

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 11 August 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair

Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Nina Taylor

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr David Davis

Dr Tien Kieu

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Mr Rex Motton, Committee Member, Prospectors and Miners Association of Victoria.

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

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

At this point I will take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Also appearing with me via Zoom today are Mr Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair; Dr Samantha Ratnam; Mr Andy Meddick; Ms Melina Bath; Dr Matthew Bach; and Mrs Bev McArthur. And we may have some other committee members joining us momentarily, but we will get underway.

All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

So if I could please get you to state for the Hansard record your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Mr MOTTON: My name is Rex Motton. I am a committee member of the Prospectors and Miners Association of Victoria, and I am filling in the spot for the president, Mr Carkeek, because he is unavailable today.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks so much for that. All right. Well, with that I will hand over to you now, if you could give your opening remarks and keep them to about 10 minutes. I will give you a 1-minute warning as we approach that time, and that will then allow us plenty of time to ask you questions. So over to you. Thanks, Rex.

Mr MOTTON: Thank you. Look, I have made a series of notes, so I am just going to read through them. The Prospectors and Miners Association of Victoria represents small-scale miners as well as professional and recreational prospectors. The organisation's charter is to protect the rights of those we represent, and it has been actively doing so since our inception in 1980.

Victoria has a great geological legacy with its wonderful gold endowment, which makes it one of the richest places on earth, having produced 88 million ounces of gold, and the prospectors association wants to see that our industry is encouraged to flourish.

Prospectors association members have a long history of being associated with the bush. It is through this process of prospecting that our members have a unique understanding of what is going on in the bush. Prospecting is a low-impact environmental activity, while small-scale mining affects a small area that is relatively easily rehabilitated due to its small areal extent. On a larger scale, modern underground goldmining has also demonstrated that it can work alongside environmental demands, with world-class mines such as the Stawell goldmine, which is currently down at a depth of 1600 metres below the surface. By contrast, the natural surficial environment may penetrate, say, at 50 metres deep. Much has changed in terms of resource management since the early days of the gold rush, and a better understanding now exists as to how best international practice can be applied to prospecting and mining.

In terms of environment management, the Victorian Environment Assessment Council, VEAC, celebrated its 50th year this year. Earlier this year they held a symposium entitled Science into Management: Research on Victoria's Public Land. Curiously, nothing within the symposium suggested that Victorian ecosystems were in decline. During the past 50 years of VEAC, Victoria has moved from 12 per cent of Crown land being national parks to just over 50 per cent. The majority of Crown land is now national parks and is therefore managed by Parks Victoria.

Where possible, the prospectors association has worked closely with government and especially with the resources department, DJPR, to improve outcomes for its members and educate the public about its members' activities and the industry. This inquiry is into the causes of decline, and it is the prospectors' view—I would like to share my screen, if I may.

Visual presentation.

Mr MOTTON: I just wanted to show this graphic. It is a couple of graphs showing the effects of the catastrophic wildfires that have occurred over the past 170 years. The graph on the left is set into half-century lots, so 1850 to 1899 et cetera. This is the millions of hectares that have been affected by wildfires. You can see that it gradually declined right up until 1999, and then in the last 20 years we have lost 4.5 million hectares as a result of these catastrophic fires. The graph on the right is the number of deaths caused by these wildfires, and you can see that even recently—in the last 20 years—it resulted in something like 170 deaths.

The CHAIR: Mr Motton, can I just ask you: where do those figures come from? Because there is no source down the bottom. So if you could just add that for us, that would be great.

Mr MOTTON: Yes, sure. That came from *Wikipedia* actually.

So further to that, what changed in that period of time over the last, say, 50 years? One of the things that occurred was that in 1983 the Forests Commission of Victoria was disbanded or it evolved into various other government departments, and this may have led to the problems that we see today in forest fire management. Certainly that would have had an impact on the environment and the decline of ecosystems. During its time the Forests Commission operated for most of the last century, and it was responsible for:

... forest policy, prevention and suppression of bushfires, issuing leases and licences, planting and thinning of forests, the development of plantations, reforestation, nurseries, forestry education, the development of commercial timber harvesting and marketing of produce, building and maintaining forest roads, provision of recreation facilities, protection of water, soils and wildlife, forest research and making recommendations on the acquisition or alienation of land for forest purposes.

That is also from *Wikipedia*.

So the other threats that we can see relatively easily, just by driving around, are the effects of invasive weed species, which severely compromise the integrity of the native environment because they can dominate areas and invade and replace the native species. It is pretty obvious to anyone with a trained eye as to which species are non-native. I have a pretty extensive library on this. The other aspect of feral and introduced species are feral animals, such as foxes and cats, that eat smaller native animals, such as dunnarts, bandicoots and even echidnas. Most of the smaller native marsupials are under threat as a direct result of being preyed upon.

Despite the websites indicating that there are a number of measures being taken to control weeds and feral animals, such as the Agriculture Victoria link that is part of my paper, there are no key performance indicators to show just how effective these programs are, such as the amount paid in bounties annually for fox scalps or the amount of areas sprayed for weeds and where those areas might be. In the 1970s there were community programs that strongly supported, by government, these activities. Currently there are budgets for it, but it is hard to see exactly how those budgets are effective.

Another aspect of the brief is the adequacy in government. In terms of the adequacy of the legislative framework, the Victorian environment is one of the most heavily regulated in the world and particularly in Australia. The prospectors association have highlighted in their submission that there are at least 14 applicable legislative Acts and another nine mostly governmental bodies that are involved in environmental management. Bringing these various Acts together in an overarching manner could streamline and make more effective management on the ground. The prospectors association have proposed a public land use commission that

revisits the role carried out by the Forests Commission, when land management appears to have been more effective.

So in conclusion, the prospectors association believes that, with proper management, the wildfire disasters are avoidable, as demonstrated by the Forests Commission's excellent work in the previous half-century. The prospectors association proposes that environmental studies should be aimed at establishing KPI-type scenarios that can demonstrate whether or not an ecosystem or a good or bad species is in decline or ascendancy, which could be applied to national parks and state forests equally. The prospectors association would like to see the removal of native vegetation offsets for small-scale mining because it does not seem that this is particularly appropriate, and it also recommends that the commission that is created fully represent the public stakeholders of all industries and government and NGO bodies to ensure open and comprehensive discussion and decision-making processes that ensure world's best practice and positive, informed outcomes. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks so much for your presentation there, Rex. We will throw to questions, and I will ask Mr Hayes if he has got a question.

Mr HAYES: Thanks, Chair. Thanks very much, Mr Motton, and thanks for your submission. I just wanted to ask you: your organisation is of the opinion that the formation of new national parks and conservation reserves will not have social, economic and environmental benefits that are inferred in the VEAC report.

Mr MOTTON: Yes.

Mr HAYES: Would you like to expand on that?

Mr MOTTON: Well, the VEAC report has not addressed in any real detail the exploration, mining and prospecting aspects of working in those areas. We commissioned a report by the economist Mr Alan Moran, who said that he believes that approximately \$280 billion worth of economic benefit is being wiped out by the continued growth of national parks throughout the state, and the *Central West Investigation* is part of that. So we do not believe that the prospectors have been fully consulted, and we think that it should really be reviewed, taking into account more detail of what has been proposed.

Mr HAYES: Okay. Thanks. Will I do a follow-up, Chair?

The CHAIR: Yes. Sure. Just quickly.

Mr HAYES: Okay. Look, once again about your submission, you say that biodiversity is not actually in decline but is going through a medium-term phase of regeneration. There is a lot of scientific evidence that would point the other way to our inquiry. What evidence do you base that on?

Mr MOTTON: Well, it is a historical view. If you look at the previous century, I guess with the decline of the steam engine and the advent of the internal combustion engine we have not had to rely on forest products since then, and you could easily see photos from the late 1800s where large areas of forest were devastated by the high consumption of forest products. So practically every forest that you go to today is regrowth forest that has benefited from the public policy for the past 200 years or so.

Mr HAYES: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Ms Bath, a question?

Ms BATH: Thanks, Chair, and thanks, Mr Motton, for your presentation today. The term 'native vegetation offset' either brings a euphoric smile to people's faces or a great big frown on occasion. In your submission you speak about your concerns about native veg offsets and you speak to—and I will just read it and you can speak to it then:

... the PMAV recommends the system of offsets (including carbon, native vegetation and Indigenous Corporation compensation payments) be replaced with a broader sustainability scoring system that includes ... metrics—

that include—

... sustainability factors ... job creation, indigenous community ... regional community building programs and industry collaboration ...

Can you elaborate on that for us?

Mr MOTTON: Well, I think that it is trying to get a more holistic approach to what is going on. Native vegetation offsets are not necessarily directly benefiting the area that is impacted. If you look at small-scale mining, it is actually quite a small area. The licence area is usually in the order of 1 to 5 hectares. So for small-scale miners who have limited funds it is fairly prohibitive to take on these really quite large environmental programs. We are quite willing to work with community groups and First Nations groups in order to get a positive outcome, but it should not be prohibitive or preventative to have such a burden, an economic burden, on such a small operation.

Ms BATH: Can you explain to us, Mr Motton: when you have got your hectare or two that you are working on and you are prospecting—whether it be, I am saying, with your handheld machines or whether it is panning or the like—what sorts of, if any, remediation do you do post that? Explain—you are taking us out on a field trip—on a prospecting trip what you do on that land and what sort of, I guess, obligation are you under to remediate? And what do you say that your members do?

Mr MOTTON: Look, it is even on our website, ‘Fill in your holes’, but essentially if they are metal detecting—and that is what 90 per cent of our members do—they might use a shovel or a pick to dig a hole to find out what is causing the metal detector to beep and, having done so, fill back the hole. It is usually about the size of an echidna hole. In fact you could go around and sort of debate whether that is an echidna hole or a prospector hole, but invariably our members fill back those holes so there is no significant impact or effect. They are not big holes, because a metal detector can only go down sort of 15, 20 centimetres, unless you had a ‘Welcome Stranger’ nugget that was down a couple of feet, but we do not find those very often. And then in a small-scale mining operation, let us say you have a hectare, there are people—you would have seen the Aussie goldrush program—digging up and detecting and then backfilling the waste material. Those types of licences are heavily regulated by the mines department and the mines inspectors. They have a bond that is set by the mines department to ensure that the bond will cover the cost of the rehabilitation if the miner does not do it. So it is in the miner’s interest to do it so he can get his bond back, because I am sure that the bond is a lot more than the expense of what the rehabilitation cost is.

Ms BATH: Thanks, Chair. I do have others, Chair. Can I ask one more?

The CHAIR: Yes. Ask one more, and then we will go back around.

Ms BATH: Thanks. Mr Motton, I guess in relation to VEAC and the closure of 77 000 hectares to a raft of operations, what input have you had into that, and can you share with the committee what the ramifications are of the government closing up those 77 000 hectares? What will it mean for you and the PMAV?

Mr MOTTON: Well, particularly for the PMAV, which is why I am here today, a lot of these areas that they are proposing to lock up are goldfields areas. They came into being as forests because they were originally set aside for prospecting and mining back in the 1850s and 1860s, and a lot of that information is available through titles. Once they become national parks, then it is totally prohibited to carry out prospecting or mining or any other activity along those lines—exploration, for example. We should not be locking up one of the world’s greatest goldfields. We are in the top 10 goldfields in the world in terms of past production and sort of treat it as—perhaps blinkered really. If they are mining down at Stawell at 1600 metres and tree roots go to, say, 50 metres—and we have seen that underground mines can coexist next to communities—then it is really about limiting the footprint of that underground mine portal, and you could have processing plants outside that state forest in order to ensure the integrity of the forest. It depends on the scale of the operation, but certainly prospecting and small-scale mining—if you look at the number of small-scale mining licences around the state, there are very, very few. So it is not like you are going to have some mad gold rush of the 1850s, where the whole place is going to be covered in miners causing massive degradation. It is just illegal to do it.

I think we should take a longer term view, working hand in hand with the environmental aspects of mining. World-class operations abound. You have got, say, the Henty goldmine in Tasmania, which is in the middle of the World Heritage area. It is not that they are diametrically opposed; they can work together and should be encouraged. If anything, personally I would prefer to see these goldfields turned into historic reserves and respect the goldmining heritage that exists in them.

The CHAIR: Dr Ratnam, a question?

Dr RATNAM: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Mr Motton. I was going to ask a question in response to some of the evidence you provided about the impact of fire on ecosystem decline. I too was a bit concerned—Mr Hayes asked this question—about that aspect in your submission that indicated that your organisation thought that we were not actually experiencing biodiversity decline, rather a phase of regeneration. So I just want to put that on the record. I was quite concerned about that aspect of your submission.

Secondly, the discussion about the impact of fire on ecosystem loss—we know that fire does impact on habitat loss, and we know that habitat loss is a driver of extinction and biodiversity loss. People also have had very, very strong evidence throughout this inquiry, and it is science that is accepted globally, that climate change increases the intensity, severity and frequency of fire on the landscape. You did not refer to that in your presentation. So I wanted to know what the view of your organisation was on taking strong action on climate change, given that climate change intensifies the amount of fire that we see, which then causes the biodiversity loss that we experience.

Mr MOTTON: Well, that is why I brought the graphic up, because you could see that over the previous 150 years the aerial extent of environmental damage through wildfires has actually decreased now during a period when in the last 170 years the planet has warmed 1.5 degrees. So if that is the case, why have we lost—and that would not be in steps, it would be gradual. If we were gradually increasing in our temperature over the 170 years, why did we see a period of actually declining wildfires? Or was it actually that they were better managed back then and perhaps have not been as well managed in the last 20-odd years?

Dr RATNAM: Well, I was actually referencing your claim about something happened over the last 50 years.

Mr MOTTON: Correct.

Dr RATNAM: That there was an experience of more intense fires and therefore more loss associated with those fires at the same time as we have seen the impacts of climate change really intensifying over the last 50 years. So isn't there a link in your view, in your organisation's view, between intensifying impacts of climate change therefore causing more fires, which is one of the reasons we have seen more fires in the last 50 years?

Mr MOTTON: Are you saying that the global temperature has increased dramatically in the last 50 years compared to the previous 170?

Dr RATNAM: No, I am asking about your assertion.

Mr MOTTON: Okay.

Dr RATNAM: You mentioned that in the last 50 years there have been more fires and you attributed that to management of forests when in fact the science points to the intensifying impacts of climate change over the last 50 years having an impact on the severity of fire. So I just wanted to challenge that assertion—that you attribute the increase in fires to forest management when the science is saying it is the intensification of the impacts of climate change that have caused the intensity of fire. So I just wanted to know what your view in terms of that contradictory claim is.

Mr MOTTON: Well, I think it would depend on what sources of information you use to establish that climate change in the last 50 years has intensified, if you have had 170 years where it has so slowly increased. But I would like to talk about management. So my point in the discussion is that in the last 50 years we have had a massive increase in the aerial extent of national parks. Now, parks management has been different to state forest management, especially since the Forests Commission was removed in 1983. So there has been a gradual build-up of fuel, forest fuel load, during the late part of last century, since 1983, which has resulted in a very high fuel load in those areas, which has resulted in the catastrophic fires of the last 20 years. So if we had continued the patchwork quilt process that the Forests Commission invented since they took on forest fire management back after the 1939 fires, then we would not have seen this massive build-up and therefore—I mean, I am not saying we would not have had the fires, but it perhaps would not have been as intense.

Dr RATNAM: So Mr Motton, sorry to interrupt, but are you asserting that the intensification of the impacts of climate change has not had an impact on the intensity and severity of fires that we have seen over the last 50 years?

Mr MOTTON: No. I am saying that the amount of fuel load there has had an effect. If we take that the last 170 years have caused a 1.5-degree rise in temperature, then we cannot just assign it to the last 50 years; we would have to assign it to the whole 170 years in a gradual change, wouldn't we? So you would not expect to see a step downward to 4.5 million hectares being wiped out in the last 20 years. So I am suggesting that unless we address this with a more holistic view about how we can address it—let us say we cannot address climate change on a world scale but we can address management of our forests in a perhaps more comprehensive way, then perhaps we should look at that.

Dr RATNAM: But what if, Mr Motton, we cannot actually? If we do not address the impacts of climate change, no matter how much forest management we do, we will not be able to minimise the impact or the incidence of fire, given the intensifying impacts of climate change.

Mr MOTTON: Okay.

Dr RATNAM: So I think we are actually coming from different viewpoints, which I think is worth putting on the record here—

Mr MOTTON: That is fine.

Dr RATNAM: and I am interested to know what kind of evidence you are basing these assertions on, because it is actually contradicted quite significantly by the science that we have heard at this inquiry and is available kind of globally.

Mr MOTTON: Yes, okay. Well, I mean, my father ran cattle in a state forest and worked with the Forests Commission. Annually that forest was burnt off. If you look at the top end of the Northern Territory, that whole area is burnt off on an annual basis. So by reducing the fuel load, you do not get necessarily the intensity of fires. So you are saying that we are invariably going to have fires. And yes, I would agree with that because this is Australia, and these fires are an annual event, but by reducing the fuel load we can reduce the impact.

The CHAIR: Okay, we will have to move on. Thank you, Dr Ratnam. Ms Taylor, a question?

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. So there were just two limbs. One was I just put it to you that there might be other perspectives on the idea of ecotourism. I know myself—and I am not just talking about me as an individual, that is irrelevant; it is the broader community—that I literally would pick a place to visit because it is near a forest. I will pick that, and I did recently. 'Oh, great'—the place I hired was near the Wombat State Forest—'Great. I'm going to hire there'. So that was the carrot. So I am just saying, I just put it to you, there may be the possibility that there are many others who think in that direction. I am just putting that out there.

But the second limb to that issue—but I emphasise it is not about Nina as an individual, it is about the broader community, so let me put that caveat—is what is coming through. I get that forest management is critical, absolutely, and I think everyone would agree. We would probably have differences of opinion on what that looks like, and certainly from my perspective we want to listen to the experts. But I am just concerned that what is coming through in your presentation—I say this respectfully—is that I am not getting a sense of the value that you give to reports such as the IPCC report and the status of climate change on the impact on our future. So I am afraid that is just not coming through in your presentation, that is all.

Mr MOTTON: Well, I have tried to keep it in practical terms as to what we deal with on the ground as prospectors, what we see and deal with on a daily basis. It is very hard to address something that is global on perhaps a local scale. So I was looking for practical outcomes that we could manage rather than talking about climate change. Yes, look, that is a bigger picture, if you like.

In terms of ecotourism, if you look at say the Central Highlands of Victoria, where goldmining and prospecting are a key part of the community's activities, they are also one of the biggest tourist attractions in the area. You can go to practically any caravan park throughout central Victoria and it will be dominated by prospectors and small-scale miners and members of our community. So ecotourism has a number of aspects to it. Of course there are bushwalkers, bird groups—there are any number of activities that you can do in the forest. But I am not saying that they are all opposed to each other. You know, I think that they can be worked in together. I think that is what you see in the state forest system, where you have a large variety of members of the public

from all different interests and activity groups that are accessing these areas and carrying out the types of activities they enjoy.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. The only other thing I was just going to say there is absolutely the focus on climate change is a practical one. It is not a theoretical argument, and the solutions are practical. So to your point, I would hate to think that the committee's outcomes would be a theoretical argument. We are not working on that premise. Just to reassure you, we are very much—and I do not want to speak for others, but I would think our focus is on practical outcomes. So I just wanted to reassure you of that.

Mr MOTTON: I think that is certainly one aspect of it, but we can also look at other aspects of how that can be managed. So I think we should take a broad approach, and in so doing we can cover all the bases and hopefully, you know, come up with the solutions that everybody can see are beneficial, particularly for the environment.

The CHAIR: Great, okay. Thank you. Dr Bach, a question?

Dr BACH: Thank you very much, Chair. Thanks, Mr Motton, for being with us. Mr Motton, on a range of other occasions we have heard from organisations who ultimately have been able to go on to talk to us about some of the practical work that their members do. We have just had a discussion, and I agree with the points Ms Taylor was just making about the need to ensure that we dwell on practical solutions. I note also that you have talked about some of the work that your members are doing in the field in Tasmania. So we have heard from you about simple things, basic things, like filling in holes. Are there other things that your members do in order to seek to ensure that the environment that they are working in is cared for? And specifically about Tasmania—so a two-pronged question—in your view are there any environmental benefits or benefits to the broader community regarding the work of your members there, Mr Motton?

Mr MOTTON: Look, I am not aware of what you are referring to in Tasmania, but, as I said before, I can certainly point to the communities in central Victoria where our members are prospecting right throughout the goldfields. So those communities benefit from the tourism—the ecotourism, the prospecting tourism, if you like—and they are a key part of that community. In fact a lot of people that enjoy it might make the tree change and move from Melbourne to those areas so that they can continue their beloved activity.

It is generally such a low-impact activity—it is not like you go and dig a hole every 5 feet or something or every 2 metres. You are looking for something that is very rare, you know, so to walk across areas and look for nuggets of gold—I have done it, and you can walk all day and find a couple of bullets and that is it. So it is a very low-impact activity. So it is hard to say what more they could do to contribute, but certainly they contribute to the economy of the community that they are living in.

You do get prospectors that commute, if you like, from Western Australia back to Victoria on a seasonal basis because of the hot summers in WA, but, you know, these are pretty dedicated people, and some of them do it professionally. If you are doing any kind of earthwork activity with machinery, you require a licence and you require a bond and you require a rehabilitation program that is all approved by government prior to the actual activity taking place. So it is not something that is unregulated; it is quite heavily regulated.

Dr BACH: Thank you for that, Mr Motton.

The CHAIR: Great. Mr Meddick, a question?

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Motton. I just want to return to your submission for a moment, and I just want to ask you a question. You refer to the VEAC in quite disparaging terms, I feel, in the submission, and one of the claims that you make is that the VEAC *Central West Investigation* in particular lacked independence and integrity. I am just wondering what evidence you can present to the committee to back up those claims that they lack integrity and independence?

Mr MOTTON: Okay. Well, I did not write the submission. I mean, as I said at the start, I am standing in for Mr Carkeek. He wrote the submission. He is the president. So if I could, I would rather defer to him and have him respond to that when he is available. But as I understand it, there were a lot of submissions made to the VEAC CWI from across the community. Some seem to have been taken on board while others seem to have been ignored. So, look, I know that, for example, a number of mining and exploration companies were not consulted. Of course I am a geologist, so I work in that industry, but I also know that some of the local

government bodies were not consulted. I am just saying that I think that the coverage could have been improved.

Mr MEDDICK: Just to expand upon that, then, you state that some of the stuff that was actually presented to VEAC was ignored. Isn't it just quite possible that VEAC did not ignore that, that they actually considered it, given that VEAC is made up of people who are scientists and researchers and others as well—environmental experts—that they actually did consider it and weigh it up. And just because a particular body or a group of people do not agree with the outcome of a particular report, isn't it possible that just because they do not agree with your position or someone else's position they did consider it but the evidence just does not back it up?

Mr MOTTON: Well, from what my members have told me within the prospectors association, 65 per cent of submissions to VEAC were against the proposals of the national parks in the CWI investigation. That was some of our research. If you are going to go with 35 per cent of the vote, I do not think it would hold up. You have a look at it. We can send you the information. I can easily contact our members that did the research.

Mr MEDDICK: And that is fine. It is just that the strength of the submission also has to be considered and the scientific validity has to be considered as well, and that carries considerable weight.

But we will move on from that, and I have just got one other question, if I may, Chair. You also state, and you actually raised this before as well, in the submission that you are saying that biodiversity actually is not in decline and that it is going through a medium-term phase of regeneration. I am just wondering how you marry that up with the fact that Australia—if we discount the rest of the world for a moment—has one of the worst records of deforestation, of habitat loss as a result of that deforestation, and also we have one of the worst records of species extinction in the world. Surely that constitutes loss of biodiversity by its very definition? And therefore if we are going through that, if we are seeing these losses, that means we have a biodiversity in decline.

Mr MOTTON: If you look at species loss, for example, in what you are talking about there, most of those species that were lost were on the mainland and occurred in the first 20, 30, 40 years of white settlement—

Mr MEDDICK: We are talking about just the last few years. We have one of the worst records of species loss just in the last three years.

Mr MOTTON: Okay. Can you name those species, please?

Mr MEDDICK: I do not have a list here, but these reports come out all the time.

The CHAIR: Sorry, if we can just not have any back and forth. Perhaps, Rex, if you can just answer Mr Meddick's question, and then Mr Meddick, just one at a time questioning. Thank you.

Mr MOTTON: Sure.

Mr MEDDICK: I am finished with questions too, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Motton, do you want to respond to Mr Meddick's last question on the species?

Mr MOTTON: Well, I am not aware, certainly, of any mammal species that have been lost in the last three or four years. I do not know of any floral species. I am not saying that they do not exist, and I am certainly not an expert. I am here to represent the prospectors association. I cannot really comment without doing further research on some of these aspects that Mr Meddick is talking about.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thanks. Mr Meddick, any other question? All right. Mrs McArthur, a question?

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Yes. Mr Motton, perhaps you could expand on how the previous Forests Commission operated in managing forests. Would they have had a similar budget to what Parks Victoria have now? And could you compare the work of the Forests Commission with the current operation of Parks Victoria? That is my first question.

Mr MOTTON: Thank you for the question. I really like the question because, as I said earlier, my parents ran cattle in the state forest and as such were heavily involved with the Forests Commission. Every year there

was an annual burn-off of the understorey of the forest. I remember that as a kid. And you were not in any danger of walking through or nearby these forests that basically ticked away—you know, the flames would be maybe a metre high, and they would just slowly burn through the forest. But they worked it on a patchwork quilt process so that they were not necessarily, you know, burning the whole lot at once, but they made sure that they kept on top of it so that there was no massive fuel load build-up. And this, to me, was a great process, because the tops of trees and the upper storey of the forest was not affected in any way.

Of course you would need to manage gullies separately where you had perhaps rainforest-type species—and of course all forests are different—but it certainly was effective, particularly from 1939 to 1983. So I think it is a period that could be reviewed and looked at in terms of current practices. It certainly made an impression on me when I was very young.

And in terms of budgets, I do not know what the budgets were. I guess that Parks Victoria was much smaller then. Probably the modern equivalent would be the state forests, which is now DELWP. And I am not sure of how Parks fits in with DELWP, but they certainly work together. That has been my experience.

Mrs McARTHUR: So would you recommend, going forward, that we have a dedicated forest commission similar to what we had previously, which was dedicated to undertaking the roles that you elaborated on before?

Mr MOTTON: Yes, I would, because I do not think that we have a sort of holistic view. We have become rather silo-focused on each and every department. And as I said, we have got something like 14 different Acts governing the environment. And I think VEAC has a role to play in that, but they also should take into consideration other bodies that have perhaps more practical uses or stakeholder investment, if you like.

Mrs McARTHUR: And would you have a view, or would your association have a view, about state forests, public parks, being owned by the public and therefore that they should be accessible by the public?

Mr MOTTON: Yes. If you look at national parks, generally they have meant that the public has been largely locked out. It is an interesting to look at. You can drive down a number of roads today where you have got a national park on one side and a state forest on the other, and you cannot tell the difference. So I am not quite sure why we are sort of locking away these areas when clearly they can be managed under the state forest system. And if you are in the mining and prospecting field, you know that it is heavily regulated and you know that there are massive responsibilities on compliance and low-impact work. You are actually better off doing low-impact work so that you do not have the costs of rehabilitation. And this is an important part of the process.

The prospectors association has recommended that we have some sort of commission that looks at land use across the board but has all sorts of stakeholder engagement. I remember back in the early 2000s there was the Extractive and Mining Industry Advisory Board, which reported to the Honourable Theo Theophanous, who was the Minister for Resources at the time. That was a body that encompassed all walks of mining and earth resources, so that included quarries and coalmines and everything. I think that those forums were very valuable, getting industry to be able to talk to government and put forward how we could best proceed.

Mrs McARTHUR: Can you just further elaborate on your experience as a young person and your family's experience? You mentioned that you were in the High Country as a child and you were cattle grazers. How was that area managed at that time, and were there the intense fires that we have seen lately, since we no longer have grazing in the High Country?

Mr MOTTON: That is an excellent question. The forest we ran cattle in was the Moira State Forest, which was directly across the Murray River from the Barmah State Forest. It was actually working with the Forestry Commission of New South Wales, but it was the same process. If you go back there now, it is a national park. We had 32 000 acres of forest that we leased and ran cattle in. We had a thousand head of cattle. There were lots of swamps and creeks and of course the Murray River, the Edward River and the like.

If you go back there today, there are any number of signs that have been put up around the forest showing that this area was burnt out by a wildfire on this date and this area was burnt out by a wildfire on these dates. And the old-growth forest that was there is no longer there. It has been replaced by young growth, because the fire intensity, due to the forest fuel load build-up, caused the death of that forest and it had to start from scratch again. So, you know, it has not been a good outcome for the forest, and I think it is rather sad to see what has been going on. Putting signs up does not really help the forest terribly well. Then after that we moved to Ararat, and I grew up in the goldfields of Central Victoria.

The CHAIR: Okay. All right. Thanks.

Mrs McARTHUR: Are we finished, or can I ask one more question?

The CHAIR: One more, thanks, Mrs McArthur. You can have it back for one last question.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you very much, Chair. So, Mr Motton, would you say that the fire intensity has coincided with the change in operation of the previous Forests Commission and also the elimination of grazing in the High Country?

Mr MOTTON: Yes, I would have to support that view, and from my discussions with other people that have worked in the High Country I can see that as well. The fact that they stopped doing those regular burn-offs—and I could see that just working in the bush over the last 45 years—led to the fuel load build-up, which of course led to the intensity of the fires. I am not saying you would not have had the fires, but when you have got that amount of fuel load that has built up, let us just say, from 1983 to 2003—you have got 20 years of forest fuel build-up—that can have a massive effect on any wildfire coming through.

Mrs McARTHUR: So basically destroying the old-growth forest.

Mr MOTTON: Yes. It does sound sort of like lawn keeping, but it certainly worked. And our traditional owners were very much a part of that. So I would encourage that sort of process to come back again.

The CHAIR: All right. Thanks very much. Thanks, Rex, for coming along today and helping us to understand the position of the prospectors and miners association. It has been very much appreciated. I would like to thank you for your time and contribution today.

Committee adjourned.