

# TRANSCRIPT

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

### Inquiry into the Environment Protection Amendment (Banning Plastic Bags, Packaging and Microbeads) Bill 2016

Melbourne — 1 December 2016

#### Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Ms Samantha Dunn

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Richard Dalla-Riva

Mr Daniel Young

#### Participating Members

Mr Greg Barber

Mr James Purcell

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Simon Ramsay

Ms Colleen Hartland

#### Staff

Secretary: Mr Michael Baker

#### Witnesses

Mr Trent Williams (affirmed),

Ms Erin Lindwall (affirmed), and

Ms Narelle Huxley (affirmed), Sea Shepherd.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Welcome to the committee inquiry in relation to the Environment Protection Amendment (Banning Plastic Bags, Packaging and Microbeads) Bill 2016. We are hearing evidence from a number of witnesses today, and we have 45 minutes for this particular session.

What I would ask that you do is provide an opening presentation of about 15 minutes in duration if you would like to address the terms of reference of this particular bill, along with anything else that is relevant to the inquiry that we are conducting, and from there we will open it up for questions.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Sure. I, Trent and Narelle are here today representing Sea Shepherd Australia, and we give our 100 per cent support to the proposed bill to ban plastic bags, packaging and microbeads in the state of Victoria. In Sea Shepherd's almost 40 years of existence we have had many campaigns and the organisation has witnessed firsthand issues in international waters with regard to marine debris and plastic waste. In this particular instance we decided to establish the national Sea Shepherd Marine Debris Campaign in February this year — that is when it started — to combat the growing issue of plastics in our oceans and waterways here in Australia, because we saw it as such an increasing problem.

The issue of plastics in our marine environment has widespread community concern, as demonstrated by the number of people who are attending our clean-ups here in Victoria. We have had approximately 850 volunteers come along since February, volunteering around 1700 hours to clean up our beaches all around Port Phillip Bay, also as far-reaching as the Mornington Peninsula, which Trent overseas, and Mallacoota as well.

We are finding about 80 per cent community attendance versus the core Sea Shepherd volunteers. This continues to grow as well. The numbers that we have been seeing are just incredible. We feel that this shows passion and concern everywhere and people want to do something about it. We also tend to pick different spots to do our clean-ups monthly, because we feel the problem is widespread and we want to connect with as many members of the public as possible. We are also garnering some local media publicity, with articles being published quite regularly.

As far as plastic, over 80 per cent of what we collect is plastic and although whole and intact plastic bags do not make up a vast amount of that percentage, the broken-down plastic bags and plastic film remnants — it is truly staggering, what we are collecting there. Just on the weekend at Mordialloc we collected over 1000 pieces of plastic film remnants, which is broken-down plastic bags essentially. That is very dangerous to marine life — in the water obviously it appears like a jellyfish or something of that nature. If we do not change the legislation by banning the bag, packaging and microbeads, all we will ever do is clean up beaches, and we really need to cut the problem off at the source to curb this problem.

Why is the ban important for us? We feel the planet is running out of non-renewable resources such as petroleum, which a lot of plastic bags are made out of. We feel that plastic bags are incredibly toxic to both animals and humans alike, being made from a petrochemical source. Plastics never break down — they just get smaller and smaller and then become microplastics, which marine life ingests. It also leads to the risk that if you consume seafood, there is a good chance that you may be consuming plastic. Plastic in the ocean is responsible for killing hundreds of thousands of animals each year through entanglement, ingestion and suffocation.

We also feel that there are already readily available alternatives that are cost effective and less damaging to the environment, such as cardboard boxes, better bags, fabric bags and so on. So why not just single-use plastic bags? We feel that if we ban single-use plastic bags only, such as what has happened in South Australia, retailers and consumers end up swapping one for the other, and in locations where the single-use plastic bag ban has occurred, such as South Australia, many thicker bags end up in landfill.

We also feel that marine animals cannot distinguish between lightweight plastics and heavy bags, and we also feel that it leads to confusion for consumers and businesses alike, because there is a bit of a grey area as to what is acceptable and what is exempt. Obviously we feel that the exemption for health and medical bags is warranted. We also feel with the biodegradable plastic that it does take a long time to break down and can remain intact long enough to threaten marine life, so it is probably not the best-case scenario to replace the single-use with the biodegradable. Also, you need sometimes industrial compost facilities, not your household compost, to be able to break those down.

Then what about the needless fruit and vegetable packaging? We feel that we never had those conveniences in the past. It just seems to be that more and more of late there is excessive packaging as you go into the

supermarket. Consumers are getting so accustomed to this convenience that they almost will not be able to chop up their own fruit at the end of the day, which is quite ridiculous. We also feel that if packaging is factored into fruit and vegetable costs at present, to be able to remove that may be a saving for industry and consumers alike, so that could be a real positive to present out there.

Microbeads and microplastics: obviously a lot of people know that they look like fish food. Fish or smaller marine animals ingest them and they get passed up the food chain. Obviously that means that humans who consume seafood are at risk as well. They are quite small so they do not get caught in the waste treatment plants, in their filtration systems — they just slip through. Also, once they are in the water they attract toxic substances such as PCBs. Finally, they can be hormone disruptors for humans, which is quite scary.

Just on a side note to the bill, we also think that education and changing consumer behaviour in conjunction with the ban is necessary. Obviously the proposed six-month transition period we feel gives quite adequate time for consumers to get used to the idea and to adopt alternatives if they are communicated to effectively. I think with that with as well effective TV, radio and print advertising to give people a reason why this is occurring and the benefits that there will be for the environment will go a long way as far as people supporting the actual ban. That is probably all I have got at the moment.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Fantastic. Ms Huxley and Mr Williams, did you have anything else that you would like to add by way of general remarks or comments in relation to the issue and more specifically the bill? As a parliamentary committee, we are charged with understanding the nature and extent of the issues the bill proposes to fix and engaging with stakeholders, community groups and organisations and getting their views on the scope and the contemplation of the bill but also understanding the way it sits alongside other initiatives designed to minimise harm or to otherwise improve practices that have an impact on the environment. If there is anything else that you would like to add, we do have the luxury of a bit of time because it is a subcommittee of the inquiry. If you would like to make any general remarks, feel free to do so.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — I look after a specific area of the Mornington Peninsula, being the coordinator of the marine debris team in that particular area. Basically that has been going since August this year, and we have done a number of clean-ups. To back up what Erin said in her brief, we are finding a minimum of 80 per cent of the local communities getting right behind getting these plastics off the beaches and out of the waterways and things like that. People are already doing this on their own initiative and working with organisations such as ourselves. It is growing and growing.

We have found that in a very short space of time in my particular area we have had over 300 people volunteering for only three or four clean-ups, I think. But they are very aware that these clean-ups are a bandaid solution, and everybody feels that they want to attack the problem at the source. A lot of people are commenting on plastic bags and things like that. Many retailers have already switched to biodegradable bags, but, as Erin mentioned, they are very hard to break down and compost and things like that and there are no facilities to do that. So the general consensus from the area that I look after is that the community is very much behind the change and people are already taking their fabric bags and reusable bags and things like that always. So I guess that is an introduction to my particular area.

**Ms HUXLEY** — Just in general in the public — I do the clean-ups with Erin — a lot of the feedback that we get from the public is that they are getting quite frustrated with the amount of particularly plastic packaging on their fruit and vegetables. They are finding that they have got no option, so they are actually forced into purchasing fruit and vegetables that are wrapped in plastic when they actually do not want that. That is just general feedback that we are getting at every beach clean-up we do. I think that is indicative of the environment — that people are becoming more aware and they want to choose the right option but they actually do not have the opportunity to do so. So it is a little bit hard for those people who want to do the right thing when the supermarkets are not enabling them to do so.

**Ms LINDWALL** — We did contribute. At our clean-ups we had the Plastic Bag Free Victoria petition, and we contributed hundreds of signatures to that overall result, which shows that people are only too happy to sign and support that initiative because they are all concerned.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Thank you very much for that overview. I might just start by picking up on a number of things that have come out in not just your submission but the general comments that you have made now. On the one hand we have a group of people who are actively donating their time — you said 80 per cent

of people are from the community as opposed to coming from the marine debris team and from Sea Shepherd more generally — and people are committed to not using as much plastic. They do not want to actually take up the offer of plastic where it is available but feel that it is foisted upon them when they go to the supermarket and choose pre-packaged goods.

There is a disjunct between that aspiration that we have on the ground from people participating in clean-ups and people who are prepared to be proactive and the fact that despite the fact that we have some supermarkets moving to 'biodegradable' products they are still being accepted at the checkout. The question that I have relates to how we get people to change their behaviour such that they are not just not being offered these things but they are not being inconvenienced because they already have their own packaging or they choose five bananas from a stack of bananas and do not put them into one of the thinner plastic bags that are generally available in the supermarket in a roll next to each particular fruit or vegetable item. How do we tackle the gap between people wanting to do more to minimise the impact on the environment caused by plastics — I will move onto microbeads in a minute — and the fact that when they go to the supermarket people still have these ingrained habits around saying, 'Well, I have to get tomatoes, grapefruit, grapes and zucchini, and I will get each one in a standalone plastic bag and head to the checkout, despite the fact that I think that plastic bags are bad'?

**Ms HUXLEY** — It is a behavioural problem that you are dealing with, which needs a comprehensive change management plan attached to it. Because even the people I speak to in the supermarket are totally unaware. They think that those green bags are totally harmless, but there is nothing to educate a consumer on: do you know where that ends up? They think they can put it in their bin and that it goes away, but it does not go away. So there is a gap there around education and change that needs to be addressed, definitely.

**Ms LINDWALL** — I also find that although it is a great initiative, with the REDcycle program outside Coles the bins are often overflowing with plastics.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Yes, I would agree with you, from personal experience. I have in fact often taken bags from there when I have not brought my own for shopping.

**Ms LINDWALL** — The few that I have I am always trying to stuff in. I guess it is a good thing to have a bandaidd solution, but it kind of gives people a bit of an excuse to say, 'Oh, well, I can put it in those soft plastic recycling bins, so I can continue to use as many as I need'. It comes down to education that it is okay to put your fruit and vegetables loose in your basket, even though it might annoy the cashier. That is fine. You can still do that. You do not need to separate everything. It comes even from going into schools and educating children so they can pass that onto their family members, which we do as part of our education talks as well.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — The issue of greenwashing is something that has come up in the context of other witness evidence to this particular inquiry and the idea that if something is biodegradable, then that is a catch-all for being environmentally good. What has your experience been in the conversations that you have had? I note that probably the conversations you have are with a friendlier audience or an audience that is more predisposed to being proactive on environmental measures than not. But how is that conversation rolled out with the people you have been talking to around the distinction between biodegradable and compostable and the circumstances in which those definitions and standards apply?

**Ms LINDWALL** — I think there is confusion. There is so much out there — I get confused, and we are in this world all the time, living and breathing it. But on the definition of biodegradable and compostable, do people actually know that you do need industry-level, commercial compostable services to break these things down? You cannot put it in your backyard compost. Or is there identification between products to show what you can do home composting with or if it has to be industry-level? The same applies with biodegradable: there is a misconception that it breaks down quickly. It does not. So yes, it is greenwashing. People are just not informed, and there are reasons for that, obviously.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So by extension, based on your answer just now and the fact that you have had 80 per cent of community buy-in, you would have people coming to your clean-ups who would think that because they are getting 'biodegradable' packaging, they are doing the right thing environmentally in a way that is either just under or at par with not using plastic at all. Is that a fair sort of thing to think?

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes, I think so.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — I think people are actually really amazed to see those plastic bags on the beaches and the breaking down of them — the plastic bags as well as the biodegradable bags.

We do not just do a beach clean-up. We do what I call a pimped-up beach clean-up. We actually data collect. We put everything out there. We get the community and people that are involved, and we break down everything into items and count numbers and then upload that data. The general community are really, really shocked, and they really get involved. It is not just a handful of us going through this dirty work at the end of the day. They are really surprised and interested, and then they are educated by seeing these statistics and things like that and seeing what sorts of plastics are coming out. There is a massive factor that the biodegradable ones are still being put into our waterways and things like that.

Going back a step, I just wanted to say that in my local community there are many retailers that provide boxes that are left over from the fruit and vegetable department and other boxes from the bottle shop or things like that. I know that when I go shopping there is a box available to me, so I just put my fruit and vegetables in a box. Then that is re-used and re-used and re-used at home until it is at the point where it is compostable.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — The other part to that, though, is that if you are buying grape tomatoes, baby cucumbers and pre-mixed salad — kale slaw and all that sort of thing — they will all come invariably with some form of plastic packaging around them for the sake of unit pricing and cost efficiency.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So that is something that we have also heard evidence on.

**Ms HUXLEY** — As Erin mentioned, we are seeing it growing. We are seeing cauliflower now that is ground up into granules and packed in a bag.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Cauliflower rice, I think — it is the new superfood.

**Ms HUXLEY** — I am just staggered every time I go into the supermarket now to see what else they are doing it with. Basically they are taking control out of the consumer's hands so they cannot do anything themselves. Everything is pre-packaged to the point where you wonder: 'When does it stop?'. Foods like micro herbs are packaged in really thick plastic. Most of the time when I see them in a supermarket they are discounted to \$1 or something, so the environmental — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — In the dead and dying section, you mean?

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes, exactly.

**Ms HUXLEY** — So the environmental cost is massive for basically what will probably be thrown in the bin.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Why can you not do the same as when you are getting your mushrooms — put them in a paper bag? Why can that not be done with spinach and rocket and all that sort of stuff?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Sorry, did that follow on?

**Ms DUNN** — Trent, you talked about uploading data, so it was actually to follow up. Is that where you were going too, Deputy Chair?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Yes. What does the data show? What has it told you? If we see the data as a pie, how is that broken up in terms of different types of waste and packaging and plastics that you are collecting?

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Plastics just go through the roof.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So talk us through what the pie looks like.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — I am trying to think. Over 50 per cent are plastic items — broken-down plastic and things like that. About 20 per cent are whole plastic bags. So that is 70 per cent plastics straightaway.

**Ms LINDWALL** — That is what we seem to find — 70 per cent.

**Ms DUNN** — Before you continue on, in regard to the 20 per cent of whole plastic bags, do you make a distinction between single-use plastic bags and the heavier weight bags?

**Ms LINDWALL** — We do not, no. They are in the one category, as a whole plastic bag, but not lightweight or otherwise.

**Ms DUNN** — No worries.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — We do break down the data into other things like fishing bait bags and that sort of thing, so we are not just talking about supermarket stuff but we are talking about industries as well. So we do make the distinction between those kinds of commercial fishing and recreational fishing, which is different.

**Ms DUNN** — Yes, where it is outside of that sort of straight retail.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — But if we are talking about just the general shopping bags and things like that, the data that we have collected is 20 per cent whole and 50 per cent broken-down pieces of plastic.

**Ms DUNN** — Sorry, you can continue describing the pie. I just wanted to ask about that bit.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So 50 per cent are plastic items and 20 per cent are whole plastic bags.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — That is 19.13.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So let us round that up for the sake of an afternoon discussion.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes, we are happy with that.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — That is the 70 per cent right there. What is the remainder of that gross data there, Trent?

**Ms LINDWALL** — This is actually just plastic items.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Yes, this is a breakdown of just plastic items. So we have got plastic bags, plastic food packaging, film remnants, the foam cups and foam trays and also things like the plastic lids on coffee cups.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Yes.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — To other foam insulation and packaging and other plastic items, which could be bits of plastic strapping or things off toys or just random sorts of things. Then there is a small percentage here of non-plastic items as well.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So in the course of the collections that you have done, I think you indicated there have been over 1400 hours of volunteer work put in to do those clean-ups.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — What is the volume of waste that you have collected during that time?

**Ms LINDWALL** — Total kilos?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Yes.

**Ms LINDWALL** — It has been 3.4 tonnes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — And that includes inorganic and organic matter?

**Ms LINDWALL** — That is everything, yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So how does it vary when you head out to regional Victoria? The reason I gave you the thumbs up when you talked about Mallacoota before is that not only does it have a really good waste

transfer system that kicked off after the community got involved but it is also in Gippsland, which is the area I represent. I am very keen to talk about what the impact of plastics is in and around the marine and riparian areas throughout regional Victoria. Obviously ocean currents and water movement would have an impact in terms of drawing rubbish and waste to the shore.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes. The Mallacoota representative is not with us today, and it is a small kind of family team. So that is probably indicative of the results.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — I think I know a couple of them, actually.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Julie Parker?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Yes, she is very vocal in the community.

**Ms LINDWALL** — She has been really instrumental in driving that clean-up up there. They also do riverways and things like that as well. The numbers are probably a lot smaller because we are getting a higher attendance in Melbourne and the Mornington Peninsula, but just at a glance plastic film remnants stand out and also plastic packaging, food, which is wraps, packets and containers. Yes, they are smaller numbers.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — You are looking at a data grid. From across the table that looks very, very interesting. I cannot read it upside down, but it looks like —

**Ms LINDWALL** — We can give you a copy.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — We would love a copy of that. That would be great. Could you provide that to the secretariat at some point after this hearing?

**Ms LINDWALL** — We will.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — You will get a reminder, so that is all okay.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — But since you know the Mallacoota area, the team have gone out to Jellies Beach, Mallacoota lake, the ‘mulla’ river, Tamboon Inlet beach, the Howe Bight bottom lake — so all around the area in just that one particular region.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — One of the things that we do have to consider is also the convenience. The idea of convenience associated with plastic items and plastic packaging and containers is something which makes sense to people who are tourists or visitors to an area. One of the things that I would like to get more of an understanding of is how we educate people who will be more inclined to see the value of convenience because they are on holidays than people who would perhaps live in an area. We have had evidence from Torquay where people who live in the area are well accustomed and well educated around the importance of making sure that they have their own bags and that they do not use unnecessary packaging if they can avoid it.

But what about the fact that we have got coastal communities that often swell to 10 times their size in peak periods? Often it will be a question of just needing to get the shopping done and just needing to pick up whatever you can in order to keep going with your holiday. How do we change that and how do we tackle that when it comes to people who are not going to be spending any length of time in a community?

**Ms LINDWALL** — I am not sure if the Boomerang Alliance mentioned it, but we went to their Threat Abatement Plan launch on Monday.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Yes, we heard about that.

**Ms LINDWALL** — They did mention that in the Byron shire they have been starting to put bags into —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Mr Angel referred to that before, yes.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Airbnbs and serviced apartments and things like that, which you could extend to caravan parks — a welcome pack or something like that with a reusable bag which doubles as a souvenir. So it is all about providing the people when they arrive at their accommodation an option to be equipped, because when they are on the go and travelling, even internationally, people do not leave with their KeepCup and their

water bottle and their re-usable bag. We do, but we are not the norm. So it is just about that: making that really easy for people and maybe even treating it as a souvenir so it kind of works for both.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — On to microbeads, I am interested in understanding more about the groundswell that was necessary to effect bans on microbeads internationally. What got governments over the line in terms of the compelling business, environmental and economic cases that were made for banning microbeads? And in particular — and I asked this of Jeff Angel, from the Boomerang Alliance, in relation to microbeads — was there any change in market appetite for or market confidence in cleaners and cleansers and floor polishes at either the consumer end of things or right up to the industrial scale when markets changed from the plastic-based microbead to something like a ground-up shell or a kernel or rice bran or apricots or whatever? What has the feedback and response been like in those jurisdictions where that has changed? And what were the things that got those bans over the line?

**Ms LINDWALL** — Do you mean the ones that have happened internationally?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Yes.

**Ms LINDWALL** — I am not as well versed on that as I should be, but I feel that these areas obviously have seen an impact on marine animals. I guess the threat of ingesting that yourself and that risk to you and your family would really resonate, I imagine, with those particular countries. But I am happy to get back to you on that question.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — It is more than just a threat, though, is it not? It is actually happening. I think Mr Angel referred to 85 per cent of marine life having trace plastic in its system and will test for plastic particulates or product.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Exactly, yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — How has the engagement and the community awareness and education worked in those other jurisdictions? If you want to take that on notice, I am very happy for you to do so.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Sure.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — But I would be interested, in terms of the work that Sea Shepherd does internationally, to better understand this issue. What worked, what did not and what has the consequence been of those bans? Trent, you look like you want to say something.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Part of my role volunteering with Sea Shepherd is also education and school talks and things like that. I usually take a container of a product that has got the microbeads in it so people can see them. It is just an educational awareness. They are absolutely shocked about the conditioner or shampoo or lotion — there are actually plastic remnants and microbeads inside them. They can see them, and then we can have a jar of microbeads that were picked up off the beach and just say, ‘Look, that and that are the same thing’.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — What you mean ‘a jar of microbeads that you can pick up off the beach’?

**Ms LINDWALL** — Pre-production pellets.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Pellets, yes. Sorry.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Okay. I was thinking, ‘Microbeads — it would take a very long time to pick microbeads up off a beach’.

**Ms DUNN** — You have got dedicated volunteers!

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — That is a day with a magnifying glass you are never going to get back again!

**Ms LINDWALL** — A little bit different but similar.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Yes. Sorry about the terminology.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — No, that is all right.



**Mr WILLIAMS** — But just to give them the idea of, ‘This is the sort of thing that’s getting out into the waterways and on the beaches and affecting the sea life and the seabirds as well’ — that sort of thing. So education is a massive thing that we are involved in.

**Ms HUXLEY** — I still think when people pick up a product they do not read the labelling and they do not really know whether it has microbeads in it or not, and for those companies that have changed to have a product that has natural ingredients and does not have microbeads it is really a selling point for them at this stage to promote it as: ‘This has no microbeads’. That has really got a lot of the companies across the line, or they see that at some point in time they are going to have to change anyway so why not do it now rather than wait to be forced to do it?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — If I were to play devil’s advocate on microbeads, and I am going to, you could argue that the presence of microbeads in the ecosystem is a matter of fact but not something which necessarily creates a problem until such time as it reaches a critical mass. I note that you have said that it attracts toxins — and that sounds like a really good, solid ‘This would pass the front page of a newspaper’ test in terms of saying that is bad — but could you not argue if you were pro-microbeads, which I am not, so let us just be very clear about that, ‘Well, it’s actually just like having more sand in the ocean. It will work its way through micro-organisms. It might be ingested by fish in the same way that you get a bit of sand in an oyster or a piece of fish that you eat or you might get a bit of mud in your spinach. That is actually just something that features in the environment but does not in and of itself cause any harm’? What would you say to that?

**Ms HUXLEY** — But do we know that? What is the science behind that — to say that if I am ingesting this and it is accumulating in my body it is not going to have an impact on me?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — We have had some evidence that says that marine excreta will contain plastics but that some of that will work its way through an organism’s system and thereby be picked up as part of the rest of the ecosystem to make its way back into other organisms. But in and of itself how does the presence of plastic in microbead form constitute a health problem? I am playing devil’s advocate here. What do people say in support of the argument that microbeads are of a sufficiently damaging nature, either on their own or with a build-up to a certain aggregate point, that they should be banned?

**Ms** — I feel that there is information out there about the substances that they are made out of being cancer-causing endocrine disruptors, and that is quite readily available information. I guess until we do an audit of the population or call out for volunteers to test their body and fat content if they are ingesting seafood, we will not know exactly, but that is probably where some research needs to be done.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Does it seem then like a more refined argument to say that there is no net loss or damage or disadvantage from using organic abrasives in a product as opposed to microbeads when the organic materials in and of themselves are demonstrably, conclusively, not going to cause harm? I am trying to work my way through the reasoning of this, because this is what this inquiry is about. Is it the case that abrasives which have been used in cleansers and scrubs and cleaners and floor polishes for ages, made of kernels or bran or whatever, will not when they enter the waterways create the same problems as microbeads? And do they degrade to such an extent that they are no longer perceptible?

**Ms HUXLEY** — Not being a scientist, but on balance I would say that if you have got an alternative that is natural and is not a chemical, that would be better. I will not say every single substance is in this instance good to be in the ocean. But I think when someone is creating a product then, yes, definitely you would want an organic material as opposed to something that is a chemical, because again if we do not stop, we are continuing every day to put millions of microbeads into the ocean. We just do not know the impact.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — You mentioned a critical point — at what stage are we aware that we are going to reach that critical point? If we have got this information now and we already know that plastics are ingested by 85 to 90 per cent of marine life, are we going to wait for that critical point? We have already got the knowledge, and we are building on that education. You can liken it to things like mercury in tuna and that sort of thing. There are fishing villages that we have experienced in Japan that have lived off marine life, and there are diseases and sicknesses and things like caused by mercury. As an example, we know that now and we are reducing that impact.

We know the impact — and there is an impact — of microbeads on marine life. We are building on that education. We do know that it causes problems. So are we not already at that critical point where we can make a change and not sacrifice human life or the quality of human life because of it? That is my question back to you — what point is that critical time? We know this stuff now, and we can change it.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Very good. Thank you very much for all of those answers. I will hand over to Mr Dalla-Riva.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Thank you, Team Debris.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Marine debris.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Please do not be offended by the way in which you have just been addressed by a member of the parliamentary committee.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — I just have a couple of questions. The results that you have got from the data: have industry or retail been provided with that sort of evidence?

**Ms LINDWALL** — Our results are all recorded in Tangaroa Blue's database, so Sea Shepherd information has not specifically been provided to industry. But I imagine that Tangaroa Blue are using our data in conjunction with data from many others.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — One of the concerns, obviously, is ensuring that there is an industry understanding that if there is a change, they need to be part of the solution, not just imposed.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Definitely.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — The other one is that you said education is better than enforcement — at least, that is what I have written. What is proposed in the bill is a pure enforcement process — banning things. As I said to some previous witnesses, cars have consequences, but we do not ban cars. Parliament does not ban cars for the obvious reason. It is a combination of education and banning certain activities. Obviously microbeads are a significant issue. I am still trying to grapple with the issue of plastic bags in the sense that it sounds easy, but I am like one of those stupid consumers who buys the cauliflower now.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Do you buy that cauliflower?

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — I buy the cauliflower.

**Ms DUNN** — Richard!

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Let the record reflect the disdain from around the table.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — You were not here before, but I also buy the organic zucchini in the plastic polywrap.

**Ms HUXLEY** — It is not organic, then.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — The issue is that I am reflective of what I guess you would call a 'normal consumer' who is adjusting to life demands, smaller families, time constraints and convenience. I have worked in retail, and I understand that they are there to make a profit as well. I am just trying to grapple with the notion of banning plastic bags. I hear what you said, and we have heard evidence about the fact that they do not break down and they cause a lot of damage. There are other forms of plastic that are utilised in consumer processes now, including bagged cauliflower. For \$3.50 you get two bags of — —

**Ms LINDWALL** — But how much is actually then wasted? Because a lot of people fall for that, and it is cheaper to buy — —

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — It is cheaper to buy a whole cauliflower and cut it down, but I am one of those time-poor people who would prefer to sit down rather than cut up a bit of cauliflower. But I will sit down for 3 hours watching television, and that is consumer nature. I am just trying to reconcile consumer changes with the demands of banning something for the sake of banning it.

I am very interested in some of the evidence you have provided for the record. That is probably the first time. We have had people talk about it, but for me this is pretty much evidence based, so I would love to see the evidence. For me that reinforces the argument more than: 'I think it's bad' or 'Plastic bags are going to be around for 1000 years'. Well, I will let you know in 1000 years if that is true or not. The reality is that there is some tangible evidence that you have provided, which may help in our deliberations.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — That is why that grid is important that you wanted.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — The grid is important. Education is important. You would agree with that. Obviously industry and retail need to be engaged. The one thing I was trying to go through, and you did discuss it here, will be fleshed out in the data that is provided. In the 'marine debris — plastic', I am interested in the 'other plastic items' — that is not plastic bags.

**Ms LINDWALL** — No.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — That would be, as you mentioned before, toys and other things.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Obviously we are not asking for Parliament to ban toys just before Christmas.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Is that what you are asking for? Are you suggesting that that should occur?

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — I heard that was the rumour from the Labor Party.

**Ms DUNN** — Do not let them go into the environment, probably.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — It is not a rumour from the Labor Party. You tried to say that we were banning Christmas carols, and you lost out on that one as well.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Just so you are aware, the plastic category entails things such as cigarette butts because they have got plastic filters in them. That is a massive part of that percentage, to be honest, because we are doing beach cleans. Also you are looking at straws, cups and things like that as well as toys and other packaging, like personal care items and things like that. It involves all the fishing items as well — bait bags and plastic lures —

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Which you would expect on the beach.

**Ms LINDWALL** — at those particular locations. Also there are the remnants of plastic and foam. Foam is considered part of that as well, foam plastics.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — I think the evidence there would be quite good to see.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes. We will get that to you.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Richard, I guess I wanted to make the point about education. We have also got that transition period to use to work with community retailers and things like that to transition, educate, advertise and market these changes, giving people other options as we transition.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — That was my argument. To say we are just going to ban it without some industry input is not the way to go. Mr Melhem raised an issue before that, for example, Target banned plastic bags, but if you now go into Target, they have got them back.

**Ms LINDWALL** — They are back, yes.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — There must have been some consumer or some behavioural changes that allowed —

**Ms HUXLEY** — Or lack of change.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — or a lack of change that allowed Target to go back to having bags. For us it is probably worthwhile examining why they brought back plastic bags when they had stopped it. You mentioned

cardboard boxes. I thought of Bunnings. When they set up their structure Bunnings had no plastic bags at all, but they had all the boxes there. I do that; I grab them. There is a big overlay of education. The big challenge of course is the plastic bags in a supermarket where you have got 1000 little fiddly bits that you have to get home in some way. That is the harder bit.

**Ms LINDWALL** — For most supermarkets, as we have said, all the produce comes in cardboard boxes, I imagine, which gets discarded. It is just a matter, I guess, of finding a space within reach of the consumer out the front to have those available — which is at no cost.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Yes, and that is the industry buy-in or the retail buy-in.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Obviously we are all consumers. I have got three kids, I go shopping all the time and I live in one of those places where the population increases during the holiday periods. I live in Mount Martha, so the population booms during the summer months. It is the same thing. It is easy. You take in your reusable bags, put the loose items in the shopping trolley and at the check-out they just go straight into your own reusable bags. To me it is just that simple. My kids are all aware of that, and they are great. They help out and they go, ‘Okay, I’m going to carry this bag and you carry that bag’, both taking them in empty and out after the check-out.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes, it is habit building. A big part of our campaign is about that — changing consumer behaviour. If the amendment is to take place, we are 100 per cent behind helping to get that message out there, whether it be through social media, face-to-face communication outreach or education in schools. We find that is our responsibility as well.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — One final question. The obligations in the bill are for 1 March. Given the enormous amount of cultural change that is needed, not only with the legislators but also with the consumer and the industry, do you think that March is probably a bit premature?

**Ms HUXLEY** — I think it would be in terms of an announcement, ‘This is our plan: we are going to ban plastic bags’, but as you said, if it is six months after that, there is that transition period and that gives you that six months to make sure that the right measures have taken place, the right conversations have been held, there are forums to discuss what other options there are and businesses are set up to accommodate these changes.

It is not just a case of at 1 March, ‘Sorry, no more plastic bags. Fend for yourself’. I think we need to have a transition period that is very well structured to make sure that people are engaged and accepting of it, because the worst thing is to have resentment around a big change. It is a big change. We were there 20 years ago when we did not have all of these plastic bags. When I was growing up we certainly did not have plastic bags — we had paper bags or we had our own bags that we took to the supermarket — and things were not covered in plastic. I am not saying that the demands of life were the same back then, but we did not know any different and we were fine with it. So I think we need to start to transition back to that stage when we were not reliant on plastic.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — It made me think of the giant paper Tuckerbag bags that used to exist.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Exactly.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — I used to put them on my head and make funny masks. Anyway, that has just gone into the Hansard transcript.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Bring Tucker back!

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — It is like that movie *Tammy*, but we will not talk about that.

**Ms DUNN** — It is a wonderful trip down memory lane, and I can only hope that those bags are not manufactured out of native forest pulp, but that is another inquiry for another time. Thank you so much for your submission today, and also I thank the Sea Shepherd for their tireless efforts on protecting marine ecosystems, and that is whether it is in the bay, Mallacoota or the Southern Ocean. I thank you very much for the work that you do.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Thank you.

**Ms DUNN** — I am interested in the data you collect, because it is very interesting in terms of what that is revealing as being washed up on shorelines. Is that accessible to the public at all? Who actually has access to that data?

**Ms LINDWALL** — Obviously ours is fed into the Tangaroa Blue database, which in a general sense is available to anyone. The Sea Shepherd data is not, but we do reveal it occasionally when we reach certain targets — for example, three-quarters of a million items picked up and things like this.

**Ms DUNN** — When there are significant things to report.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes, but we do not have it accessible to the public, but I do not see why we cannot if the need is there.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — We do highlight through social media some of the — I use the term — highlights with our beach clean-ups and things like that.

**Ms DUNN** — The headline things.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — You say, ‘Wow, this was amazingly disgusting that we had a beach clean-up today and we had 127 people turn up and in 1 hour we picked up 343 kilos off Mount Martha south beach three days after the council cleaned that beach, and some of the top items were plastic remnants, you know, broken down plastic bags, cigarette butts, and these are the numbers’, but as Erin said, that data is uploaded into the national database, which is accessible by anyone.

**Ms DUNN** — Yes. Okay, that is great.

**Ms LINDWALL** — And upon request I am sure they could give that data to certain organisations, or we can just give it to you.

**Ms DUNN** — I would be very happy to have it for the committee, but I was just thinking as a greater public interest as well. I am wondering in terms of the beach clean-ups whether there are some consistencies. I assume you find more rubbish on the beaches in the bay than what you do on ocean beaches. Is that a fair assumption?

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Yes, and also different kinds of rubbish. Obviously in the bay we are getting a lot more of the general consumer items and things like that, and with the movement of the bay over the last months, everything is working in this clockwise direction, so we are finding a lot more on the south-eastern beaches and around the bayside area as well. Then we get a lot more industry items over in Williamstown and the Jawbone Marine Sanctuary.

**Ms DUNN** — So it is reflective of what is happening. It is a proximity thing.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Yes. I know your question is about areas within the bay and then coastal ones, but we have also got data that within the bay there are different types of marine debris, plastics and things like that. And we have got all the data, so we can say, ‘Okay, here’s the data from Williamstown, Jawbone sanctuary, where there is no general public on the beach, but it has all been washed ashore or come from the local factories and things like that to a very popular public beach like Mount Martha south beach, where you are getting a lot more, I guess, of those consumer items and things like that’. We are also finding that with the currents we pick up things like parking tickets. In Mount Martha I can pick up a parking ticket on the beach that is from Hobsons Bay council.

**Ms DUNN** — Yes, because there is the tide — it eddies around.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — You can actually detect where it is going as well, which is just, you know — oh, my God! So even within the bay there are a lot of different types of plastic, but still the majority of the data is coming down to those plastic bags and remnants of plastic bags.

**Ms DUNN** — Yes, so there is a consistency regardless. That is how it falls, no matter which beach — —

**Mr WILLIAMS** — The consistency is there, but you can also see the difference with other items that are still a big issue, but the consistency of plastic bags is still there.

**Ms DUNN** — In terms of the prevalence of plastic bags, the bill talks about banning single-use plastic bags, but to your mind do you think that there should be, I guess, broader laws around banning all plastic bags because of what you are actually finding washed up on beaches?

**Mr WILLIAMS** — I do personally.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Yes, I do. I think it leads to, as I said, a grey area and confusion for consumers and businesses alike when one thing is banned but there are maybe some loopholes that you can get around and replace one with the other. As I said, in places that they have done this single-use plastic bag ban, they have found that heavier, more durable bags have been on the increase as well as purchases of garbage bin liners and things like that, because people do not have that option anymore.

**Ms HUXLEY** — Back to Trent's point earlier, it is like marine life do not know the difference. Our customers, which are potentially marine life, do not know the difference between a thin bag and a thick bag.

**Ms DUNN** — Yes, a single-use bag versus a so-many-micron plastic bag.

**Ms LINDWALL** — 'I won't eat that one'!

**Ms HUXLEY** — We are still going to be picking them out of the ocean, but ideally we do not want to be going out every month — or it would be every day, basically, if you are just walking around picking up bags all the time — because we would just continue to pick up rubbish all the time. We need to stop it, and then we will have plenty of other things to pick up, no doubt, but that is one thing that ideally we would like to stop.

**Ms DUNN** — Yes, it is stopping the supply chain, I guess, at the source point.

**Ms LINDWALL** — It is a good start to ban single-use plastic bags, of course, but I just feel that, yes, there would be a grey area, and it would be quite easy to get around using alternatives for businesses and consumers.

**Ms DUNN** — That is great. That is very true.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Yes, and I reiterate the point that marine life and birdlife do not know the difference. At Brighton dog beach there was a gull found dead on the beach with plastic all around it. There are the penguins on Safety Beach, down near Dromana, and there was a seal we found on Balnarring Beach in Western Port that had plastic around its tail — you know, a plastic bag caught around its tail. So, yes, there is definitely an effect, and plastic does not have any distinction to the animal it is affecting.

**Ms DUNN** — No, that is right. That is great. Thank you so much.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — I just want to follow up with a question, because it was raised: do you track where the bags are coming from? Obviously you said that at Hobsons Bay you found somebody's — —

**Ms LINDWALL** — The ticket.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — The ticket. But do you follow, like, a bag? I know it is hard if it is a generic bag.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Yes, if things are labelled, we do attempt to track that. I know that when we are doing a breakdown of plastic straws, for instance, we will mark the difference between unbranded straws — and I am just going to pick on McDonald's for a second because it is easier to identify. So we might say, 'Okay, then, I'm just using random numbers'. We might say, 'Okay, we've picked up 325 straws, but 272 of them were McDonald's branded'. So we can actually break down that data. We do have within the data that we upload another branded section for the plastic strapping — does it come from Coles or that sort of thing?

**Ms LINDWALL** — Bait bags.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — It is getting harder and harder to track plastic bags, because they are not all like they used to be, like when it was Safeway, Coles or Tuckerbag — —

**Ms LINDWALL** — Branded, yes.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — They are not all branded anymore, so it is getting harder and harder to track them, because they are just using generic ones. Even the biodegradable ones are not branded to the particular store or the retailer, so that data is getting harder and harder to source, but there is — —

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — But that would be worthwhile, too, because the argument is that plastic bags remain in the environment for a very, very long time, so is there some data to say, ‘Okay, we’ve tracked a plastic bag that has come from Williamstown that we found on the Mornington Peninsula or other some area’?

**Mr WILLIAMS** — As I said, it is more the strapping and things like that that are branded, that hold together.

**Ms LINDWALL** — The bait bags, yes.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — And it is the bait bags and stuff, where we can track it back to producers.

**Ms DUNN** — Yes, you can work it out.

**Ms HUXLEY** — Yes, and the majority of the plastic that we generally pull up is remnant by that stage. There are circumstances where we have picked it up and it is so brittle, because it has been sitting somewhere, that it has broken into a million pieces, basically.

**Ms DUNN** — It just crumbles.

**Ms HUXLEY** — You go to try and pick something up, and it just shatters.

**Ms LINDWALL** — A lot of it is the grey single-use plastic bags, yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Can I just ask a question, too, in relation to marine life and damage. You might want to take this on notice. Have you ever had an instance of a marine animal or bird being injured or killed because of cornstarch or rice product packaging or a plastic bag that it has ingested before that product has degraded?

**Ms LINDWALL** — No, not particularly.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Again this comes back to the utility of cornstarch, for example. We had evidence before that you can put wet stuff in one of those cornstarch bags for a few days and it will not actually disintegrate. Therefore the same reasoning applies where a turtle or a fish is not going to know the difference between a single-use plastic, a single-use biodegradable or one of the heavier bags such that if it ingests a cornstarch bag it might also still die. Anything that you can provide to the committee on that particular point around risk and damage to marine environments because of non-plastic packaging that has been introduced as an alternative would be great.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Sure.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — If a fish or a turtle ingested that cornstarch bag, it is going to have the same effect. It is going to feel fed, it is going to feel full and it is not getting the nutrition and vitamins that it needs from its normal — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — That is where again, if there is any further information that you can provide on that component of the alternative, that would be great. We are, however, hopelessly over time, which says as much about your evidence as anything else. Thank you very much for appearing. You will receive a transcript of today’s hearing, and there are certain things that you have agreed to provide on notice to the secretariat.

**Ms LINDWALL** — Of course.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — That would be fantastic if you could provide that, and we will go from there. Thank you very much.

**Ms LINDWALL** — No problem. Thank you very much for your time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**