

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Melbourne — 5 September 2016

Members

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Witnesses

Mr Peter Campbell, president, and

Mr Charles Ablitt, vice-president, Bushwalking Victoria.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Campbell and Mr Ablitt, for coming in today. Just before we pass to you, I understand the secretariat has asked you to provide a presentation to us for about 10 minutes, and then the rest of the time gives us an opportunity to ask you questions. Just before you go on with your presentation, I need to let you know that this hearing is being recorded, and a copy of the transcript will be provided to you to check for accuracy prior to it being publicly distributed. Also, what you say in this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, but once the hearing is over that parliamentary privilege is no longer afforded. On that note, thank you again for coming. We are looking forward to hearing the presentation.

Mr CAMPBELL — Thank you, Chair. I might start by introducing myself. I am Peter Campbell. I am the president of Bushwalking Victoria, elected this year. My colleague here, Charlie Ablitt, is the vice-president. You are in your second year as vice-president, I believe?

Mr ABLITT — Second year, yes.

Mr CAMPBELL — I have been bushwalking and been active with search and rescue since I was a child. I was born in 1960. I think my first bushwalk was down at the Prom in about 1970 with my uncle and extended group there, and I have been bushwalking ever since, along with ski touring and some other activities.

Just an overview about Bushwalking Victoria: it is an association that basically covers around 60 clubs. Most of them are bushwalking clubs, but some of them are outdoors clubs as well which do activities more than bushwalking. Around 8000 people are caught up or associated with the clubs. We have individual members of Bushwalking Victoria as well. I think the number there is 300?

Mr ABLITT — Yes, 300 — up to 350.

Mr CAMPBELL — Three hundred, and that is constantly growing now. But overall we represent around 250 000 people who bushwalk, which is the single largest user group on public land. Bushwalking activities pre-date the existence of Bushwalking Victoria, which was formerly known as the Federation of Victorian Walking Clubs. They have been bushwalking for over 100 years, so there is a lot of heritage associated with the activities.

Moving on to the submission, or our position, if you like, we regard invasive and feral animals as a major threat to biodiversity because they are changing and destroying landscapes and they are not part of the natural ecosystem. Actually the scientific evidence is that they are the no. 1 cause of native animal extinctions — for example — in Australia, so it is a very serious problem. We would also put to you that the current business-as-usual approach to eradicating or controlling feral animals is not having a significant effect, so we are looking at exponentially increasing numbers of deer, especially sambar. There is also a major wild horse problem. The wild horse problem I have personal experience with. I was on a search. I am also the convener of Bush Search and Rescue, which is a standing committee of Bushwalking Victoria. There are about 200 volunteers regularly doing search and rescue for Victoria Police search and rescue. My colleague Charlie is or was the convener of the bushwalking trails committee. How many volunteers have you got?

Mr ABLITT — We have about 200 at the moment. It is actually BTC — Bushwalking Tracks and Conservation. We get out and we clear the tracks. I just had a successful weekend, if I might be so bold as to tell you. From Roaring Meg in the south part of the Prom, if you know it, around to Waterloo Bay, 21 people cleared that track, so that is now open for the influx of tourists over the summer period. We do that right throughout the portfolio of Parks Vic and also DELWP.

The CHAIR — Well done.

Mr CAMPBELL — So there is program of trail maintenance that Bushwalking Victoria supplies volunteers for and organises volunteers, along with the search and rescue contingent. I have encountered deer on a search, or evidence of a deer. There was a search for a missing hunter around the Tomahawk

Creek area. He unfortunately was not located, but there was evidence of a lot of deer damage. So we have some examples and feedback from people in the clubs about specific examples of deer damage.

The recent significant reductions in Parks Victoria's budget we believe have greatly compromised the organisation's ability to effectively measure and reduce invasive animals. With those budget cuts there are not enough people on the ground. They are not actually measuring the problems, so we do not actually know definitively how many deer there are, but anecdotally there are a lot. There are increasing numbers. There are motorists hitting them in cars and bushwalkers are seeing them, whereas previously that did not used to be the case.

While eradication of invasive animals on the mainland might be difficult, there are opportunities to completely eradicate invasive animals in some areas, such as Snake Island, which has come to our attention recently. There is clear evidence of the increasing severity of landscape-scale environmental damage caused by invasive animals, but we are in favour of more research to actually determine how many animals and how much damage. Bushwalking Victoria is not aware of any current eradication programs for invasive animals, and the limited control programs that have been implemented have been implemented inconsistently to date, so we are not seeing a lot of focus on that. That is associated, I think, with the cuts to Parks Victoria.

Recreational bushwalkers have reported some alarming close encounters with deer shooters in some national parks, including along sections of the Alpine walking track. I will mention the significance of that later in the presentation. We have done a quick refresh of our policy, because we had a policy on wild horses but we did not have a lot on invasive animals. So the board has considered this, and we have got some draft policy that is hot off the press, so to speak.

We support the classification of the following invasive animals species as feral pest animals on public land, including national parks: deer, goats, pigs, foxes, horses, rabbits, dogs, cats and introduced rats and mice. We see those as the big-ticket items. I guess the key there is that they are feral and pest animals. None of those should be classified as game animals in our opinion. They are feral pest animals, and there needs to be appropriate management and eradication programs in place. We support the humane eradication of these invasive and feral animals from public land, including national parks.

We recognise that shooting is an effective method of eradicating these animals, and Bushwalking Victoria supports shooting as part of pest control and eradication programs, organised and supervised by land management authorities that use licensed professionals and/or suitably qualified land management staff. You will notice that has got a professional flavour to it, and the keyword there is 'eradication'.

Bushwalking Victoria considers that the safety of all users of public land is of paramount concern, noting that all shooting activities on public land pose very significant risks. We accept that the closure of some areas of national parks and public land is required while shooting is used during eradication programs, noting that this has a major impact on bushwalkers who wish to access these areas. Whilst they are closed, people cannot go in there. The converse is not the case. If someone is going on bushwalks in there, that does not result in the closure of the areas.

We support targeting all invasive animals during closures. We are not in favour of having a closure and just saying, 'We're going to shoot deer'. If there are foxes in there and there are rabbits in there, the opportunity should be taken to deal with as many as possible. We accept there is a long history of shooting of deer by recreational shooters in some sections of some protected areas on a seasonal basis. We are aware that that does happen, but we do not regard recreational shooting of invasive and feral animals as an effective long-term method for eradication, as recreational shooters often leave a residual population of some animals because typically they want to come back next year and shoot again. We oppose increasing the areas available for recreational shooting in protected areas due to the danger that shooting poses to bushwalkers and the potential closure of those areas.

We also believe that hunting with dogs in protected areas should not be allowed under any circumstances, and we support increase funding, as I mentioned earlier, for Parks Victoria and DELWP to improve

research and investigation of biological control agents for deer, which are obviously potentially the solution to the problem but they currently do not exist, as far as we are aware, and conduct programs to eradicate and reduce the numbers. If eradication is not practical, then there should be attempts made to reduce numbers.

That is the submission. I have got some specific examples around sightings of animals. I will just summarise those. In and the O'Shannassy aqueduct, close to Melbourne — an easy day trip — there have been deer sighted in that area; in Buangor park there is deer; at the Snowgums lookout there is evidence of pigs in that area as well; and at the Beeripmo campground in the west of the state. Feral goats have been a problem in the Lerderderg State Park for decades, and nobody seems to be taking any control measures. In 2008 a person counted 50 goats along a stretch. They cite the specific location, and the native vegetation species, which I will not read out, is listed.

There is a comment here about Parks Victoria needing adequate funding. There is illegal hunting occurring in national parks and evidence that feral pigs have been established in the Wombat State Forest. The person was advised by Parks Victoria staff that piglets have actually been released there to establish a population for hunting purposes — illegally, which is — —

The CHAIR — Sorry, what was that? Was that through word of mouth?

Mr CAMPBELL — This was someone who was talking to a parks ranger. It was word of mouth. They did not see the piglets, but they are aware of the issue around pigs in the Wombat forest, where there previously was not and there suddenly is. They have appeared. If there was further research into that and DNA testing was done on animals, that would provide more evidence about if populations were being transplanted for hunting purposes. There should be a public education campaign about feral animals and the need for professional culling. I cited my own example about the Tomahawk Creek region. I have also seen large feral goat populations in the base of cliffs in the Grampians back in the days when I was rock climbing, and they were having some significant impact there. Those specific examples the committee can look at in more detail. I will make sure you have got the appropriate documentation. They concludes my presentation. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you; that is very helpful. We have heard this morning a bit of a divide, I guess, between the professional invasive animal eradicators and the recreational hunters. Because the nature of the problem of invasive animals is so big, do you see any possibility of having all organisations being involved in the eradication of invasive animals?

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes. If there is an eradication program, recreational shooters could play a role in it. I would not say, though, that the program would consist of recreational shooters saying that they are going to go in and get rid of feral animals, because the evidence is that they do not exterminate them. They do not eradicate them. They shoot a few, and then they come out because they want to go back the following year. The situation we want to avoid is that the program is recreational shooters going in each year to shoot a few animals in a park — and the park being closed for those purposes — leaving animals behind and then coming back the next year and shooting some more. That is not eradication. That is maintaining a game population.

The CHAIR — But if it was in some organised way they could be used as well as?

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes. In the same way as we provide volunteers for search and rescue. There are professional search and rescue, police and some SES employees are professional and there are volunteers that back them up. The recreational shooters could provide a volunteer component to an eradication program. But the key there is it is an eradication program, not an annual hunt.

Mr YOUNG — Thank you, guys, for coming in and presenting. You just said that the evidence shows that hunters do not go in to eradicate and that they leave a few for next year. What evidence are you talking about when you suggest that?

Mr CAMPBELL — The fact that the deer populations are booming. Despite the fact that there is recreational shooting occurring, they are not actually controlling the animals.

Mr YOUNG — If hunters were not going in there and taking, even if it is the portion that they take, deer populations would not be booming anyway?

Mr CAMPBELL — Well, they are booming. They need to be eradicated.

Mr YOUNG — We have had a lot of evidence to suggest that deer at the moment are in populations so large that we will never eradicate them. That is why we have moved on to control methods. The point I am trying to make is that regardless of whether hunters take a percentage, if the population is booming, what difference does it make if hunters are there or not?

Mr CAMPBELL — The difference it makes is if recreational hunters go into an area and it is closed for that purpose then every other user is excluded from that area, and they are not actually making a significant impact compared to that exercise being done as eradication under professionals. So the keywords that I used were that we support shooting as part of a pest control and eradication program organised and supervised by land management authorities that use licensed professionals and/or suitably qualified land management staff, with some volunteer component. When we have a search, and I am on search and rescue, I do not just say, 'I'll add in my own car and start looking'. I am operating under the command of the police. Similarly with the BTAC crew. They do not just go out there with their chainsaws and start chopping down whatever they like. There is Parks Victoria management of that, so that things are done in an appropriate fashion.

Mr YOUNG — You are right; you used a lot of keywords there. But when you are talking about the effectiveness of professional shooting, what evidence do you have to suggest that that is better than what recreational hunters are doing?

Mr CAMPBELL — The evidence I would cite would be in the Northern Territory where they successfully eradicated water buffalo.

Mr YOUNG — The Northern Territory is a very different situation from what we have got here.

Mr CAMPBELL — Very different, but they had a feral population and there were attempts made to control that population over a long period of time and it was not succeeding. So they embarked on an eradication program and that fixed the problem and that was done predominantly by professional shooters.

Mr YOUNG — With our terrain in Victoria, professional shooters cannot have the impact that they can in the Northern Territory, where it is open and you fly over it in helicopters. We just simply cannot use those mechanisms. If professional shooters are not as effective, what evidence are you using to suggest that they are better here than recreational shooters?

Mr CAMPBELL — The evidence would be that someone who is a professional shooter is going to be, I would say, more methodical, perhaps better equipped and more efficient than recreational hunters. Recreational hunters typically would go out and kill a couple of deer and bring them back. They are looking for a trophy or something. They are not actually looking at large-scale extermination — and that is what is required if you are going to run an eradication program.

Mr YOUNG — You are suggesting that, but what evidence have you got to suggest that professional shooters are having more of an impact? We have just had an industry representative body here that could not even give us figures on what they are taking, whereas we know exactly how many animals are being taken by recreational shooters.

Mr CAMPBELL — In my submission I said that part of the problem is that we do not have this evidence. What we are saying is that there needs to be some funding into research that will actually elicit this information, because I do not have it at my fingertips.

Mr YOUNG — But you have already formed an opinion, without the evidence?

Mr CAMPBELL — I have formed an opinion that professional shooters, on balance, will be more effective if they are tasked to do it and there is funding available. Right now our understanding is that there is not funding available, and therefore it is not happening. It is actually a moot point at this point in time.

Mr YOUNG — What areas are closed down for hunting that would otherwise be used by bushwalkers?

Mr CAMPBELL — Which areas? There are parts of an area around I think the Avon Wilderness. I think parts of that are closed.

Mr YOUNG — Is that all?

Mr CAMPBELL — That is what I am aware of at this point in time.

Mr YOUNG — It is not a very large area or a very long list of areas. Did you know that Wilson's Prom was closed for three days when they did hog deer program last year?

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes. There was just an exercise down at Wilsons Prom, yes.

Mr YOUNG — Apart from that, there is only the one area that you are not really sure about where it is?

Mr CAMPBELL — In the Avon Wilderness, as far as I am aware, there are closures there for shooting, and there was just one at Wilsons Promontory.

Mr YOUNG — At Wilsons Prom, we understand they closed that down because it is a smaller area in the scheme of our natural parks and public lands in Victoria. It is also a high visitation area, with a lot of people going in there and using it. So it is appropriate, maybe, for safety reasons to close that down. In areas that are not like Wilsons Prom, that are big, vast and have low visitation, you mentioned that there are risks and dangers. What are some of those risks and dangers?

Mr CAMPBELL — People getting shot.

Mr YOUNG — How many people have been shot by recreational hunters in Victoria?

Mr CAMPBELL — I am not aware of any, but I am aware of people who have been camped on the alpine walking track and they have had shooters walk right past their tent, armed with loaded rifles. This was a national park area where they should not have been. They have also found illegal camps that they have set up for shooting purposes, where they go into the national park adjacent to or right on the alpine walking track. They are setting up these camps and conducting shooting exercises from there.

Mr YOUNG — But there has actually been no incident?

Mr CAMPBELL — There have been incidences of — I myself have heard gunshots when I have been in the bush, in the vicinity of the Jamieson forest. I am talking many years ago now, so I would not cite it as recent evidence. There are people who have been in the area where shooting has been conducted.

Mr YOUNG — So what evidence do you have to suggest that that is a safety issue? I have been in lots of areas where there has been shooting.

Mr CAMPBELL — Guns kill people.

Mr YOUNG — You just said you are not aware of anyone who has been shot by a recreational hunter.

Mr CAMPBELL — But you asked me what evidence have I got that that is a safety issue. If you are in an area where people are shooting guns and you get hit by a bullet, then you will be killed.

Mr YOUNG — But it has never happened.

Mr CAMPBELL — That does not mean it will not happen, with all due respect.

Mr YOUNG — What you are talking about is perceived risk that you have got no evidence of even existing. And might I just add that guns do not kill people — people kill people.

Mr CAMPBELL — Guns do kill people when someone pulls the trigger.

Mr YOUNG — That is right — people. But at the same time you have not supplied us with any evidence to suggest that there has been a safety issue.

Mr ABLITT — Can I comment on that one? There is a great increase now of people getting out into the bush. It is being promoted not only by ourselves but also by our health department here. They are encouraging us to help people along that way. What is actually happening is this: guns are not made any less safe by putting them in the hands of ordinary people, whereas if you put them in the hands of a professional, that professional has some responsibility.

The fact is that more and more people are getting out into the bush. That means there is going to be more of a confrontation if you allow recreational hunters to get out there and do not close the parks in those periods of time when there is a likelihood that somebody will be shot. The second thing is that recreational hunters generally have dogs with them. I have been in the bush at different times, I have heard the hounds going through the hills early in the morning and I can tell you it is quite a frightening feeling that this sound is coming closer to you. Maybe you enjoy it, but I certainly do not.

Mr CAMPBELL — I would also add, canoeing in the Mitchell once, we actually rescued a dog that had escaped — or got lost — as part of a hunting exercise. We got him on the canoe and got him out, so a lot of these dogs are going missing. Some of them have got radio tracking collars, but some of them are out there. I think they will basically die; they will not survive. I am happy I do not have evidence of someone being shot by a recreational shooter, but I rue the day that somebody does get shot because there is an increase in recreational shooting in parks.

Mr YOUNG — Well, why do we not wrap ourselves in bubble wrap and stay at home then? Because we cannot go about our lives thinking of perceived risk and then regulating because of it.

Mr ABLITT — There is an actual thing about OHS, you know, and this is one of the responsibilities of the government — to actually look after the population. If the population is using an area for recreational experiences, they should not be expected to worry about whether or not they are going to walk around a tree and be shot because there is a deer on the other side and somebody is shooting at it. I think that is just as valid as your point.

Mr YOUNG — And you have not provided me with any evidence to suggest why you should be worried about that.

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes, I have.

Mr ABLITT — Humankind.

Mr CAMPBELL — The evidence is that someone that gets hit by a bullet is in big trouble.

Mr YOUNG — I completely agree with that. Just on your point about deer becoming a pest species rather than their status at the moment as a game species, in your opinion what is the perceived change that would happen if they were declared a pest, and how is that going to actually contribute to reducing deer numbers?

Mr CAMPBELL — Well, I do not believe they should be managed as game, because one of the concepts in managing game is that you maintain a population because you want to maintain the ability to hunt the animals. So if they are regulated as game, then there will not be an eradication program because

someone — mainly recreational shooters — has an interest in preserving a population for shooting purposes.

Mr YOUNG — But our regulations do not provide any restrictions on how many can be shot, how many can be taken. Changing them to a pest species would not change any of that.

Mr CAMPBELL — Well, they are a pest, so they should be classified as such. They are an introduced species and they are creating damage in the same way as pigs and rabbits and goats and horses are, so we do not see any distinction from all those animals we say should be regarded as feral animals.

Mr RAMSAY — Right. At the risk of offending my parliamentary colleague from the Shooters and Fishers Party, I just want to ask a few questions in relation to control rather than eradication, because your evidence is based on eradication. We have heard evidence that in fact recreational hunters and professional shooters can work together in relation to control of certain species. The argument today has all been about whether they are game or pests, and I guess at some point someone will make a determination on that.

Look, I take your point, and I have heard enough testimony to suggest there is a place for professional shooters as part of a management and eradication program. My understanding is that government has not set a policy on eradicating the sambar deer out of Victoria as yet. What we had this morning was there was not really a policy at all about how to deal with sambar deer except for the use of recreational hunters, which do attract government taxpayer funds to help manage the species. Apart from professional shooters and recreational hunters there are also other forms of pest control or game control. There is baiting and trapping. Do you have the same reservations about those tools as you do with the shooting component of management and eradication maybe down the track?

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes, so with the trapping, in the case of rabbits, the old jaw traps are now illegal. So the word ‘humane’ comes to mind. If you are going to trap, then it needs to be done in a humane way. We do not want to cause undue suffering to animals, whether they are feral or not. Sorry, the other aspect you said was trapping and — —

Mr RAMSAY — It was baiting.

Mr CAMPBELL — Baiting. Yes, so — —

Mr RAMSAY — Wild dog baiting. There is aerial baiting. There is fox baiting.

Mr CAMPBELL — Like, if you are baiting wild dogs with 1080 and that affects a quoll population, then we would not be supporting any baiting activities that have an impact on native fauna or flora. Well, baiting obviously will not affect the vegetation, but we are not supporting control measures that will impact on native wildlife. However, if there is baiting that is specifically targeted at a species, or it is a biological agent, then we would be happy with that.

Mr TILLEY — I am just getting a little bit confused when you talk about baiting for dogs and quolls. I mean, it is a canine blend. The poison does not affect native species or fauna.

Mr CAMPBELL — If the poison does not affect the native species, then that is okay. If it is a control measure that is targeted at the feral animal and there is not an impact on native species, then we see that as part of the eradication program.

The CHAIR — Can I just ask a question.

Mr TILLEY — Hang on. You said one of the — —

The CHAIR — Mr Campbell, if you are not in a position to answer a question because of expertise, you do not have to. I just find that this is the bushwalking association, so you may or may not know a lot about poisoning, but it is up to you to tell us whether you can or cannot answer a question.

Mr CAMPBELL — Look, I am happy to extend myself if necessary. If I get out of my depth, I will say so.

Mr TILLEY — You mentioned there was a trap that was illegal.

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes. The old jaw rabbit traps with the teeth — they are not allowed to use those anymore. That is my understanding. My understanding was that they were illegal, but I am not a subject matter expert in rabbits and trapping. The point there was that if there is trapping, then it should be an enclosure for the animals. It is not something where the animals get snared and can suffer.

Mr ABLITT — Can I give an example of that, please? I know at the moment I have been talking with Parks Vic up in the Cathedral Range area north of Melbourne, and they are trialling out there to actually get the goats and stuff that are up there, and they have been quite successful with it at this time. So there is an example where we would be happy to support them.

Mr TILLEY — My closing question, if I may, is: from your experience in your organisation what is the worst invasive species currently? Is it cats, foxes, dogs, goats?

Mr CAMPBELL — I can tell you the most dangerous in my experience would be horses. I say that from personal experience. I was on a search for a missing brumby hunter at Davies Plain. He was a Parks Vic contractor tasked with capturing the wild horses. I will not go into the full story, but he ended up chasing after a horse, caught it and got knocked off his horse when he was bringing back the stallion. Then he lost his horse and he went looking for it, so there was a big, large-scale search in the Davies Plain area. This is in far-east Gippsland — the far reaches of your electorate, otherwise.

Mr TILLEY — On the other side of the hill.

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes. I have lost my train of thought there. When we were searching we were given tasks to go down ridges where there was no track. We were going down a ridge, and there were four of us in my search team. There was a crashing in the bush, and it was like, ‘What the hell is going on?’. It was just like something out of a science fiction plot. What it was was horses actually thundering along. We had disturbed about four or five wild horses, and one of them ran past about 2 metres away from one of the searchers. If they had have hit them, they would have done some serious damage. So that is probably a special case, but that is an example that if you got in the way of a horse and you are in the wrong place at the wrong time, then you could be seriously injured. Deer, I think, are a little bit more elusive. You are not so likely to actually run into a deer or have one attack you.

Ms WARD — With the bushwalking, what are the economic benefits that are brought to the state through bushwalking as an industry?

Mr CAMPBELL — I cannot give you a dollar figure, but what I can say is that of these 250 000 people that are visiting rural areas, they are typically buying supplies. Often they will be using some camping facilities at the trailhead and/or at a motel. So it is not just about getting out there and sleeping under canvas. And some people are going on commercial groups as well. The actual dollar figure I cannot give you, but there is a significant visitation and recreational usage of these wilderness areas, and it is growing.

Mr ABLITT — Could I also add to that the fact you can see the proliferation of shops around the suburbs that are selling walking gear — boots, camping stuff. So that would be also a figure that would have to be taken into consideration.

Ms WARD — Sure. Are you aware of invasive animals affecting people bushwalking and wanting to go bushwalking or of hunters affecting people’s desire to go bushwalking?

Mr CAMPBELL — In answer to your first question on invasive animals, we recently surveyed our members and they have come back with some examples. There are not a lot of examples, so I would not say there is an overwhelming — —

Ms WARD — How many people responded back to your survey?

Mr CAMPBELL — I think I have got about eight responses. But it went out at fairly short notice.

Mr ABLITT — About a week ago.

Mr CAMPBELL — About a week ago. People are citing feral animals, but they are not regarding them as a huge problem. The example I gave you is the most serious in terms of personal risk. Sorry, the second part of your question was?

Ms WARD — Whether hunting is deterring anyone from bushwalking and whether they are concerned about hunters.

Mr CAMPBELL — Hunting is concerning people. As I mentioned, there have been people that have had encounters with people carrying guns in parks, and I personally have been in a situation where guns have been fired and I have been in the bush. So I have feared for my own safety many years ago.

Ms WARD — When you say many years ago, what time frame are you talking about?

Mr CAMPBELL — I am talking about 1980, around the Jamieson area.

Ms WARD — So do you think that hunting practices have changed since the 80s?

Mr CAMPBELL — If you look at the numbers you would find there would be more hunters active now than there were back then.

Ms WARD — Do you think their practices have changed?

Mr CAMPBELL — I am not aware of the details of hunting practices.

Ms WARD — Sure, okay. And do you think that there is a role for bushwalkers to play in helping to collect information around invasive animals — how many there are, doing counts and participating in developing an understanding of what is in our parks?

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes, I would say definitely, because we have got some evidence — real evidence — coming back now from people about incidents with invasive animals and the effect they are having.

Ms WARD — Not just the incidents, but if you are walking along and keeping a tally of what you are counting and what you are seeing to help collate that information.

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes. I think that if there is a program that is established to do that, then I am sure that from the recreational bushwalking community that we represent some people would be keen to participate in that. They are already showing that they have recorded some data. If there is some process put around that and they are asked to log encounters et cetera, then we can start doing that, and that will help inform the research, if you like.

Mr TILLEY — Peter and Charles, thanks for giving your submission today, and I would like to thank you both for the volunteer efforts that you do in search and rescue for our community, who from time to time do get lost out there. We probably share a very similar — probably in different ways — love of the bush. That is why I live up the part of Victoria that I do and spend a fair bit of time there. It is about the use of our natural resources, our parks, whether they be national park, forest or whatever the case may be. We were talking about horses, but what about other activities in the park? We will put aside recreational shooting. What about trail riding? Have you ever been trail riding in the national parks or state parks or forests?

Mr CAMPBELL — I do not have the policy at my fingertips. I know that we have got conversations open with the mountain biking people and four-wheel drives as well, so I think there is a spirit of

collaboration, if you like. It would come down to probably specific incidences. Some walking trails are banned for mountain bikes, so there are management decisions made around that. Some tracks are closed to four-wheel drive access, and there are management decisions around that. But then there is also facility for some people: I myself own a four-wheel drive, so I am not saying that any single-user group should be excluded. It is a case of the decisions being made in the best interests of all user groups but also in the best interest of protecting the environment. So I guess the key principle, I would stress, is that if there is some environmental damage or major impact on other users, then that is something that should be looked at seriously in terms of it not happening — and the example being shooting. So if shooters are in there shooting and no-one else can go in there, well, that is a big impact.

Mr ABLITT — Could I just add a little bit to that. I am actually the foreperson for talking with mountain bikers and also four-by-four, and the more — —

Mr TILLEY — Can we include horse trails as well?

Mr ABLITT — Yes, I think we can. Actually we can be close because I am actually trying to contact people near Melbourne, like out in the Dandenongs and such like places, whereby we can have a dialogue together so we can work together to make it a more comfortable environment, because we seem to be talking all the time from different sides of the table. As soon as we get together and we start to talk together, we have an understanding and we realise we are doing the same thing. We are really stepping forward in that.

Mr TILLEY — So it is not Bushwalking Victoria advocating, say, ‘The only activity in our parks and forest is the bushwalking’.

Mr ABLITT — No, we are realistic.

Mr CAMPBELL — My daughter is a keen horserider — not in national parks but at a horseriding facility — and I have participated in trail rides in Queensland and I can see that that is a valid activity, and it comes down to if it is not having any negative impact on the park and it is not impacting other users greatly. If you take the example with mountain biking in Western Australia, there is a walking track that goes for a couple of hundred kilometres and it skirts Perth — the Bibbulmun Track, I think it is. That is a multiday and sort of an iconic walk, and lots of people are doing it. There is a mountain bike track that goes parallel to it. They converge and they stop at the same facility, so they can camp in the same areas, but they are actually riding on separate tracks. So you do not have the mountain bikers conflicting with walkers; you have got them utilising common facilities but actually on separate tracks and they are in the same parks area. So there is a good example of coexisting to everybody satisfaction.

Mr TILLEY — Which gets me onto the next point, which is particularly that the inquiry is on invasive species, and we do have a number of those. The thing is: how does government come up with appropriate policy, or what would be the willingness to pay of user groups using our parks and forests to minimise the incidence of feral pests?

Mr CAMPBELL — So if there was specifically a levy put — and I am winging it here; we do not have policy on this — on parks access that was directed towards feral animal control, I think people would be prepared to pay it. If there is a parks entry fee of \$10 and that goes off into consolidated revenue, people would not be prepared to pay it.

Mr TILLEY — Right, okay. That certainly covers that side of things. I just want to cover horses particularly. Some of the stuff I would like know with the numbers that you are talking about in Victoria in particular, who has come up with those figures?

Mr CAMPBELL — Are you talking about our previous submission?

Mr TILLEY — Yes.

Mr CAMPBELL — Charlie, can you help me out there?

Mr ABLITT — Was not a paper coming out just recently, first of all, from Parks Victoria maybe, about the number of horses increasing over the past seven or so years? I think there was about — —

Mr CAMPBELL — I think the question is relating to our submission.

Mr ABLITT — Our submission, okay.

Mr TILLEY — Those sorts of numbers that you are saying in this earlier submission, is what you are saying accurate today compared to what you were saying back in 2013?

Mr CAMPBELL — No.

Mr ABLITT — No.

Mr CAMPBELL — We did not update any of the numbers in that submission. The subject matter was seen to be relevant, so we did not have time to redo the submission and find out up-to-date information. That is basically resubmitted, if you like. I think from my experience in Davies Plain, where Parks Vic had a large crew in there collecting horses associated with this search that I was on. There was — and we saw evidence of it — a lot of horse traffic. They were forming their own tracks up and down ridges, there was big piles of dung — the stallions mark out their areas — and then we actually nearly got run over by horses, so there were lots of horses around. It is a big problem.

Mr TILLEY — The reason I am asking is that I am challenged because we do not have the population data on deer. How is it that we have got a population dataset on horses? Anecdotally I get that there are about 1500 in the high country, not something in the order of 20 000.

Mr CAMPBELL — I think with horses — again this is anecdotal — I have seen a big mob of horses off the back of Mount Jim, like 20 of them just mooching around.

Mr TILLEY — That is where they break loose. You are going to get a mob of 20 anyway.

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes, so there was a big mob there, and I have been into Cowombat Flat many years ago and there were horses roaming around there, so they are a lot less elusive than are deer. So I think it is easier to come up with some sort of estimate, but you are not going to get them all, because the horses we saw off-track were in the bush and you would not spot them flying over a short distance above in a helicopter.

Mr TILLEY — Just so you know, I am not opposed to any sort of control on horses. It is just adding data, if you had something that might assist the inquiry a bit further.

Mr CAMPBELL — No, but I am happy to take that on notice. We need to do a refresh of that horse policy, and in doing so we will be consulting with or looking at where we can find evidence on that.

Mr TILLEY — Yes, because some of this stuff uses the African count method, and it does not work here.

Mr CAMPBELL — I guess the general principle, getting back to what we were saying about funding for research, is if you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it. And right now we cannot measure it, so the way to fix that is by expending some money on measurement, which is part of the research.

Mr RICHARDSON — Thank you, gentlemen, for coming in. I will reiterate Bill's comments about the search and rescue support as volunteers is very important. I do take the point that, from the contention I have heard today, you are not too bothered about whether it is professional or recreational hunters; it is about the protection of native flora and fauna — and I take that you are not experts on which method — and we are trying to get to the bottom of what exactly is the best way to support Victoria economically and sustainably into the future in terms of invasive species. I just wanted to clarify, in terms of the number of people that you represent in Bushwalking Victoria, how many was that again? I think you might have mentioned it to Vicki before.

Mr CAMPBELL — So we have got about 60 clubs, around 8000 members of those clubs, and as to individual members of Bushwalking Victoria, there is a cohort of about 300 individual members. So they can join Bushwalking Victoria without joining a club; previously they could not do that. So that is about 8000. But the wider bushwalking population — people that go bushwalking — this includes day walks out of Melbourne, so it is not all overnight walking — is around 250 000. I am not sure exactly of the source of those numbers, but there are some estimates around.

Mr RICHARDSON — I think that is good to contrast with. We had evidence today from the Game Management Authority that there are 48 000 licensed game hunters and 32 000 licensed deer hunters. So you absolutely have a role to play in the discussion, because one of the terms of references of our inquiry relates to community safety. We heard from the North East Catchment Management Authority that there were extensive concerns about community safety and interaction with hunters, particularly to the point where Crime Stoppers has established an online interactive tool to report instances on private land and with people who are either bushwalking or doing other recreational activities where there are breaches of the law. So I think in relation to your point about being in national parks where they should not, we are absolutely wanting to hear your thoughts on how we better improve safety in those outcomes. Because if there are instances where landowners or people who are going about their activities are feeling unsafe or concerned, then that can have a wider impact on the outcomes of removing those invasive species.

So if there is anything further you want to talk about in terms of community safety and that interaction, feel free, because it is one of the key terms of reference of our inquiry and that better interaction. While recreational hunting has a huge economic impact and contribution, it is also acknowledging the range of other impacts as well. So if there is anything else you wanted to elaborate on further on that, feel free to, but we are keen to get to the bottom of all those uses and how we better support the eradication of invasive species.

Mr CAMPBELL — I guess the nub of the issue is that if you have got recreational hunting happening in an area, it is not safe. I understand that there is no evidence of someone actually being shot, but I think there is evidence that if someone gets shot, they are likely to get hurt, so there is the proximity of people and firearms. And I am aware of evidence in the US where they actually had a hunting season and they said, 'There's too many people getting shot'. They are shooting at each other because they think they are deer, and they get pretty excited when they go away and it is opening weekend.

Mr RICHARDSON — Did Dick Cheney not shoot his adviser?

Mr YOUNG — I do not often go deer hunting.

Mr CAMPBELL — So they got them to wear fluoro vests, because they thought that will reduce the incidents because they will be able to tell they are not a deer and they will not shoot them. More people got shot the year they were using the fluoro vests, so they stopped using fluoro vests. That is the US; that is not Australia. But the situation that we want to avoid is increased recreational shooting and ending up with someone getting shot, which is avoidable. So if there is recreational shooting happening in a park or an area, it should be closed to other users because of that risk. I am not going to rely on bubble wrap to keep me safe from a bullet. You made a comment earlier about wrapping ourselves up in bubble wrap. I am not sure what the appropriateness of that is, but the way to stop someone from being shot by accident is to not have them in the area, and that means that those areas are closed.

Mr RICHARDSON — I think there is the information we took about private land as well. You know, we had farmers who were concerned about people accessing their property without approval, which is trespass. I think it comes to bringing it all together in this inquiry and how better manage the various uses. I think that is important in terms of that broad protection of native flora and fauna. So I just wanted to round that out with that information and really put on the record for your organisation as well what Victoria Police is doing in those regions for any breaches.

Mr CAMPBELL — I appreciate that. So on the example I cited on the alpine walking track, Mansfield police were contacted about that, but they were about 3 hours drive away from where it actually happened.

The CHAIR — I think on that note we have pretty well come to the end of the allocated time, so if we come up with some other questions, I hope you do not mind if we write to you and perhaps seek a response, because this is the first day of hearings and other things do come up. So thank you for your time today and for your submissions.

Mr CAMPBELL — Okay. We are happy to put out a further call to our members and the wider community to get information that will assist the committee, so we are happy to do that.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much.

Witnesses withdrew.