just a male-dominated thing, and increasingly there are more and more young women that are shooting. For instance, my cousin brought his daughter out. My other cousin is going to bring his daughters out next season. So we shoot as a family, and we shoot with families who shoot as families. Generally we will go down to Dowd’s in Gippsland. We will shoot there. We will shoot in the hides our fathers shot in. We will all congregate, the same families together in the same places every year. We all know each other well. So I suppose in answer to your question, although I do not mind people calling it a sport, for me it is not a sport. For me it is a part of my identity. It is things that I want to pass on to my children. It has got so many good qualities about it. It teaches people responsibility; it teaches people family; it teaches people how to be in the bush, in the environment, and how to use it responsibly – and we do use it responsibly and we do not litter, because it is our country. You know, we are not vandals. So we do that, and then we meet with all of the other families that are doing it. I have rarely seen someone just out in the bush on their own with a gun that does not know anyone else.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. I appreciate your answer. In relation to the family aspect of this and the hunter conservationists – so I want to open it wider for you all – the role of Field and Game in conservation, can you speak to that? I know that your report goes into it in great detail, and even Professor Kingsford, in your submission, said:

Duck hunting is not a major conservation issue ...

He said:

The real culprit is things like habitat loss due to diversion of rivers ...

Can you talk about your hunter conservationist efforts?

Danny RYAN: I will lead off on that one, Melina. Thank you for the question. Field and Game had its formation in the late 1950s – 1958 – and it was primarily due to the occurring habitat loss. Obviously, after the

Second World War there was heavy mechanisation of the agriculture industry and draining of swamps and wetlands, turning non-viable agricultural land into viable agricultural land. So there was a massive amount in the loss of wetlands. Field and Game was formed on the basis of that – to preserve wetlands, and in turn to preserve the habitat and the environment for birds to breed, and therefore to continue the sustainability and move forward with hunting. Both of these things are symbiotic relationships. They both match up with each other. I think you made reference to Professor Kingsford's hearing here two weeks ago. Habitat is the driver of abundance and population.

The CHAIR: That is time. Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Chair. Thanks for appearing today. I want to ask some questions about Field and Game's conservation as well. You often describe yourself as Australia's most surprising conservationist, but, as I am sure you are aware, some years ago Field and Game was charged with and convicted of diverting water illegally. Can you please explain to me how this aligns with your definition of conservation?

Lucas COOKE: So let us be very clear on that straightaway. Nobody was convicted. The gentleman that you are talking about –

Georgie PURCELL: Sorry, fined without conviction and paid costs of \$1500 – was fined \$1500 – and admitted to stealing the water.

Lucas COOKE: So pleaded guilty and found guilty without conviction – that is right. It was also found that the actions taken had an environmental benefit in the area that he was working in and that it had no detrimental impact on anybody downstream. The diversion of that water at that time, the 2009 incident – so you are going back quite a way, but it is hardly news; it happened – as I said, was investigated at the time. Mr Howard never denied it. He was clear on what he did. There was a change as a result of that in the water management practices in the area, which included a government land manager getting a slap on the wrist for doing exactly the same thing: opening a gate without a licence. At the time the Heart Morass, the Sale Common and Dowd Morass were all watered in a very similar way. As I said, there was a lot of controversy.

I know you have made claims in the past around this and the fact that it aligned with a duck season, but it also aligned with the end of a very dry summer, and Field and Game had done a significant amount of planting in that wetland. As part of the active management of that wetland, we are very, very aware of salinity issues and acidity issues that happen in that wetland when water falls below a certain level. So the addition of water was at the point in time when it did stop the water falling to a point where acidity in the water would have killed over a thousand seedlings and new plantings in the area, and I am very proud that you will get to see those plants in a few weeks time. There are certainly pictures, and the submission shows the significant amount of habitat that has been created there. Trees need water to grow, just the same as waterbirds need water to thrive. Waterbirds need habitat. That particular wetland is now a thriving habitat for over 1300 species of waterbirds. So an inclination that it is not conservation to put water into a wetland is, frankly, pretty ridiculous.

Danny RYAN: And also, Ms Purcell, Mr Gary Howard is a recipient of an OAM for his conservation work.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes, I am aware of that, thank you. We might have to agree to disagree on if stealing water during a drought is conservation. My next question is for you, Mr Ryan. In a Facebook post from 10 May Field and Game addressed claims of threatening, violent and abusive behaviour towards women in the animal protection community, including me. I have received a number of death threats and rape threats and online violence constantly since the start of this inquiry from duck shooters. Despite evidence and receipts of this abusive behaviour, Field and Game put out a statement that there had been no observations of inappropriate behaviour from shooters and essentially suggested that I was making it up and following the wrong path to report it. I found it deeply offensive. Can you please explain to me the work that Field and Game, if any – the work that you have done to protect women in the community from violence from your members?

Danny RYAN: That post was in relation to you specifically and your stances. I think that the Facebook post at that time explained relatively broadly to all of the hunting community that everyone has a voice and, irrespective of the fact of if you disagree with that voice, there still must be respect shown to the person. So we were quite concerned –

Georgie PURCELL: I would say that saying you had seen no evidence of it when it was very clear is –

Danny RYAN: We had had nothing reported to us officially. There were some discussions and conversations that went on in the background which led us to then make that statement to make sure that it was understood in that wider hunting community – not necessarily our members – that that sort of thing is just simply not on. We value all of our members, we value everyone in the community and we stand by that post. I think that sums that up.

Georgie PURCELL: The question was: what actions have you taken to educate your members on how inappropriate this behaviour is?

Danny RYAN: We did a Facebook post, and there was something mentioned in an email that went out to all of our specific members. It is no different to the normal standards that the rest of the community is held by. We informed our members that that is not on. Our members know that is not on, and I do not think it has occurred since.

Georgie PURCELL: It absolutely has. The Facebook post was implying that I was making it up, and the abuse escalated. But we will move on from that.

Danny RYAN: Oh, I do not think it implied that you had made it up.

Georgie PURCELL: On page 20 of your submission you stated that:

Native game birds can absolutely live a normal life post-wounding and no data exists to substantiate otherwise.

What evidence do you have to support this claim?

Danny RYAN: The GMA recently trapped and caught 595-odd birds, and there were 20 of those birds found to be carrying pellets. Some of those birds were two-year-old birds and some of those birds were juvenile birds, so that answers your question there: birds can survive post an infliction of an injury. Waterbirds in particular, particularly ducks, suffer injuries all the time: they run into trees and they run into objects, powerlines and things like that; they are injured for a short time and then they recover.

Georgie PURCELL: With that evidence of post-wounding recovery, which in our understanding is very minimal, do you think that this justifies the level of wounding –

Danny RYAN: Can you clarify your understanding? What scientific data do you have in regard to that?

Georgie PURCELL: Well, you would understand that –

The CHAIR: We are at time.

Georgie PURCELL: wounding rates, percentage wise, differ – some people say 6 per cent, some people say 40 per cent.

The CHAIR: We are at time.

Danny RYAN: I am happy to answer that, Chair, if you want –

The CHAIR: You are happy to answer the question, quickly?

Danny RYAN: The wounding rate is a massive issue, and I am sure that we will answer the question in somebody else's question as we move along, or I will take it on notice if you like.

The CHAIR: Okay. Mr Galea.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes, if it is acceptable.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, gentlemen. I would actually like to ask about wounding. In your opinion, is wounding – obviously wounding that does not lead to a fatal outcome immediately – an inevitable and unavoidable part of native bird hunting?

Lucas COOKE: I think it is an unfortunate consequence sometimes. The argument about wounding is an exceptionally complex one, and exactly as was just being talked about, actually putting a figure on wounding

has been exceptionally hard. I think you can waste a lot of time and effort, and our organisation has presented this exact opinion in working groups in the past – you could waste a lot of time and effort trying to put a number on wounding. I think it is a lot more productive to focus on, 'Look, let's just try and reduce it', the same as whatever, what can we do to educate and engage members to bring wounding to the absolute minimum point that it possibly can be?

I do not think it is inevitable. I think every hunter has a decision and the ability to skill themselves and that sort of thing. At the same time it probably would be remiss of me to say that it is not an unfortunate consequence that we know sometimes will happen. I think to the previous point, the outcomes of wounding – as well as being very hard to put a figure on how many birds are actually wounded in the first place, it is equally difficult to actually get an accurate figure around birds that are wounded, survival rates and that sort of thing. To say a very small portion of birds survive is pretty difficult, because we just do not know. We know some birds are definitely out there and carry shot. We know those birds show no sign of any sort of disability or anything from carrying that shot. They have to be X-rayed to work out that there is actually a shot in there, hence the reason we say that they are obviously out there. They are healthy, happy birds living, and you put them through an X-ray machine and go, 'Oh, there's a pellet.' Birds can certainly survive being wounded; they can go on and live. Some birds will certainly die of wounds. We think probably most wounded birds die pretty quickly – that seems to be the evidence we see from so-called rescuers not being able to actually have a duck survive. Like I said, we could spend a lot of time trying to put a figure on wounding – you could spend a lot of time trying to talk about that. I think the best avenue to come at it is to let us try to continue to improve hunter practices to minimise wounding to a point where it is as small as it can possibly be and hopefully it is not a recognisable thing that happens.

Danny RYAN: Sorry, Michael, just on that, the cohort of hunters in Victoria are very tuned in to wounding and very tuned in to good practices in the field. We have certainly seen in the last 25 years an advancement in the information technology sector in particular; we have seen a lot more emphasis on certain good, high-level hunting practices to ensure that you bring birds in closer and ensure that you do everything that you possibly can to make good decisions. There has been an emphasis and there has been a move away from some previous practices that have now brought hunting probably a little bit more in tune, and there is a lot more effort that goes into making sure that there is no wounding.

Michael GALEA: And what is an acceptable rate of bird wounding to you?

Lucas COOKE: There is no number that you can put on that. I am not going to say five is okay or 10 is okay or 100 is okay. I am going to say we want to see no wounding. Again, in an ideal world we would not see a single bird wounded. But, again, there are complexities around how you define 'wounding'. When you define wounding as a bird that is shot and not recovered – and the very environment we hunt in means sometimes you are going to kill a bird outright but not be able to recover it – then you are always going to count that bird as wounded, even though it is stone-cold dead. It is not a surviving bird and there are no welfare issues around that bird, but you count it as a wounded bird. There will be instances where things like that happen. The focus will not be on trying to put a number on it. 'Okay, we're happy if we go out on opening morning and we only wound one bird' – that is silly. We are only going to be happy when you go out and do not wound a single bird.

Michael GALEA: Would you agree that for a felled bird that has not been killed but has been wounded, the most likely reason why that cannot be retrieved is because of the natural environment, say thick reeds or other environmental factors? Firstly, would you agree with that? And secondly, would you agree that hunting should be restricted in those areas because of those challenges?

Danny RYAN: The answer to the first portion of your question is no, not all the time. Hunters utilise their resources, such as retrieving dogs – again it goes to the education process that we were talking about earlier, like your position and where you choose to hunt – to make sure that when they take in and shoot their birds they fall in a location that they can be retrieved. It is basically all about the retrieval strategy. It is about the smartness of you being a hunter and positioning yourself to make sure you can retrieve all the birds.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. You have provided in your submission a graph, I believe on page 21, showing possible outcomes for native game birds that have been shot during a hunting season, showing that the majority, according to this graph, are killed outright or are missed or whatever. There is no data attached to this.

Perhaps this could be a question on notice, but could you please supply the committee with the data points that you constructed this graph from?

Danny RYAN: Basically, when we put that graph together we deliberately did not want to put any data around that, and that is based on the fact that this is such a big – pardon the pun – moving target, because there has been no definitive work done on this for periods of time. There have been different scientists that have done different things at different points in time, and everyone comes up with a different answer.

Michael GALEA: How could you be confident that this is correct, then?

Danny RYAN: Because of our field experience. We have 16,000 members with an average of 35 years experience, so we are 480,000 years worth of experience in the field. When our members report back to us and talk to us and we have a general discussion about wounding and recovery rates, then when you put all of these things together and analyse all the data, that is how we come up with the graph. 3.4 per cent of birds scanned had pellets. We know there is probably a percentage of those that die, so it is a very difficult process to put a number on how many birds get wounded and recover and how many birds get wounded and die. There is no data that has yet been done on that.

Lucas COOKE: We can show you the data we use, but to Danny's point, we did not want to get lost in discussing the validity of that data. We wanted that particular point to be that there are different outcomes across a spectrum. But we are happy to supply the data that is available so you can look at it, and I think you will see exactly what we are looking at. It depends on which study you look at, how you read it and all those sorts of things.

The CHAIR: Thanks. His time has expired. Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Sorry, I thought I was still in budget estimates. Lucas, Field and Game Australia and other hunting organisations often refer to their roles in hunter education. What can you say about the claim that one in five duck hunters failed a test to identify waterbirds?

Lucas COOKE: Fair question, and that claim I know has been rattling around. It is definitely the case that we have seen during this committee process some pretty interesting surveys and things come out that are quite subjective. I think in answer to that question, that particular question that is being referred to when they are saying that hunters failed was a Game Management Authority survey that was extended to hunters to participate in voluntarily. There are a lot of things in that particular study that were not particularly clear. They make some mention of trying to make it so that it was only people that were licensed to hunt duck and quail that were answering that question, but it is a little bit ambiguous as to whether all of the people answering the question were in fact actually licensed shooters or not. The question itself was also, we would say, obviously pretty misleading, or it was perhaps poor survey design. The question that they refer to as failed required three correct answers to be considered correct. Ninety-seven per cent of respondents chose the most popular correct answer on that question. It is just that most did not answer all three questions. It seems to us as an observer of the methodology behind that question that perhaps it was a pretty poorly asked question, because obviously most people did not realise they had to answer all three questions. Ninety-seven per cent of respondents got the right answer. They just did not answer all three.

Bev McARTHUR: So we can disregard that flawed claim. What does Field and Game have to say about the shooting of non-target species?

Lucas COOKE: I think we have spoken about that a little bit as well. We think the injury of non-target species should be zero, and we certainly aim for it to be zero. But we think that a lot of improvements in hunter behaviour have occurred or taken place that have largely led to any incidents now being very isolated ones. We think the protected species that were presented this year as shot – there are some questions to be answered I think around where they actually came from and whether they were in fact shot or not. But again, the goal or the aim of our organisation would be obviously to eliminate that through continued education and engagement of hunters.

Bev McARTHUR: What is your position on addressing the concerns around the long-term decline in waterbird numbers?

Lucas COOKE: This is another good question. We heard a lot from the scientists in the last committee hearing about this long-term decline. I think the long-term decline is rolled out by a lot of people. The point that perhaps has not been made strongly enough from our point of view is that this long-term decline is happening across the entirety of eastern Australia, and it is happening largely in non-game species of birds. That seems to be getting ignored, and we are still blaming hunting. New South Wales, we heard from Richard Kingsford himself, has had a 72 per cent loss of waterbirds, where there is no game bird hunting. They have suffered that loss due to loss of habitat.

Our argument – and I think where organisations like Field and Game come in – and as we have discussed already, our very roots of our organisation are in preserving habitat, which then preserves all waterbird species. We have had some pretty detailed analysis done of east Australian waterbirds by transect and by species and actually found that both in New South Wales and in Victoria game bird species are actually showing no significant decline. In fact the other part of the argument is since 1996 there has certainly been no massive increase in game bird species in New South Wales since hunting ceased. What there has been is still a sharp decline in non-game species. When you go right down into it, it comes back to largely the way that wetlands are being managed in those areas as well. A catchment management authority that is trying to make a wetland survive can put water into those temporary shallow wetlands once every five years, and the wetland will survive and still be a wetland. But birds will not thrive, because obviously an Australian native duck that lives three to five years needs water more than once every five years to breed and thrive. When you have hunters advocating for wetlands and managing for abundance and they are trying to make sure those wetlands get environmental water flows once every two or three years, that is when we see ducks and other waterbirds thrive. So that is the importance I think of the difference between hunters managing for abundance versus an environmental group managing just to make sure that wetland remains something that can be classified as a wetland.

Bev McARTHUR: Right. So –

Danny RYAN: Sorry, Bev. And Australian game ducks are remarkably resilient. So we already know that the eastern waterbird survey – and I could talk for hours on it – only covers 10 transects. So if northern New South Wales is dry, those birds will move to Victoria or Queensland.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. They do not know about borders, I am told.

Danny RYAN: They do not know about borders. They fly over the borders. They ignore borders, and they ignore transects to some degree as well. So if northern New South Wales is particularly dry in a particular year and the Macquarie marshes are dry – and Professor Kingsford spoke about that at length two weeks ago – those birds move to Queensland. So you get a peak in the Queensland transect but you get massive reductions in the New South Wales transects, and if those birds are not in that transect they just do not get counted. And the EAWAS is not an abundance survey to begin with.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Morning, guys.

Danny RYAN: Morning, Jeff.

Jeff BOURMAN: I have met the pair of you. I have not met you before. With Field and Game, the organisation started round about the time there was a problem with the population of black ducks back in the 1940s or 50s, and Field and Game had a hand in their rehabilitation, for want of a better word. Can you tell me some more about that?

Lucas COOKE: Yes. So that is exactly right. The founding story of Field and Game started with the Victorian government identifying that – due to agricultural practices at the time draining the temporary shallow wetlands that Pacific black ducks in particular rely on to breed and thrive – because of the fact those wetlands were being drained at a fairly alarming rate, all ducks, all waterbirds but particularly Pacific black ducks at the time, were at a significant risk if those practices continued. So the founding of Field and Game came about with the group identifying that threat and actually lobbying government at the time to say, ‘Right. Charge us a game fee, charge us – we’ll buy a licence. Charge us a game fee’ – or a duck stamp, at the time, as it was called – ‘and put that money back into purchasing the land on which these temporary shallow wetlands exist and make

sure that they don't get turned into dryland agriculture, that they remain as habitat.' That is the proud history that we say really led to our 199 beautiful Victorian state game reserves existing in the first place and all of that habitat existing for not only ducks but all waterbirds and wetland species of plants and animals. So, yes, certainly that is why we are so intricately intertwined with the conservation work and the hunting.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you. That was back then. Can you give me a more recent example of where Field and Game as a whole has done exactly that again as far as rehabilitating farmland?

Lucas COOKE: So certainly, yes, the jewel in the crown as far as the work that we have managed to do and achieve around that is 100 per cent our Heart Morass property, or the wetland environmental task force being set up and purchasing that property and the care they have taken there, and again we will see in coming weeks the stunning transformation of that land. So that was a prime example of dryland agriculture, of dairy farming or cattle grazing, that had completely denuded that country, put it back to bare ground. As I spoke on briefly before, the water levels in that were kept so low that salinity and soil acidity were a huge issue. There was essentially no vegetation that did grow or could grow on it other than pretty sparse grass, which obviously did not support habitat for any animals. Certainly once that property was taken over and the goal was set to rehabilitate it, it is now a thriving wetland and a touch over 3000 acres of perfect habitat for Victorian wetland plants and animals.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you. I might point out that though I am not a member of Field and Game I have been to Heart Morass and it is stunning, and the before and after pictures are quite telling. Field and Game has three pillars: hunting, clay targets and conservation. Australian simulated field – can you tell me how that works in with the hunting and conservation as part of the pillars?

Danny RYAN: I will take that one. As our organisation grew, in the off-season people were looking for something to continue to enhance their skills, and we adapted an English version of a clay pigeon shooting discipline – it is called 'English sporting' over there. We adapted it over here, and we called it 'simulated field'. That grew our organisation exponentially in the 70s to the point where we now have 68 branches, and 59 of those branches are in Victoria with shooting ranges. We have a couple of conservation-only branches that do that, so that was how our simulated field grew, and simulated field is a sport, as opposed to duck hunting, which is hunting.

Jeff BOURMAN: And the aim of simulated field would be to be a better shot. I have had a go at it and – how should I put it – if you go back to the same range two weeks in a row or two shoots in a row, it is not the same. It is all about being able to adapt, and it makes you a better hunter. In my case it proved that I needed a lot of work.

Lucas COOKE: More practice for you, Jeff.

Jeff BOURMAN: What proportion of your members shoot simulated field?

Danny RYAN: Our membership is eclectic. We have a large proportion of our membership that shoot clay targets and ducks and quail. We have a large proportion of our membership that only hunt ducks and quail and other species; they also hunt deer et cetera. Our numbers indicate that roughly 7000 of our members partake in a clay target shooting activity at least annually – of about 16,000.

Jeff BOURMAN: How many members do you have in total again?

Danny RYAN: Sixteen thousand members.

Jeff BOURMAN: How many do you think would hunt and do clay target?

Danny RYAN: It would probably be close to 14,000 to 15,000.

Jeff BOURMAN: That is a lot. Even though I have got to crack in about 1 minute 30, that is about all I have got, Chair.

The CHAIR: Well, you have got 30 seconds left.

Jeff BOURMAN: You made comments in your submission using terms like ‘caring for country’ and ‘healing country’. What are Field and Game’s shared interests and aims with the traditional owner corporations, and how do FGA’s principles align with the traditional owners represented by registered Aboriginal corporations?

The CHAIR: If you can give a brief response, that would be helpful. Thanks.

Michael O’KANE: We have got shared aims: obviously conservation of existing wetlands in Victoria; maintenance of conditions favourable to sustaining and increasing native bird populations throughout Victoria; the expansion of existing wetlands and the creation of new wetlands where appropriate to compensate for habitat loss experienced largely over the preceding century; continuing efforts to husband environmental resources in a sustainable and renewable manner; and the preservation of tradition which encourages firsthand engagement with wild places and acknowledges the role of active game management in contemporary Australian life. The continued valuing of the natural environment and wildlife habitats in Victoria is vital to the health, wellbeing and sustainability of the broader Victorian community. They are all aims that we share.

Lucas COOKE: We could talk all day on that, so we might provide a bit of an answer on notice as well just to elaborate.

Jeff BOURMAN: That would be great.

The CHAIR: Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you. Thank you all for being here and for your very detailed submission. I might go to what you were just asking about the work. What I had read was that your organisation strives to effectively follow the *Traditional Owner Game Management Strategy* that you reference in the submission. This was released in 2021 – the Victorian *Traditional Owner Game Management Strategy*. Perhaps it is one for notice, much like the one you have just spoken about, but what efforts have Field and Game made to implement the strategy or stay true to that strategy within your own membership? If you have got anything you would like to speak to on that, it would be great, otherwise I am happy to receive that on notice.

Michael O’KANE: Yes. Thanks for the question. We are engaging with the federation and with a couple of other groups. We are in conversation with the Taungurung land and waters Aboriginal corporation. We have had discussions with Djaara, Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation. We are engaging in those conversations at the moment trying to find a way forward, and there will be a way forward because we both want the same things, so we are trying to support them in their aims.

Sheena WATT: So you are in the early engagement portion of your work to understand –

Lucas COOKE: Yes. I think to answer your question about what the organisation has done, organisationally what we have done is obviously identify that it is an exceptionally complex area and there are a lot of moving parts within the traditional owner community within Victoria, so certainly as an organisation it is only a fairly recent move. But certainly, getting Michael on board, we have actually formed an Indigenous engagement committee, which Michael is going to head up, because what we have found is you can have a talk with one group and think, ‘Right, we’ve got a really clear course of action and we think we know what we’re doing’, and then you talk to another one and you go, ‘Oh, maybe this doesn’t quite work.’ So we are certainly trying to get all of those moving parts to a point where we can identify it. We have got a few programs identified now that will be boots-on-the-ground programs within the next couple of months that we are really, really excited about to be involved in.

Sheena WATT: Thank you. I am going to go back to Heart Morass, which I think Mr Bourman mentioned earlier as a very frequently cited example of a hunter conservation approach. Can you talk to me about funding? Does Field and Game receive any government funding for wetland management and for the work that you do on Heart Morass?

Lucas COOKE: The Heart Morass project has certainly received funding in the past, but to be clear, that was through a VicRoads offset program and it was funding around some of the planting that we did. So, yes, there is certainly funding –

Sheena WATT: Currently –

Lucas COOKE: I would have to take it on notice to get the exact things right, but I believe that funding comes to an end either this year or maybe next. As far as have we been directly funded to manage the wetland, no. We have managed through offset programs and different programs for certain parts of it, but no, there has not been.

Sheena WATT: Okay. No. That is helpful to know.

Danny RYAN: We operate that under our WET trust, Sheena. That works with various philanthropic bodies, environmental trusts – Trust for Nature, for example, we have partnered with in the past. It is a very wide space, and we work with a lot of like-minded organisations.

Sheena WATT: Great. So in your view if native bird hunting were to end, what do you think would happen to those wetlands under the trust's care?

Danny RYAN: That is a very interesting question. We have ownership of several portions of land within the state, and we have not investigated that as yet, because the outcome of this select committee and the whole process is not yet completed. We will continue to own those and care for them in some manner and form.

Sheena WATT: Okay, good to know. If I do still have time, Chair, I just want to ask about the trustee's obligations under the terms of the trust deed. I am trying to really understand what it is that Field and Game's obligations are for the continued management of the site – Heart Morass and others. Have you got –

Danny RYAN: That would be under the WET trust. We have a separate committee of WET trust governors that looks after that, so I will take that question on notice, and I will get that one back to you.

Sheena WATT: I am very keen to sort of understand the beneficial interests of the trust, what are the permitted activities and uses for the trust land and understanding more about governance arrangements and decisions.

Danny RYAN: Oh, that is easy to answer. The trust manages the land. Field and Game Australia owns the land.

Sheena WATT: Owns the land, the trust – yes, okay. Anything you can provide me to help shape that up would actually be very helpful.

Lucas COOKE: We will take it on notice and give you the exact –

Sheena WATT: Thank you. It is a complex area, and I appreciate your support for that. I just want to ask about lead shot, actually. I understand that lead shot is not currently permitted for the shooting of ducks, but it is for quail. Do you think that lead shot should also be banned for quail hunting? What is the position of the organisation on that?

Lucas COOKE: I think it is again a controversial area, but I think fundamentally the position of the organisation is that they are two very different environments in which that shot is used. Field and Game completely support the banning of lead shot in wetlands because of the effects of lead in wetlands specifically. So the danger of lead to birds in wetlands is that they ingest it. The lead is not dangerous to the ducks in the wetland unless they eat it, but when they eat it it is very dangerous to ducks, and we would completely agree with the banning of that because of the fact that dabbling ducks, swans and other waterbirds 100 per cent unequivocally have been found and shown to eat lead and suffer from lead poisoning because they have eaten lead.

Sheena WATT: Is that position publicly available?

Lucas COOKE: I do not think we have ever shied away from that position.

Danny RYAN: It is regulated. It is legislated.

Lucas COOKE: I do not know that it is stated, but it is certainly legislated, and we have supported the banning of lead in the past. Just to go on to the original question about the difference with quail, certainly lead in farmland and lead disbursed across stubble quail habitat does not concentrate and is not ingested by the birds, so I think it is a very different thing to consider. It is not quite as simple as saying, 'It's banned for ducks; why don't we just ban it for quail as well?' It has very different effects on those environments.

Sheena WATT: I appreciate that explanation. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. I just wanted to return to wounding. Your submission spends some time contesting a definition of wounding. There is a sentence here that 'many wounded birds recover to full health and go on to thrive'. I wanted to ask if in Field and Game's view a bird that survives and continues to have shot pellets in its body should be counted as wounded.

Lucas COOKE: Absolutely. That is definitely a bird that should be counted as wounded. I think the point we are trying to make, or the contesting within the wounding argument, was as much as anything not necessarily to contest that birds are wounded but to show that it is an exceptionally complex argument or conversation to have. It is not quite as simple as the rhetoric that comes all the time of 'Every bird that's wounded suffers this long and painful and terrible death.' Well, they do not. Our contestation is that they do not. Some birds survive and thrive and go on to live perfectly fine. Yes, they have suffered some hardship, but they go on and continue to live and do not suffer ongoing hardship as a result of being wounded. That does not make them not a wounded bird, but it certainly does not make them a bird that suffered a long and slow and painful, terrible death in a wetland, as the other side of this argument often attests.

Katherine COPSEY: Your submission says current definitions of wounding are ambiguous. In what way then do you think that they are ambiguous? If it is that simple, are you just seeking to create confusion around the concept of wounding because you do not like the data that is being collected?

Lucas COOKE: No, not at all. The example I made before is the most ambiguous thing. So a bird that is shot and is killed instantly, under the definition of a bird that is shot and not retrieved, is counted as a wounded bird. Your side quite often then contests that that bird suffered a long and slow and terrible, painful death.

Katherine COPSEY: What is my side, please?

Lucas COOKE: Well, you are obviously on the anti-hunting side of this argument, which presents the argument regularly that all wounded birds suffer a long and slow and terrible, painful death. Well, they do not. The simple fact is that not all birds that are wounded under that definition – we would probably contest that quite a few birds that are wounded under that definition of 'shot but not retrieved' in fact do not suffer at all and there is no welfare impact on that animal.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. You have contested data that has been quoted around numbers of birds wounded and you prefer self-reporting. What kind of dataset would you prefer to measure wounding if you think that this should be informed by science?

Lucas COOKE: We do not have a preferred dataset, which is why our position is to recognise that it is an exceptionally complex issue. It is not something that you can go out and throw an exact number on. It is an exceptionally complex issue which is exceptionally hard to measure. That is the point we are making.

Danny RYAN: It is a very, very complex area, and it would require a sizable investment into the research. What we do know is that some of the numbers that have been bandied around are simply incorrect. Some people have seized upon 40 per cent, and they are claiming 105,000 birds are wounded. We know that there have been some dedicated actions by animal activist groups to go and try and find those birds over the course of a duck season and over the length of a season – it has been going on for quite some period of time – and nobody has ever recovered anywhere near even a thousand birds in a season. So if we want to have a look at that argument, these claims of 105,000 wounded birds, we see active animal activists out there and they just simply do not recover anywhere near that – not even 500 birds.

Katherine COPSEY: Do you accept the EAWAS evidence that there is a long-term decline in native bird populations?

Danny RYAN: There is a long-term decline in native bird populations, but that covers up to 60 species of waterbird. If we are talking specifically about game ducks, then no. Game ducks have flatlined everywhere in every transect as you go up and have a look at the long-term history. Also, the EAWAS is not an abundance survey. It is an indices and it is a snapshot of what is going on in those transects. So it is important to remember that the 10 transects are 30 kilometres wide, so it only surveys 300 kilometres of width of the eastern seaboard of Australia. The eastern seaboard of Australia is roughly 2500 kilometres, so it is only covering 12 per cent of the land and it only covers the transects. It does not actually go to where the wetlands are, so the transects move in a straight line and not all of the wetlands are on that line.

Lucas COOKE: I think if you want to follow that science, you need to listen to the scientists. The long-term decline is being driven by habitat loss. We need to address habitat loss.

Katherine COPSEY: So you do accept the long-term decline?

Lucas COOKE: There is a long-term decline in eastern Australia. A very large amount of eastern Australia does not have hunting. Trying to blame hunting for a long-term decline is a fallacy. Long-term decline is being caused by habitat loss quite often or largely in a state like New South Wales that does not have a recreational duck season. So any attempt to pin a long-term decline in waterbird numbers on hunting is a fallacy. We would argue it is grossly misleading to the public, with 66 species of non-game waterbirds being counted in that long-term decline in waterbirds, that you are trying to blame game bird hunting.

Katherine COPSEY: Gentlemen, when you have been out in the field have you personally observed inappropriate dispatch methods such as windmilling?

Danny RYAN: Windmilling is one of those topics that has probably been around historically. The instant dispatch of birds has been via numerous methods: blunt force, priests, breaking necks, cervical dislocation. It is an area that has been improving year on year, and again it comes back to an education process. So we see now the advance of things such as –

Katherine COPSEY: Have you observed it?

The CHAIR: Just let them conclude the answer.

Lucas COOKE: To answer that question: personally, I have never seen a bird windmilled in person in the field. I have certainly seen video footage and reports of it, but I have never observed in person a bird being windmilled, no.

Bev McARTHUR: And how many years have you been in the field?

Lucas COOKE: I have been actively duck hunting in Victoria for only three years. Again, I will admit I am not a long-term duck hunter, but again the truth is I have never, ever seen a bird windmilled.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you.

Michael O'KANE: I have never seen it.

The CHAIR: You have never seen it either?

Michael O'KANE: I have never seen it, and can I just say: when I teach my kids, and the way I have been taught, and all the people that I go shooting with – we do not do it. It would be frowned upon.

Katherine COPSEY: I would like to hear from the remaining witness. Have you observed it in the field?

Danny RYAN: In the past, for sure, but as I said, that was in the past. Education and current practices have evolved and we have moved on from that process, and now we are back into different methods of dispatch for wounded birds.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for taking the time to come and present for the committee today. We value the way you have engaged and the knowledge you have brought to our deliberations. You will receive a copy of the transcript for review before it is published. It might take about a week for that to get to you, so please make sure you review that and come back to us before we publish it. If you have got things you have taken on notice, it would be great if you could get them to us promptly to help with the committee's deliberations. We are going to take a break and resume at 10:15.

Danny RYAN: Excellent. Thank you, Chair. Thank you, committee.

Witnesses withdrew.