

# **TRANSCRIPT**

## **SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS**

### **Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements**

Sale – Monday 26 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**

Cr Ian Bye, Mayor,

Mr Andrew Pomeroy, General Manager, Development,

Mr David Harper, Manager, Natural Environment and Parks, and

Ms Kirsten Power, Business Facilitation and Leveraging Officer, Wellington Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the committee's public hearing into the Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements. Can I ask that everyone in the room has their mobile phones switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on here today and paying my respects to elders past and present, and acknowledging any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who are joining us today.

I welcome all members of the public who are here joining us in the gallery. You are in a privileged position because we are not broadcasting today's proceedings, because of technological limitations at this point in the broadcast team. However, as with all parliamentary proceedings, these are being recorded and will be transcribed by Hansard.

Welcome to our first guests. I will more broadly just ask everyone participating in today's proceedings, as I have before all proceedings of this committee, to please remain respectful at all times, and if we all do that, then we will have a great set of public hearings today. Those who do not feel they can maintain the respect that is required might wish to leave the room.

Before I begin I will read out our standard patter, and then I will get you to introduce yourselves. So all evidence that we take today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided for in the *Constitution Act* and by the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders, therefore the information that 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 hearings. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

So for the Hansard record, can I get each of our first slate of witnesses to state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of?

**Kirsten POWER:** I am Kirsten Power, Business Facilitation and Leveraging Officer at Wellington Shire Council.

**Andrew POMEROY:** Andrew Pomeroy, General Manager of Development at Wellington Shire Council.

**Ian BYE:** Ian Bye, current Mayor of the Wellington shire.

**David HARPER:** And David Harper, Manager of Natural Environment and Parks at Wellington Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** All right. I will invite you to make a short opening statement if you would like, about 5 minutes or so, and then we will introduce the committee and get into questions. Over to you.

**Ian BYE:** Thank you, Ryan. Look, firstly, thank you for letting us speak to the inquiry into Victorian recreational bird hunting today. We really appreciate it. As we stated in our submission, the *Council Plan 2021–2025* prioritises the natural environment to ensure it is valued, protected and accessible. Recreational activities that take place in our natural environment must strike the appropriate balance with positive, sustainable outcomes. We are focused on preserving our natural environment, actively addressing and, where possible, advocating for organisations to help to get a common goal of sustainable outcomes.

As we stated in our submission, the Sale Field and Game branch has the highest membership of any Field and Game branch in Victoria. The branch is not just a shooting club. They have been active for many years in helping preserve the Heart Morass wetlands, which is about 1800 hectares in size and 13 kilometres long – which I believe a lot of you actually visited this morning, so thank you for doing that. More than 60,000 indigenous trees have been planted and shrubs and grasses. They have direct-seeded indigenous vegetation; controlled weeds, including blackberry, boxthorn and invasive grasses; and developed a seed collection program from more than 50 wetland and riparian plant species to support future revegetation efforts. They have constructed new gravel road surfaces and parking areas, managed existing drain entrances to maintain water levels in the wetland and rock beaching at the entrance of the two main drains and removed more than 20 tonnes of carp.

The Heart wetlands also serve a vital function in protecting the Gippsland Lakes, acting as a filter during flooding to capture solids and nutrients that may otherwise contribute to algae blooms in the Gippsland Lakes. The morass is actually wedged between two Ramsar wetland sites, wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, at the confluence of the Thomson and Latrobe rivers near Sale. We must commend the Sale Field and Game branch for the thousands of hours that members have devoted to not only preserving but improving the wetlands. If you see pictures from when they first started to where they are now, it is quite amazing what they have achieved.

In Wellington we receive a significant community benefit from duck hunting each year, in the amount of around \$3.5 million per year. Even in the reduced season the spending was as much, talking to local suppliers, as it was in a normal season, so we still had quite a lot of people that were participating. Hunters travelling to our region provide significant economic advantages via accommodation, purchase of fuel and hunting supplies and additional ad hoc purchases in small communities closest to their hunting area.

Speaking to many duck hunters, in 40 years they have never seen the number of ducks that are in the area this particular season. Wellington is one of the largest agricultural areas in the state. The devastation has been felt by many farmers, with ducks destroying pastures and crops. With the cost of feed currently hitting \$400 a tonne, farmers cannot afford to lose feed for their animals.

In Wellington we have never had problems with duck hunters and tourists visiting our beautiful wetlands and waterways. They can act together quite well. The problem with a lot of tourists when they visit the ‘middle of everywhere’, which is our catchphrase – I hope you all have the app, by the way, to see what you can do in Wellington while you are here – is that they leave rubbish and do not look after the environment. We find that duck hunters are the reverse. They take pride in looking after the environment and leave the sites even better than when they first arrived, which is a real pleasure.

Duck hunters are often multigenerational. There are not many sports where you see generations participating together. In Wellington we have not had any problems with duck hunters and welcome the visitation. We have found that duck hunters are very respectful and welcome new members. Experienced duck hunters are always willing to mentor new hunters, and there is a vast cross-section of the community that do actually participate in that sport. We cannot recall any duck-shooting-related accidents in Wellington, not in my memory.

We fully support preserving the environment and the wellbeing of Wellington residents. With the support of Field and Game, the transformation of the wetlands with the thousands of volunteer hours has made and will make a difference for the future. We must keep advocating for the most appropriate outcome for our community, which we believe is to support duck hunting as a longstanding sport which also supports the local environment and agricultural practices. Thank you, Ryan.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. I might ask the committee members to introduce themselves and then we will start the questions. We will start with Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Evan Mulholland, Northern Metropolitan Region.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region.

**Melina BATH:** Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

**Sheena WATT:** Hello. Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Ryan Batchelor from the Southern Metropolitan Region, and Chair of this committee. I get to start, which is good. Thanks so much for coming along today. Thanks very much for hosting us, both in your great part of the world and in your great council chamber offices. I want to just check some stats, really. The biggest membership of Field and Game here anywhere in the state at just over 1000 members – how many people are in the shire?

**Ian BYE:** When we look at the shire, we are about 48,000 residents. The Field and Game members that are here are not just residents of Wellington shire; they are actually residents from all over Gippsland and further.

**The CHAIR:** All over the region, right. Obviously one of the big features of the submission that you have made is about the economic effects and impact, and the contribution that native bird hunting has to your local economy. I assume that the stats you have been quoting us come as a derivation of the report put out in the last couple of years by the department done by RMCG?

**Andrew POMEROY:** Yes, that is right, Chair. That is done by DJPR's *Economic Contribution of Recreational Hunting in Victoria, 2020*.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. We have had the authors of that report come and present to the committee. If it was a different basis for the calculations, I might have interrogated it a bit more, but we have heard from them, so I am comfortable with where that has come from. Has the shire done any of its own analysis of the economic impact of duck hunting other than relying on that study?

**Andrew POMEROY:** No, we have not.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. And in general terms, what –

**Ian BYE:** Sorry, Ryan, just given we are there, what I have done to back up the \$3.5 million is I have gone and spoken to the local businesses that actually support that industry, and as I said in my speech, they were quite amazed that even in the shorter season the impact of spending compared to the longer season has been very similar, and since 2019 when those figures were released it has been a substantial increase for their businesses and the area with duck hunting.

**The CHAIR:** So you do not think that the shorter season has had any impact on the economic –

**Ian BYE:** No, it was surprising. No, it has not. The only thing it has had an impact on is the supplies of things like – I am not a duck shooter, but decoys and those sorts of things that the wholesalers might get in bulk. They were worried about, 'Why is it a shorter season; will this continue', and they could not get that sort of stock of those sorts of items, so that is the only impact that had on sales. Otherwise it was pretty good.

**The CHAIR:** That is really interesting. Just going back to the broader economics, what is the value of tourism generally to the shire in economic terms, do you know?

**Andrew POMEROY:** We will come back to you on that.

**The CHAIR:** How would you rank it?

**Andrew POMEROY:** Tourism would be in the top four economic drivers in this municipality. Obviously agriculture is the main driver of this region, but certainly tourism is – if I look at the state government's policy on the key drivers of economic change, tourism is a main player within that, and obviously for 'the middle of everywhere' we do not have probably the icons that Gippsland has. We are on the edge of the Gippsland Lakes. That is why we have said we are the middle of everywhere. The snow-capped mountains are just outside of Wellington. We have got a bit of the Ninety Mile Beach, but we do not have Wilsons Prom. So one of the key drivers for us is activities like this. So they are key activities for us because we do not have, I suppose, the heroes of Lakes Entrance and Wilsons Prom or Mount Baw Baw.

**The CHAIR:** What other sorts of tourist activities do you have in the shire, and how does that compare in scale and participation terms, do you think, to duck hunting?

**Andrew POMEROY:** I can throw over to the mayor a little bit –

**Ian BYE:** So one of our catchphrases is ‘the middle of everywhere’. It’s why we have got the emblem where you start at the top, you can go from mountain ranges – snow-capped peaks if you want – you can go all the way through a rainforest, and not many people have a rainforest that is in their backyard, through to the start of the Gippsland Lakes and finish up at the Ninety Mile Beach. So there is still a good cross-section that tourists can come down and visit and explore. There is quite a bit they can actually do. We still have some great little ports like Port Albert that is in our shire that people can come and experience, so there are quite a few bits still with the tourism side.

**The CHAIR:** I would be really interested if you have got any other data on tourist activities, participation or the scale of economic impact of any work that you have done so that we can assess where hunting sits relative to other sorts of tourist-related activities that are currently underway in the shire. What I am struggling with at the moment is we have got one set of facts – which we understand where they have come from – but what we do not have is any sort of comparison to assess: how does this compare to other sorts of activities that occur in the region?

**Ian BYE:** We can provide that, yes. No problems.

**The CHAIR:** That would be really helpful. The last question I have: you made a brief mention in the opening statement about the impact that birds have on farming practices. What sorts of crops are most vulnerable to native bird interference?

**Ian BYE:** It is a cross-section. To give you some examples, one of your speakers that is coming in later this afternoon is Gary Howard, I think for the digital tour. Gary can be testament; he goes and shoots out at Giffard, a local farm, and has done for generations. He was going out there, and there were not many ducks that were frequenting that farm; he was just getting his normal bag limit like some of the shooters do. And he got a phone call one morning to say, ‘Help’, because the farmer had planted a crop – he could probably tell you exactly what that crop is this afternoon – and basically thousands and thousands of ducks just arrived. That can happen. Often what will happen in farms where you have a dam, 5 to 10 acres around the dam – because with the ducks that are around, they need to eat of course; they can come and a water supply is what they need – they will use that dam as a water supply and they go 5 to 10 acres around. That is their feeding source, which is expected. So that can happen.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thanks very much. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Thank you very much for being here. This is my electorate, and I love being in the middle of everywhere, so it is really good to be with you today. Your *Council Plan 2021–25*: you have stated that, and it is in your submission – do you believe that a well-managed, well-supported and adaptive harvest duck season is in line with the principles of your economic plan, or your holistic plan?

**Andrew POMEROY:** Yes, we do. I suppose, as our mayor spoke about before, for us it is about balance. We would not have the types of activities occurring in the Heart Morass that you saw today without a viable duck-hunting season. Those people would not, I fear, effectively put the effort and time in to ensure that that wetland is improved over generations. If a duck season was not there, would they do it? I fear that they would not. From our overall council plan as such, the plan talks about a lot of things, but within balance. So effectively it talks about things that, from an environmental perspective, councils cannot do all on their own. There is no chance that council would have the resources to put the time and effort in that the volunteers have. That counts for a lot of things across council, whether that be for community groups, for outcomes for kids, outcomes for our environment – we really do rely heavily on volunteerism.

So I think to answer your question, our council plan is really based around not only what council will do but effectively leaning on our community to go with us and do the types of things that I suppose our environment needs, our people need, to be sustainable. I dare say that in looking at our plan as a whole, it is more about engaging with our community to do some of that heavy lifting, and in this case our community does.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Today out at Heart Morass we had Matt Bowler from the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority outlining their relationship over the last 15 years with Field and Game, and he spoke about the fact that the wetland in terms of environmental context and how it is evolving has evolved – these are my words not his, but I am paraphrasing him now – to be like the lungs of the filtration system, to really filter that water system and support the overall environment. Is that something that you are cognisant of or interested in as a council?

**Andrew POMEROY:** Yes, certainly, and the mayor touched on that a little bit before, around the improvement of that system to be able to filter especially sediment. If I look at the intensive agriculture that happens on our Macalister irrigation district, whether that be out through Newry where, as the mayor said, the Thompsons and Latrobe rivers run in through that system, they are rivers that are prone to flood. Obviously in a time of flood they pick up a lot of sediment, a lot of run-off – even valuable soils and nutrients that farmers will put in, phosphates and those types of things that are put into I suppose intensifying agriculture. The improvement of those wetlands is critical to, obviously, the health and the wellbeing of the Gippsland Lakes which are prone to algal blooms over time, and also effectively to improve the health of the morass itself. I think it does three things. It acts as a bit of a catch-all for a lot of those materials and actually creates a filtration system that, as I said before, we could not afford to maintain if it wasn't for those community groups maintaining it.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. We have only got 6 minutes, hence my request for information. You mentioned the relationship around hunters. There are those out there that would have the opposite opinion to yours at the moment, I feel, that would say that there is only a small minority of people who duck hunt and the overwhelming percentage of people do not like duck hunting. But that is not your experience from the Wellington shire's perspective, is it?

**Ian BYE:** No, it is probably not. And when you see a lot of the other areas that have problems with protesters that want to come into the environment with the duck hunters, where the shooters probably shoot in our environment is not open plains that you can actually come into and infiltrate and actually cause problems or where issues can happen. It is more in tea-tree-based areas where it is harder to actually get in. So when your hunters actually go into our areas, they are more protected, and it is harder to actually, I suppose, get in there and do those sorts of issues. So we have found that we do not have much at all.

**Melina BATH:** You have actually said that where there are tourists and hunters, the hunters act in an exemplary manner and you have found that the rubbish-leavers are the tourists. Are you standing by that comment?

**Ian BYE:** Most certainly. In most of our seaside areas that is the case, and I would welcome anyone that can help us with that, because we love people to come and visit in the middle of everywhere but we also want them to clean up when they leave. We find that when hunters come out into the areas there is no mess, but we find that a lot of the tourists that come out have a great time but are not often good at cleaning up after themselves.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. Fantastic. I have got one more minute. So on that philosophy, your engagement with hunters from a council point of view is respectful and positive, both in terms of behaviour and in terms of the environment. How would you answer that?

**Ian BYE:** Yes. I would say that is a very fair statement, Melina, that we have had no issues. I was born in Sale 51 years ago, and through the generations I have seen of people and people that do hunt in the area we have not seen many issues. And in my involvement since I have been a councillor for the last seven years, definitely no issues have come forward or before that as well. So the relationships have been quite good. We have got a good relationship with Field and Game. They are a very big club – a strong club – which is fantastic. Sorry, I am taking your time.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. No, fabulous. And the last question for me – I have got many – is: are there any other conservation groups that equal or match Field and Game in terms of their conservation efforts and their engagement with council?

**Andrew POMEROY:** I am not sure on that. There are groups of course – Landcare and other groups that are around – but probably not with the numbers that Field and Game have. So when they call a call to arms and say, 'Let's go out and actually do some work in the environment,' they can get big numbers there. A lot of the

other groups are probably struggling for membership to go and do that great work. They still do great work but probably do not get as much done as what Field and Game can because they have the numbers.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Bourman.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your presentation. I am going to cover over some stuff just to make a point. During your presentation you said something about if something needs to strike the appropriate balance for – I am paraphrasing here, wildly – the council to support it. Do you think, given that if duck hunting itself is problematical, the council would still support duck hunting as having an appropriate balance? I guess I have tortured it a bit there. If duck hunting was a problem, like behaviour was a problem and all that, would the council still think that it had an appropriate balance and continue to support it, or not?

**Ian BYE:** Good point, Jeff. Look, up to this stage we have not had problems with duck hunters in our region, so of course we support that, and the environmental changes they are making are making a big difference, not only for now but for future generations to come. So if we have major problems with duck hunters, we would have to weigh up what is the agricultural benefit of not having that industry here. But we have not had issues, so it is hard to answer that because they are very respectful in our community. It is great.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Ironically you touched on something else about agricultural things. Should recreational duck hunting get banned, it is clear that there will be ducks still shot under an authority to control wildlife. So anyone thinking they are doing this to save animals is actually just shifting it out of the public eye. That is more a statement than a question, to be honest, but.

The substitutability is a big thing I keep on hearing – that if we banned duck hunting, something else would pop up in its place. Now I have my own opinion on this, but does the council have any idea, if recreational duck hunting was banned and the three or so million dollars a year that it brings in, of what would be likely to pop up to fill that gap?

**Ian BYE:** It is interesting, Jeff, when you comment on that, because we have been hit from a few sides with the timber industry and the oil and gas industry on decline. There is no more oil getting manufactured in Bass Strait as of the middle of the next year, so there are quite a few jobs – the rigs are going by 2027, I believe Esso are looking at. As an area, there are a few other industries, I suppose, that are diminishing or disappearing totally, so we have to cover those as well. And to answer your question, we would love more industry to come here. We are working very hard for that. We have the renewable energy coming, but that is years away and we are not going to get many jobs out of that, because it is out of Hastings where those jobs will be, in construction. So to answer the question, it is very hard to replace the loss of income to the areas, but we are working hard on getting some.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** One of the things that is always flown as an outcome of banning duck hunting is ecotourism. Now to me it kind of seems that if there was ecotourism, duck hunting only closes wetlands, except for private wetlands of course, for three months of the year. Do you see duck hunting as holding back ecotourism, or conversely do you see the removal of duck hunting as: we are suddenly going to get an explosion in people coming to look at ducks instead of shooting at ducks during the season?

**Ian BYE:** Look, one of our other councillors, Cr Crossley, is an avid birdwatcher. She quite frequently goes out to the wetlands and does that. Talking to her about what has transitioned in the area, especially on the wetlands, the birdlife is growing and growing with what work has been undertaken out there, which is very pleasing. They work hand in hand with the duck hunters when they are here, and they can actually go out and still watch birds while the duck-hunting season is on. We have had no issues.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Thank you. The contribution of the council touched on the use of the principle of Ramsar. Another one of the things I have seen about wetlands is that Ramsar listing seems to be a reason to stop duck hunting. The wise use principle seems to be forgotten, because it is my understanding under the Ramsar principles that as long as it is done in a sustainable manner and a responsible manner, hunting is not a problem. I have got a whole lot of stuff here I could read, but you guys wrote it so I will not bore you with it. Is your understanding of that principle, the wise use principle, that it is certainly not a lock-up-and-leave-it

approach to managing the environment, which is what would happen should, particularly in this area, duck hunting be banned?

**Ian BYE:** I am not an expert in that field. But if we look at the 1800s – that is, between the two Ramsar locations – if that piece in the middle was not changed from the salt plains, the years and years and years and thousands and thousands of hours to develop that critical piece in the middle that does do a bit of filtering to both, the water flow would not be there where it is now. What would happen to the two other locations? I do not know.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Thank you. I have only got a minute. I am going to touch on something – you mentioned that despite the shortened season the income to the area was still up compared to what you expected. I will make a comment and ask for a response. I believe that is true, there are no problems with that, but I think one of the reasons is a lot of people were going hunting because it was going to be possibly their last time, and I do not know if we should hang our hats on this particular season. We have heard from experts that say shortening a season is the worst way of managing the duck population; just removing the bag limit was it. Do you have any comments you would like to make on that? Just as a council.

**Andrew POMEROY:** I think if I look at the Sale Field and Game club as, I suppose, a driver of participation, we are seeing probably a growth in that club in our municipality. We are also seeing it in East Gippsland and with East Gippsland field and game as well. So I do not think it is about, I suppose, the driver being this could be their last time. If I look at those clubs and those groups, they are growing.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** So correlation and causation may not be the same thing.

**Andrew POMEROY:** Yes, correct.

**Jeff BOURMAN:** Thank you. I am out of time.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Watt.

**Sheena WATT:** Thank you to all of you for being here today and for your opening remarks, which I think were actually very insightful about what it is that you do here in Wellington. I had a question about – this is one of the few times I have been here – what are the other outdoor recreation activities that are popular in Wellington shire? If we had to paint a picture about why people come here, apart from duck hunting as an outdoor recreation activity, what are the other ones, and can you give me any more details on that?

**Ian BYE:** Bike trails, the link-up of bike trails – so basically you can jump on a train from Melbourne, come down, jump off, ride your bike for kilometres and kilometres and kilometres through little towns and then jump back on the train and go home – is one. So that is kilometres we have established. We have beautiful waterways, so a lot of people come down to experience the waterways. You can actually put in at the port of Sale here at the boat ramp and end up at Lakes Entrance if you choose to. So the waterways are all connected right through the whole Gippsland Lakes system.

**Sheena WATT:** So is that like kayaking or –

**Ian BYE:** You can kayak, you can boat, you can jet ski. If you like whiting, there is tonnes in the lakes if you want to catch some fish. So it is quite good.

**Andrew POMEROY:** And in general terms the majority of our tourism around here is camping – camping, fishing, hunting, four-wheel driving and boating. There is a fair bit to do with beaches and camping and families during Christmas time. If I look at our caravan parks that we lease out to other operators, they are full at Seaspray, Port Albert, Woodside and Loch Sport and those types of places that are very much a high driver of visitation over the summer months.

But then when we come into winter, obviously the visitation of caravan and camping sort of declines. So this recreational type of activity of providing a camping outlet for people who like the great outdoors, so to speak, is really important to us because it keeps things ticking over at a time when they are not – realistically, this time of year a lot of our caravan parks are very quiet. You do not have to book in advance; you can come right in. They will show you a happy, open and welcoming door. But it is also the four-wheel drivers that go and camp in the bush and those types of things as well that are high drivers of any sort of recreational activity, especially for the



towns like Heyfield and Maffra on the edges of our areas there. But also if I look at the Woodside areas and those types of things as well, they are high drivers. The outdoor recreational space is extremely high in our tourism mix.

**Sheena WATT:** So I was reading from one of the other submissions that the uncertainty around the season has made it very hard for tourism operators, particularly around preparing for numbers and staffing arrangements and other things. Is that something that tourism operators around here have reported to council?

**Ian BYE:** Probably not so much, because when you look at the duck-hunting season it is really – the school holidays have finished, you are starting to have more of the retirees, I suppose – the grey nomads – filling a lot of those places up. So there is the room still. Probably when it falls is –

**Sheena WATT:** It is not a peak, competitive time for the –

**Ian BYE:** No, it does not compete.

**Sheena WATT:** Okay. I understand that. You spoke about one of your fellow councillors and that they are an avid birdwatcher. I know there is a technical term for that, but I cannot recall what it is – apologies. I am not going to put it on the record, because I cannot recall. Have you done any studies about non-hunting bird-related tourism? Do you have any numbers or evidence around birdwatching numbers, how many folks come to this area for birdwatching, how popular that is and where Wellington sits in the vast view of our state and fellow avid birdwatchers?

**Ian BYE:** Probably the opposite. We are starting to ramp that up. Cr Crossley, as I said, is an avid birdwatcher. She has got organisations that she corresponds with that are looking at building up in the area more and more of the organisations –

**Sheena WATT:** Is that locally based organisations?

**Ian BYE:** Organisations coming to the area, because the birdlife is now more and more frequent. So there is more activity, I suppose, that hopefully will be happening. That is something we can target as well.

**Sheena WATT:** Have you got any plans or investments you are making as a council into infrastructure to support avid birdwatchers? That is something I have asked about at a couple of inquiries. Are there any investments – trails, walkways, other things – that support –

**Ian BYE:** We have a lot already that is in the shire that birdwatchers can go on. Field and Game provides boxes for birds to make sure they can breed. I do not know how many hundreds they have done, but it is quite a lot in those areas, so that does help. But we already have so many walking trails that are already established. It is just the birdwatching community need to go in –

**Sheena WATT:** It is just more because it is the investments that have been made by Field and Game and other conservationists that have enabled you to have a very strong –

**Andrew POMEROY:** Correct.

**Sheena WATT:** attraction to your area for birdwatchers.

**Ian BYE:** Yes, most certainly. Probably one of the things that Field and Game have done is make it accessible into those wetlands areas by maintaining them.

**Sheena WATT:** What does that mean?

**Ian BYE:** So if it is all overgrown, you cannot get in there to see where the bird habitat is.

**Sheena WATT:** So vehicle and walking?

**Ian BYE:** And walking tracks. They maintain those as well to have accessibility for the non-duck hunting season so people can come and experience –

**Sheena WATT:** That is new evidence we have not much heard before, about how the work of Field and Game and other conservationists has actually enabled other wildlife tourism folks to access these areas. That is a new piece, and I have listened to that with great interest. Thank you very much. I have 5 seconds left, so I might leave it to the next person. Thank you so very much.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. I want to go back to this birdwatching activity that clearly Field and Game have enabled.

**Ian BYE:** Most certainly. They are not just there to have an environment that is there for duck shooting; they create an environment that is there for all birds to come into and people to enjoy.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Do you find there are any other groups, like the anti-duck hunting groups or even the birdwatchers, that go out there and do all this voluntary work on Heart Morass? Or do they build bird-nesting boxes or clear the weeds and so on from all the tracks? Are they active in doing voluntary work?

**Ian BYE:** I am not 100 per cent sure on that – it may be a question for Gary Howard this afternoon, because that is what he is coming in for – but I believe not much at all.

**Bev McARTHUR:** No. How important is the 8 gigalitres of water that the Heart holds? And can you provide any information about the projects that improve the water quality?

**Andrew POMEROY:** I cannot.

**Ian BYE:** No. I will probably have to take that on notice.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Take that on notice. We have heard past witnesses suggest that duck hunters are gun-toting cowboys, that they are misogynists, that they do not really encourage women and that men encourage boys to go shooting under pressure. Do you have – you have said you have been around duck hunters for quite a while – any evidence of that?

**Ian BYE:** Most certainly. To visit the Field and Game when they just had their normal skeet shooting, the inclusion of all types of people in our community is acceptable, whether it is a young girl, an old lady, an old man or a young boy.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Even somebody like me could pop in.

**Ian BYE:** Most certainly. There are no problems.

**Melina BATH:** That is a young lady.

**Ian BYE:** All cross-sections of the community they like to include, but the one thing that I like about the shooters is that if they see someone that they do not think is appropriate to come into that community, their safety is firstmount. I reckon that is fantastic – that they do include anyone that wants to come along, but if they think you are not appropriate, they also do that side as well. But they do include everyone.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Right. So they are very inclusive. I did want to say how fabulous it is to be sitting here in this room where all this magnificent local hardwood has been gained. We are never going to see it again. We would hate to think it has got to come from Canada, but anyway, that is another matter.

Now, you have said that fishing is an important activity here as well, but surely fishing is just as cruel as duck hunting. Do you think that will be on the hit list of the activists next?

**Ian BYE:** I would hope not.

**Bev McARTHUR:** You would hope not.

**Ian BYE:** It is another activity that people like and is recreational, so it goes hand in hand, and it is great for the tourism side as well.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes. Hand in hand with duck hunting. In the three months that you have duck hunting here, you have said that the suppliers of shooting equipment did not have a loss of revenue, but in the shortened season did you find that any of the other suppliers, like accommodation or food suppliers or petrol suppliers, had a decline in their income?

**Ian BYE:** They definitely would have because of the reduced season of course. The visitations are less, so it would have happened, yes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So you do not think that this income can be made up, because the opponents to duck hunting want to retrofit the argument to ensure that something else will emerge that will make up for the economic activity that duck hunting provides, but you do not see that happening, especially when you have had forestry ending and the oil and gas industry in decline. There is no other way that we can improve the economic outcome here in Wellington shire.

**Ian BYE:** I think what we are doing already is by having the mountain bike trails and the normal flat bike-riding trails we are encouraging people to get out into the environment. So that is already happening. Whether we can make that cover a lot more, I do not think so.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So you have maxed out the opportunities of recreational activities and probably baristas too.

**Ian BYE:** Hard to get.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Hard to get baristas. What do you think the end game is for farmers here? I mean, the curious thing is that people seem to think that ducks are in decline, but actually water enhances the manifestation of the duck population. As the volunteers of Field and Game have improved the water facility here, you provide access to the increased numbers of ducks. How will farmers react to the lack of duck hunting if it is shut down permanently?

**Ian BYE:** Well, it is not just shutting down permanently, it is also looking at what is coming out of this season with the farmers. We are going to go around our farming group and actually just see what the impact of record amounts of ducks is doing to the agricultural community. It will be quite interesting to see what the impact has been and, with a reduced season, what the actual hunters do when they do have a crop in the ground and they are inundated with ducks outside of season and how quick it works – I am not sure if we get permits in place now or how that works – but the impact of record numbers and what that will actually do to the agricultural communities going forward. So I hope the state government is doing some studies on that and not just leaving that up to local government, because that is something that is important to actually look at.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So we have got a situation where the farmers are producing plant-based crops which are popular for those that of course do not eat ducks and other things, but they are potentially being impacted by this ban on duck hunting.

**Ian BYE:** Potentially, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Purcell.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thank you. Thanks very much for having us today and hosting us in your area. You spoke about the number of Field and Game members that are in this general area, not all of them in Wellington shire, before. It is obviously quite a small percentage of the population, and you are clearly very supportive as a council of duck shooting. I am just wondering what consultation you did with the community to reach that decision.

**Andrew POMEROY:** I can probably provide an answer to that.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Great.

**Andrew POMEROY:** We have not actually, I suppose, engaged our whole community. If I basically look at the amount of Sale Field and Game licence-holders, which is 1475, that would be one of our largest community groups. So if I look at a community group that we would have –

**Georgie PURCELL:** But they are not all in the council area, I believe?

**Andrew POMEROY:** Correct. They are not all in, but I suppose neither are football clubs. We would have a football club that would be playing out at Newry, and a lot of those players might live in Traralgon, for example, or other areas. So a lot of the council facilities that we create and use are for the whole community. Those may not just be for people that live in this community as such. Our regional sports centres will attract people from East Gippsland when they are participating in basketball, as an example.

**Georgie PURCELL:** So you did not have any consultation as a council before you came out with a supportive position on recreational duck shooting? I obviously represent a different community, and there are many of us, believe it or not, in this area who have a different position that I am sure would love the opportunity to let their views be known to the council. That is why I ask.

**Ian BYE:** When we look at what the membership is of the Sale Field and Game, they just do not turn up for duck shooting and do that each year. They actually have a lot of events. A lot of the people, of course, travel out to the events they have – with their skeet shooting out there as well, with their training, with their education. It is not just a club that turns up for a duck shooting six-week or three-month season. They do a lot more education and inclusion in that as well.

**Georgie PURCELL:** But just confirming: no community consultation before you had reached –

**Ian BYE:** The general broader community, that is correct.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thank you.

**Bev McARTHUR:** They probably voted you in on the basis of it.

**The CHAIR:** Order!

**Georgie PURCELL:** There are four of you appearing today in support of recreational duck shooting. I am just wondering if any of you have been licensed duck shooters now or in the past?

**Ian BYE:** No, I have never been a licensed duck shooter or owned a firearm either.

**David HARPER:** No.

**Andrew POMEROY:** I was 16, and I handed my gun in when John Howard put his gun laws in –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Great man.

**Andrew POMEROY:** and I was happy to hand it over.

**The CHAIR:** No, he was not. We disagree on that.

**Georgie PURCELL:** You have spoken a lot today about –

**Ian BYE:** And we have one more to answer.

**Kirsten POWER:** No.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Thank you. You have spoken a lot today about Heart Morass. I am just wondering how many other wetlands are in this area and if you could tell us about them.

**Ian BYE:** We have many wetlands. If you want to – it is a bit windy today – go for a walk, our lake that is down here is a fantastic wetland that we have developed. It was actually a tip previously and the lake at the back was not there. We have developed the wetlands that are in because we have the water close by, so we are quite active in the wetlands. We have a lot of rivers that go close to our communities that we have to make sure are maintained.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Can you tell us what other wetlands recreational duck shooting happens at? I presume it does not happen at that one there.

**Andrew POMEROY:** It is not just duck shooting on Heart Morass. There will be, effectively, duck shooting on farms – looking at dams and those types of things. There will be duck shooting along various wetlands. I suppose if I look at some of the rivers within Wellington, with some of those rivers at the moment you will see, as you drive back to Melbourne, some overflow of water coming out of the Latrobe River, as an example. Those rivers sometimes act like wetlands, and other times, in a dryer climate, you will not see any water around those rivers. Duck hunting does not just occur in those morasses; it also occurs on the edge of the Gippsland Lakes – so various other different spaces and places, not just the morass. I suppose one of the reasons why we have taken a positive position on this is that we do not hear of the angst in our community, of people that are opposed to it.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Yes, I guess it is a bit difficult when it happens at a private wetland, and you have just mentioned before that it is selective on who can enter and observe –

**Ian BYE:** Probably just one thing also is what we have done with farming practices over the years, so traditional farming practices within the Macalister Irrigation District. I am not sure if you are familiar with that. It is a gravity-fed irrigation system, the biggest in Victoria. When you look at what happened with farming practices on that side, there are a lot of natural environments that have been created; re-use dams, so we make sure we use the water to the highest amount and we try not to waste any at all. So there were a lot of environments that were created as well –

**Georgie PURCELL:** Sorry, I have just got 1 minute left and I have another question. Heart Morass has PFAS and it is recommended that ducks shot there are not consumed; I am just wondering if you have any concerns or comments about that, because it is actually impossible to follow the wildlife game regulations that say you must harvest a duck that is shot, but then the EPA regulations say that you cannot eat ducks with PFAS contamination. I am wondering if you have done any work on addressing that issue?

**Andrew POMEROY:** We would leave that to the state and to the EPA to regulate.

**Ian BYE:** I must say, though, with the PFAS, about five or six years ago PFAS reared its head across Wellington on a lot of sites. Since that, they have done a lot of testing and realised, with a natural environment, that PFAS is actually decimated and not a problem there, so –

**Georgie PURCELL:** The EPA still recommends not to consume ducks from Heart Morass.

**Ian BYE:** Yes, that I am not sure of. Just that general PFAS is really – as a comment.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Okay. Thank you, do I have –

**The CHAIR:** You have got 5 seconds.

**Georgie PURCELL:** Okay, I have got 5 seconds. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Mulholland.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Thank you. Just expanding on the consultation with your community to come to your position: can you explain what other opportunities people might have, just on an engagement level as a council, to engage with the council? I am thinking emails, committee meetings, council meetings and ways that people can have an opportunity to contact the council.

**Ian BYE:** Yes, so when we first do our council plan, we do not just sit here and wait for residents to come to us; we go out into every single community – whether that is up in Dargo or out to Briag or Boisdale, our little communities and our big communities – and we ask for the residents to please come and give us feedback. We have that also online for feedback as well, so we just do not go and make these decisions without actually listening to our community about all our council plans.

**Andrew POMEROY:** I think the other one that is a bit unique to this council is that we enable anyone to come up to the microphone near the end of our council meetings to address council and any concerns that they have. So, as you would see, other councils have probably an issue with people effectively storming their council meetings because they do not feel like they have a say. We enable people to actually have a say and

address council. At every one of our council meetings they are able to come up unannounced, have their say and be heard, and I think that is really important.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** So it is safe to say if there was an overwhelming view against duck hunting in the community, people would have an opportunity to –

**Ian BYE:** We would be happy to hear it.

**Andrew POMEROY:** Most certainly, yes.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** We have had some fairly elaborate claims to this committee in recent weeks that there would be some sort of economic benefit to banning duck hunting. Your submission states that the council – there was about \$3.1 million in economic benefit to Wellington shire in 2019 for a shortened season. Could you elaborate on this and the benefits to tourism in the area?

**Andrew POMEROY:** Yes, happy to. If I look at that data, that data would include things like room nights at hotels. The data would include things like people purchasing equipment, whether that be camping equipment, whether that be shooting equipment, possibly even pieces of equipment for their vehicles to enable them to get into spaces and places that they would then conduct these types of activities. It would include fuel and down to even groceries and shopping and food and those types of things that they would need to enable them to go hunting. So it is not just, I suppose, a select few little shops that would see the benefit of that activity, it is a really broad range of activities that benefit a whole lot of different businesses and people in our community. I am very aware that some of those people are actually behind us right now and rely on that income, especially when we see the likes of the timber industry and the gas industry and other industries leaving regional Victoria rather than growing in our region. So we are very cognisant of any sort of downturn in our economy as it gets tougher and tougher for these communities to grow and thrive.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I just want to go into what we were talking about before with some claims we have heard – that in a lot of areas like this ecotourism would be boosted as result of banning duck hunting. Given what we know and have learned about the conservation being undertaken by Field and Game and hunters, would not the opportunity for bird watching and ecotourism be diminished as a result of any sort of ban?

**Ian BYE:** I would think you are correct, because if you do not have someone that is actually maintaining the environment for people to be able to actually access to see how great it is, how will they actually get in there? I think it would decrease over years, yes.

**Andrew POMEROY:** And certainly with councils being in a rate cap environment, we do not have the extra funds to go and do the types of work that other community groups have been doing.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Is March–June the key peak tourist period?

**Ian BYE:** Not at all. As you come into the colder times, definitely not. The peak period of course is when the school holidays are, like most areas. But I think you would find with affordability now, even those have decreased a little bit in our tourist areas with what is happening in the economy. So probably it is an ideal period that is not in peak time.

**Andrew POMEROY:** And most of our activities are water based. So if I look at it from a summer perspective, that is absolutely our peak, from Christmas time through to probably mid-Feb, late Feb. That is absently our peak time for tourism.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Would you agree that many of the more remote parts of your municipality would be visited more within that hunting season?

**Andrew POMEROY:** To a degree. If I look at today, as a great example, it is cold and dreary. Apart from absolute enthusiasts doing what they want to do outside – I know people will say, ‘Dress for the weather and off you go’, but you would have to be an avid bushwalker today. You would have to be very avid, and you would probably have to be an avid duck hunter, to be honest. Duck hunters know they are going to encounter this sort of environment, because that is when their activity is, so they probably buy more clothes. They buy more gear

to keep themselves warm and all the rest of it. That in turn creates more economic activity. But if I am looking at my young family, we would probably be staying inside today if I was on holidays.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. You are going to provide us with a bit of stuff on notice in relation to the tourism side. I am also interested if you have had any feedback from local farmers about ducks and crops. It would be useful for us to get that for the committee as well.

**Bev McARTHUR:** And the 8 gegalitres – the question I asked.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you for joining us here today. Soon – I hate to give a time, but soon, in about a week – you will get a draft of the transcript of today's proceedings to review before we publish it on the website. Thanks for attending today.

We will resume at 11:15.

**Witnesses withdrew.**