

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 10 March 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair

Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Nina Taylor

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr David Davis

Dr Tien Kieu

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESS

Mr Steve Meacher, President, Friends of Leadbeater's Possum Inc.

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

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

At this point in time I will take the opportunity to introduce committee members: my name is Sonja Terpstra, I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee; Mr Clifford Hayes is the Deputy Chair; Dr Samantha Ratnam; appearing with us via Zoom are Ms Nina Taylor and Mr Stuart Grimley; in the room also are Mrs Bev McArthur and, at the end of the table, Ms Melina Bath and Mr Andy Meddick.

Now, in regard to the evidence that you will be giving today, all evidence that is taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

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

Mr MEACHER: I am Steve Meacher. I am appearing on behalf of Friends of Leadbeater's Possum.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much. Now I will invite you to make your opening statement. If you could please restrict your opening comments to a maximum of 10 minutes—I will give you two-minute warning as we approach the end of that time—and that will allow all the committee members to ask lots of questions. And if going by today is any judge, we always end up running out of time, so I apologise for that. Also if any of our colleagues joining us via Zoom lose connection, please just dial back in, but of course if I can also remind everyone just to keep their microphones muted when they are not speaking. With that, I will invite you to begin your contribution. Away you go. Over to you.

Visual presentation.

Mr MEACHER: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to make this presentation. I begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations as the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on and pay respects to our elders past, present and emerging. I extend this acknowledgement to the Taungurung and Gunaikurnai people as the traditional custodians of the forests of the Central Highlands.

I do not know whether it is due to the excellent planning of this committee or just a happy coincidence, but today, 10 March 2021, is exactly the 50th anniversary of the publication of the proclamation making Leadbeater's Possum the faunal emblem of our state.

The CHAIR: It is our excellent planning.

Mr MEACHER: Take credit where you can. In fact this morning I attended an event at Melbourne Zoo attended by the Acting Premier, the Honourable James Merlino, organised to mark this occasion.

After the first Victorian action statement and federal recovery plan were published in the 1990s, it took more than 10 years for a reserve system to be established, largely due to the intransigence of the logging industry, who would not willingly surrender some of the most productive forest, which happens to coincide with the

possum's best habitat. Three months after the reserve was established in October 2008, 45 per cent of it burnt in the Black Saturday fires.

The overall objective of the recovery plan was to downlist Leadbeater's possums from endangered to vulnerable within 10 years. In fact after 18 years it was uplisted to critically endangered, the last category before extinction. Soon after the uplisting was announced we were promised a revised recovery plan by mid-2016 driving action to turn around the decline. The Threatened Species Scientific Committee confirmed the critically endangered assessment in 2019 and in its conservation advice asked again for the recovery plan to be finalised and a recovery team to be established. We are still waiting.

In its original conservation advice the Threatened Species Scientific Committee also suggested the cessation of logging in the ash forests of the Central Highlands, and this was supported in the 2018 *State of the Forests* report. This is not a radical demand. It is simply showing respect for the science. When the Leadbeater's Possum Advisory Group was formed in 2013, it included no independent scientists and the terms of reference were such that any effective proposals, such as those put forward by Professor Lindenmayer, could not be adopted. The only positive proposal that survived the group's filters was the introduction of 200-metre buffers around the locations of actual sightings of the possum. Two-hundred-metre buffers are inadequate, because a foraging possum may range at least 600 metres from its nest tree. Therefore a 200-metre buffer will not necessarily protect the denning area, the essential core of the possum's territory. And 12 hectares is not sufficient for a colony to thrive in the long term even if it survives the logging. The scientists had recommended a 1000-metre buffer. The difference this would make is apparent in this example of a possum detection at a coupe called South Col in Toolangi.

Over the years our group has tried hard to work collaboratively with the relevant authorities. We have made submissions to VicForests' proposed timber release plans—routinely ignored, especially so since the system was changed so that the TRP no longer needs to be approved by the department of environment but only by VicForests' own board. Truly, the fox in charge of the henhouse. We participated in the Forest Industry Taskforce process in 2015–16, all the while aware of continued logging of habitat. We applied to the minister for an interim conservation order to protect critical habitat to no avail.

It was this absence of effective conservation action that led us ultimately to launch a case in the Federal Court in 2017, in which we were ultimately successful, receiving a favourable judgement in May last year. Amongst many other findings, Justice Mortimer concluded there was an incompatibility between protection of high conservation values and continued exploitation of mature native forest for commercial timber harvesting. She formed the view that VicForests had a negative attitude to conservation of threatened species. If you are unable to read the 440-page decision, at least look at table 14, which summarises the confirmed breaches in every one of the 66 impugned coupes. During the court case the government conducted a review of timber harvesting regulation and responded by setting up the Office of the Conservation Regulator. Being a department within a department, this body does not seem to have the capacity or the will to operate as an independent enforcer. In fact, as the regulator now acts as the delegate for the minister in some decisions—such as allowing intrusions into those precious 200-metre buffer zones—the OCR now seems to be part of the problem not the solution. Approval by the OCR of these applications seems to have become almost routine, as you can see in this register, and the OCR seems reluctant to take enforcement action.

In a recent investigation which took almost two years to complete, the OCR confirmed 10 breaches, yet its only action was to issue letters of warning. The OCR has refused to release the letters, so we have no way of assessing their likely impact—if any. To judge by his comments in the Assembly last week, the OCR does not even have the confidence of the Member for Narracan, an avid proponent of native forest logging with family ties to the industry, which some might consider a massive conflict of interest. His attack on the regulator, members of the stakeholder reference group and the minister for the environment is founded in deliberate and blatant misinformation, as is so often the case with supporters of the industry.

If we are to avoid the looming disaster of ecosystem decline in our forests, Parliament must respect the peer-reviewed science and rise above the ravings of self-serving bullies. One of the most common pieces of information touted by VicForests and their supporters is that only 6 per cent of Victorian forests are available for logging. Here it is on VicForests' website. But if you look closely, you will see that that statistic is based on all publicly owned forests in the state, including many that are not logged at all. The truth is that logging is not evenly spread across all forests. It is concentrated in certain areas, in certain types of forests, and in those areas it is much more concentrated, as you can see in this 2015 map of logging coupes in the Central Highlands. This claim is also extrapolated to declare that only 0.04 per cent of the forest is logged per year, nominally

equivalent to four trees in 10 000, giving the misleading impression that logging is selective and has low impact. But the reality is when a coupe is logged not only are almost all trees removed but also the mid and understorey vegetation and ground cover. Logging is intense, industrial and destructive. In November 2019, the Andrews government acknowledged the ongoing logging of native forests is not sustainable and would be phased out by 2030.

The CHAIR: You have 2 minutes.

Mr MEACHER: Thank you. We welcome this important acknowledgement but the phasing out over 10 years after half a century of intensive industrial-scale logging and several landscape-scale fires is much too slow. Less than 1.2 per cent of the mountain ash forests of the Central Highlands predates the 1939 fires. It is the regrowth from those fires that has sustained the industry for decades and now it is running out. Only scattered remnants of high conservation value forests remain and those same sites contain the last of the available timber and the last available habitat for threatened species. These have been described as lifeboats, carrying threatened species into the future. The proposed logging in one such area, Snobs Creek, has recently prompted the Murrindindi Shire Council to call for a halt.

The *Threatened Species and Communities Risk Assessment* in October 2020 spelt out the effects of logging: animals are killed, their habitats are destroyed and what is left is left vulnerable. Twenty-three species and communities were identified as being at high or significant risk due to logging. The Samuel review of the EPBC Act contains 38 recommendations and these need to be considered at the state as well as the federal level. The EDO has published a succinct report of the 10 key findings.

In Victoria the Humane Society International and Environmental Justice Australia have documented the failings of our wildlife protection laws. A review of 51 peer-reviewed studies has confirmed earlier evidence that logging can make native forests more flammable and leads to greater fire severity, an effect that lasts for decades. The mountain ash forests of the Victorian Central Highlands are included in 19 collapsing ecosystems characterised as a disaster movie. Scientists suggest a response based on three A's: awareness, anticipation and action. So why are we continuing to unsustainably log native forests?

It is not for the money. The Parliamentary Budget Office has calculated that ending logging now would save Victoria \$192 million in the next decade. Just last year VicForests posted a loss, a net loss, of \$7.5 million despite receipts from the state government of \$18 million.

It is not for the jobs. Most Victorian forest jobs are already plantation based. The 2017 study by the Nous Group found that creation of a new reserved area in the Central Highlands, the great forest national park, would create more jobs than currently exist in native forest logging.

So today we mark 50 years of the Leadbeater's possum as our faunal emblem and its population remains in decline. The possum is number 10 on the Zoological Society of London's EDGE list of mammals in need of conservation and intervention. It has been assessed as the seventh most likely Australian mammal to go extinct in the next 20 years. If we cannot do better for an animal that is so well known and so well loved, what hope is there for all the other less prominent species threatened by human activities?

The CHAIR: Mr Meacher, we are going to have to leave it there, I am afraid.

Mr MEACHER: I am really close.

The CHAIR: How long have you got?

Mr MEACHER: Thirty seconds.

The CHAIR: Okay.

Mr MEACHER: The aim of Friends of Leadbeater's Possum is to safeguard the survival of our special possum for the next 50 years and hereafter. If we can do this, not only will the possum benefit but so will myriad other species that share its forest habitat, as will the human communities who rely on the forests for clean water, fresh air, moderation of climate, storage of carbon and as places for renewal and recreation.

So what must be done to achieve this? Advocate for the federal government to release the recovery plan, then review the Victorian action statement and re-establish the recovery team. Our state needs to be freed from the shackles of the 85-year-old wood pulp agreement Act. Parliament should accelerate the phasing out of native

forest logging, including making funding available to the industry to complete the transition to plantation supply and for willing workers to exit the industry. Victoria must commit to the recommendations of the Samuel review and advocate for them to be adopted in full. Decision-makers must respect the science. And do not forget the three A's, the first of which is awareness. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much. Before we throw to questions, I just want to remind members of the sub judice rule. I am aware that there is a VicForests current appeal of the *Friends of Leadbeater's Possum Inc. v. VicForests* court case. That is just a reminder to committee members to avoid any questions in regard to that so there is no prejudice to the court proceedings or individuals. Mrs McArthur, over to you.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. I will try not to manage to end up sub judice. But anyway, thank you, Steve. Is the Leadbeater's possum only threatened by logging, which takes place in 0.04 per cent of our state forests, and not fires, wild dogs, cats or foxes, let alone anything else that impacts the rest of the 99.06 per cent of our state forests?

Mr MEACHER: Well, the short answer is no. It is not only impacted by logging, but it happens that the ecology of Leadbeater's possum is such that it is in a direct head-on collision with the logging industry. The Leadbeater's possum needs the same sort of forest to survive in as the logging industry prefers to get the type of timber that it prefers to take. So it is not only logging. Fire is a massive issue, and, as I said, in 2009 we lost possibly half the possum population, which led to it becoming critically endangered. We also know that cats can be an issue. We recently had incidents up in Kinglake with a release program that had to be called off because of predation by cats. But foxes are earthbound, and these possums are usually 20 metres up in a tree and are not usually affected by foxes.

Mrs McARTHUR: So how would you describe the management of 99.06 per cent of our state forests by our state government departments that are pledged with having to manage these forest environments, given the growth in these non-native species of animals that are damaging the ecosystem and certain native species and the growth in non-native vegetation species as well? How would you describe the management of the vast proportion of our state forests?

Mr MEACHER: Well, to put it bluntly, I would not presume to comment on the rest of those forests, because my area is Leadbeater's possum, and the area of forest that I am most familiar with is the ash forests of the Central Highlands. When you are talking about 99 per cent of forests or whatever, you are including the Mallee in western Victoria. You are including the red gums in northern Victoria that are not logged, and, as I said in my presentation, the logging is not evenly spread throughout all forests in Victoria. It is concentrated on certain types of forests, and it so happens that the type of forest that is essential to Leadbeater's possum is also the type of forest that is preferred by the logging industry.

Mrs McARTHUR: So how are the programs going to ensure that we retain the Leadbeater's possum, with the zoo or whoever else is doing the breeding programs?

Mr MEACHER: They are not going well.

Mrs McARTHUR: Why is that?

Mr MEACHER: If we knew, we would probably be able to fix it. The zoo's program, trying to breed possums from the Yellingbo reserve, has been running for about seven years and has not yet produced a single live young and has basically, I think, in effect been abandoned. But the animals that were taken into the zoos to be bred have now been in captivity so long they are no longer suitable to return to the wild. As I just mentioned, the attempts to translocate some possums from Yellingbo—where there is a special lowland population which is genetically distinct, and there are about 30 of those left so it is really in dire straits—up to an area in Kinglake which is suitable forest but has no Leadbeater's possums in it presently started really well. The possums adapted and they began to forage for food, but then of the 11 possums released, seven were predated by a cat or cats.

Mrs McARTHUR: Great.

Mr MEACHER: So that has now been also put on hold. The four animals have been taken back into captivity.

The CHAIR: Could I just interject at that point? This is a follow-on question. So before that breeding program started in that area, was it known that there were cats in it? Because I am just wondering whether they were sort of sent in and set up to fail in that way, because you would think that they would actually want to make sure what the predators were in that area so they could thrive. Can you sort of talk to that?

Mr MEACHER: No, no. They were very thorough.

The CHAIR: Yes. So what happened there?

Mr MEACHER: They obviously did not want to put them where there were cats. And they set up motion sensor cameras and did surveys and so on and found little to no evidence of cats present, so we thought it was going to be okay. And we thought that possums being so fast and moving high up in the trees would probably be out of the cats' way. It is possible there were only one or two cats, which did not show up on the cameras but were enough to eat seven possums over a month or so.

The CHAIR: Sorry.

Mrs McARTHUR: No, they are very clever predators.

The CHAIR: But I just thought it was worth asking how, yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: They are like the COVID virus—

Mr MEACHER: They are killers.

Mrs McARTHUR: clever and smart.

Mr MEACHER: Yes. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Any other questions, Mrs McArthur?

Mrs McARTHUR: No, no. You go forward.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. Ms Bath, I will throw to you.

Ms BATH: Hello. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Mr MEACHER: Good afternoon.

Ms BATH: Mr Meacher, I am kind of in a quandary in that I assume that you would value all life as well as possums and geckos, and—

Mr MEACHER: Yes.

Ms BATH: cats maybe we are not so fond of in these circumstances, I can respect that—human life et cetera. But the Friends of Leadbeater's Possums have on social media actively encouraged people to go into forest coupes and create disorder in the past. How is it that it seems that Friends of Leadbeater's Possums would encourage someone to go onto a worksite and potentially disrupt that worksite?

Mr MEACHER: I am not sure that Friends of Leadbeater's Possums has ever done that. If you have any examples, I would be interested to look at them. We certainly do know that there are people who do that, and we do not discourage them from the point of view that, as we see it, they are looking to bring attention to or even stop unlawful logging of forests. And our court case has shown in 66 coupes that were put up, 66 of them were found to be unlawful logging. So we think that does sort of show that that position is not unfounded. But I am not aware that Friends of Leadbeater's Possum as an organisation has ever actually encouraged anyone to go into coupes as such. People do surveys and that sort of thing.

Ms BATH: But you do not discourage people from going onto a worksite that is a legitimate worksite that has been assessed and registered as a worksite or a workplace and inhibit people's actions about going about their lawful work?

Mr MEACHER: I do not think that is our role. We advocate with the public for knowledge about the possum and its habitat and so on. If people then extrapolate that to meaning that they think they should be encouraged to try to do something to stop what we see as unlawful logging, then that is their decision, not ours.

Ms BATH: I am interested in the definition of ‘unlawful logging’, because if a coupe is open for access, it has been assessed through a government agency, which is VicForests, and timber harvesters are allowed to go onto that site, I am concerned that there would be people who feel that that is a safe and a rightful and appropriate thing to do when it could endanger themselves potentially or workers.

Mr MEACHER: Okay. Well, the analogy I make is if I am driving at 100 kph in a 70-kph zone, am I driving lawfully or not? Is it only when you get caught that it becomes unlawful? And what we have shown in our court case is that in 66 coupes that were approved—they fitted all the constraints that you just mentioned, they had been approved by the agencies and all the rest of it; everything was tickety-boo, everything was okay—66 out of the 66 coupes were being logged unlawfully. So how do you define ‘unlawful’? Is it that you are doing the wrong thing or is it just that you get caught?

Ms BATH: Well, the other comment I make is that there are people going into those worksites who deserve to be safe on any given day, and whatever you are supposing and suggesting in this, they deserve a rightful place of work.

Mr MEACHER: They do, but it does not need to be an unlawful place of work. And as far as I know, I certainly have not had any experience of incidents where work has been stopped that has actually made anything unsafe for people working on the logging sites. Most injuries on logging sites are from things like logs rolling off trucks, truck rollovers and things like that that have absolutely nothing to do with people stopping the work. And in fact one could argue that by stopping the work you are making things safer for the workers rather than not safe, because it is the work itself that is dangerous, not stopping the work.

The CHAIR: I am just watching time, so we are going to have to move on.

Ms BATH: I am pleased, Mr Meacher, that you would not advocate for endangering worker safety.

Mr MEACHER: Certainly not.

The CHAIR: Again, I will just remind everyone if you have questions and we have run out of time, committee members can submit questions on notice to you after the hearing, and then you can answer them as well.

Mr MEACHER: I am happy to do that. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. I only have one question. Thank you, you have answered every other question that I had in your presentation, so that was really good.

Mr MEACHER: Thank you.

Mr MEDDICK: In your group’s estimation, how many breaches of the buffer zones do you think have occurred just in the last 12 months?

Mr MEACHER: Well, I know in the OCR’s register there are at least a dozen. It has become almost routine. VicForests applies for the exemption, and it basically just gets rubberstamped. I have not seen one yet that has been knocked back.

Mr MEDDICK: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Obviously we are talking about forests, because that is where the Leadbeater’s possum is, but are you aware of the Victorian government’s *Biodiversity 2037* plan—

Mr MEACHER: Yes.

The CHAIR: and also the *Victorian Forestry Plan*, which is about transitioning? The government has announced that they are have ceased logging in old-growth forest, with a transition out of that and a support

package for workers. What do you say about the biodiversity plan, first of all, and what are your thoughts on the Vic forestry plan?

Mr MEACHER: Well, the first thing, the 2037 plan, we are aware of, but 2037 is 16 years away, and if we carry on the way we are, we will not have Leadbeater's possum in 16 years. If a long-term plan like that—or some people might say medium-term—is actually going to be worth anything at all, it needs to be broken down into: what are we actually going to do about it this year, this month, this week, today?

The CHAIR: I guess it is a framework, though. What you are going to do is: where is the action plan for points along the way?

Mr MEACHER: Yes.

The CHAIR: But do you think as a framework it is of any use to biodiversity?

Mr MEACHER: I think it is always helpful to have aspirations for where you want to get to, but if they remain as aspirations, they become just worthless.

The CHAIR: Okay. And the Vic forestry plan? And the government has already announced that logging in old growth is ceasing, but—

Mr MEACHER: Yes. As I said, 2030 is much too far away. If we carry on logging the bits of forest that are now left—the lifeboats—for the next 10 years, it is actually not going to last for 10 years. There is not enough 1939 regrowth to sustain the industry for another 10 years. So it will run out; those lifeboats will all be gone; the Leadbeater's possums will be gone. The industry is going to collapse anyway when that happens—if we do not have another big fire. If we have another 2009 in the next few years—and who knows? Hopefully we will not, but if we do—

Ms BATH: Touch hardwood.

Mr MEACHER: Exactly. If we do, this industry is going to collapse sooner than that. But if we carry on for the next 10 years logging the lifeboats, at the end of that time we will have lost the forest and we will have lost the species as well.

The CHAIR: You are saying it is not fast enough, really. Yes. Okay.

Mr MEACHER: Yes. We have got to start much sooner in phasing it out.

The CHAIR: Okay. Sure. Thank you. Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Yes. Thanks very much, Steve. It was a really great presentation and it answered most of my questions. I just want to ask you: in your view, what would a successful intervention to conserve Leadbeater's possum as another endangered species look like to you? What would be the most immediate things we could do to intervene?

Mr MEACHER: Ideally, follow the advice of the Threatened Species Scientific Committee and cease logging in the Central Highlands mountain ash forests. That is the only habitat for Leadbeater's possum, essentially, not counting Yellingbo. So that is the thing that needs to happen. We have got the top scientists in the country calling for it, as reported in the state of the forests report in 2018. That is the thing that needs to happen, and for that to happen we need to get out of this wood pulp agreement Act, which is compelling the Victorian government to keep selling wood pulp to a paper mill. So that is sort of like a precondition for stopping the logging of the ash forests.

Mr HAYES: Thank you. That is fine for me.

The CHAIR: Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you very much, Mr Meacher, for your presentation and all the work that you do and the friends group do on the ground. We have heard today from industry groups that the demand for hardwood timber is increasing, and it sounds like there is a voracious appetite from Victorians for hardwood timber, according to them—for example, for flooring and furniture. We have heard contrasting evidence that actually the bulk of our hardwood that we chop down is going into pulp for paper and other uses—and a figure of

around 88 per cent actually going into pulp, not for wood products that the industry claim Victoria's cannot get enough of. What is your view on that in terms of how much is going for pulp versus these timber hardwood products?

Mr MEACHER: Well, it is not my view, it is what the figures show.

Dr RATNAM: Yes.

Mr MEACHER: I was here when Professor Lindenmayer was speaking earlier, and he was talking about 87.4 per cent. That is about right. If you look at VicForests' own figures in their own reports, year on year it is around 70 per cent pulp logs and 30 per cent sawlogs. But when you process round sawlogs into sawn planks and so on, you lose about 60 per cent again. So 60 per cent of 30 per cent is 18 per cent. Add that to the 70 per cent that was pulp logs and you have got 88 per cent.

The best figures we have come from Dr Jacki Schirmer, when she did a report for the Victorian state government. In 2012, the figure was that 91.7 per cent went for pulp, sawdust and waste—91.7 per cent. Of what is left, the 8 per cent, about three-quarters is low-quality sawn timber, which is used for things like pallets, which are used between one and three times and then go to landfill or are burnt, and about 2 per cent of the timber is what then goes into window frames and dining tables, which the industry constantly tells us is what it is all about. So 2 per cent of the timber is what the industry claims is what they are producing and why they need to keep going.

Dr RATNAM: Why do you think that is? I am really puzzled. If you could use alternative sources of timber for the pulp, so like the 80 per cent of quantity could come from somewhere else, why do you think the industry continues to push for the logging of these high conservation value forests?

Mr MEACHER: That is a really difficult question to answer, and I have not been able to find a logical answer—

Dr RATNAM: Right.

Mr MEACHER: to that in the last 20 years. My only assumption is that it is self-interest and a belief in having a right to log these forests. I hear all the time people saying, 'Well, my grandfather was a logger and my father was a logger, and we have still got forests'. Well, actually, the forests their grandfather knew, he would not recognise now. The forests have changed over the last few generations. We no longer see the 100-metre tall trees that were common at the beginning of the 19th century. The forests that we see now, superficially they look green and they look leafy and they look like forests, but when you look at them, they have changed dramatically, and they are no longer the same ecosystem they were 50 or 100 years ago.

Dr RATNAM: Can I ask two questions on notice? Do you need to go to others?

The CHAIR: I just have to go to Mr Grimley, but yes, you can ask questions on notice.

Dr RATNAM: If there is time, you can answer here, or we can take it on notice. So the other question I had was: we have heard this 0.04 per cent figure being touted as what is being deforested, and it feels like it is a way to say that there is just very minimal impact in terms of forestry. I would be interested in your perspective on this. We have heard as well that those forests are not the same. If you take 100 per cent of the forests, not all of them have the same conservation value. So is a better figure to actually look at what is a high conservation value and then how much of the high conservation value forests are being logged? Is that a better comparison than 0.04 per cent of the 100 per cent?

Mr MEACHER: Yes and no—

Dr RATNAM: What is a better metric? What is a good metric, I guess?

Mr MEACHER: Sorry, Dr Ratnam. I would not want to imply that the other forests do not have high conservation values as well. They just do not have the same conservation values for Leadbeater's possum.

Dr RATNAM: Right.

Mr MEACHER: You will not find Leadbeater's possums living in the Mallee, for instance. It is a different set of high-conservation values.

The CHAIR: Horses for courses.

Mr MEACHER: One way of looking at it would be: if the state government were to say, 'Okay. We've decided that as a policy we're going to demolish Prahran'. Would the people living in Kew or whatever say, 'Well, actually that is okay. That is only 0.04 per cent of the houses in Victoria'—and damn the people who live in Prahran. That is what we are doing.

Dr RATNAM: Right.

Mr MEACHER: It is not even relevant to be honest.

Dr RATNAM: Right. It is not a good metric. Thank you. I will ask one more question on this. We will go and come back.

The CHAIR: Okay. Mr Grimley.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Mr Meacher, for your presentation today. I just have one question. It is in relation to previously when you stated that the Office of the Conservation Regulator is part of the problem and not the solution. Given that, my question is: how do you think the legislative framework for conservation in Victoria could be improved to underpin the successful interventions of endangered species?

Mr MEACHER: Well, thank you for that question. Yes, I think what needs to happen is there needs to be a truly independent regulator that is properly provided with the finances and resources that it needs to carry through in the enforcement of the laws. If Victoria's laws and the federal laws were being properly enforced on the ground, groups like mine would not need to take cases to court. We have taken our case to the Federal Court because the federal government has not done it, and we have been successful. If there were a regulator that was properly provided with resources, person power in order to do that, it would not be necessary for community groups to be doing. So there needs to be a properly resourced, properly independent enforcer or regulator.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thanks, Steve. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: We have about four more minutes left, and I know Ms Bath has got another question. I will get you to ask that on notice, and Dr Ratnam has got a question on notice. Ms Bath, if you want to go first.

Ms BATH: Thank you. On 26 February 2021 Leadbeater's Possum incorporated retweeted a tweet from an organisation that was encouraging people to blockade timber coupes at Snobs Creek, and there is a person hanging upside down from a tree in camouflage gear. That, to me, is encouraging people to go into that space and do that type of thing, Mr Meacher.

The CHAIR: That is a question on notice.

Mr MEACHER: Can I take that on notice? Because I do not do our tweets.

Ms BATH: All right. I get that, but you are here on behalf of—

Mr MEACHER: Yes, I am. I will look at that and I will send you a response.

The CHAIR: It is a question on notice. Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Mr Meacher, one last question. We have had VicForests here this morning talking about the survey work they do pre and post logging of a coupe, and they went to pains to talk through what those processes are and claimed that they were thorough processes of surveying coupes. I am interested in your experience of the friends group, because you are living on the ground, about what you have seen in terms of the thoroughness of their surveying work and what you think are the gaps in their surveying work, just to contrast it with the evidence we have heard.

The CHAIR: So you can take that on notice as well.

Mr MEACHER: I can give you a quick answer, if you want it.

The CHAIR: You have got about 3 minutes.

Mr MEACHER: Okay. It will not take 3 minutes. It is a very good question. Of course the question with surveying is that you are only going to see what you are looking for, and if VicForests is going in to survey a coupe that they want to log and finding a possum is going to mean they cannot log it and they have got all these contractors who have already got contracts and so on, how likely is it that they are going to say, 'No, you can't log this coupe because we've just found an awkward possum or a tree geebung or whatever'. So you have got to have the will to find what you are looking for. Bear in mind, this is an animal, the Leadbeater's possum, that was thought to be extinct for 50 years. It was there in the forest the whole time, and nobody saw it for 50 years. You actually have to work hard to see this animal, and that was where Professor Lindenmayer came in in 1983 going out into the forest looking really hard to find them and doing so. But if you do a VicForests-style survey, and I do not know what they told you this morning, what I have seen in the past is doing surveys in daylight where they walk a transect across a coupe.

Ms BATH: No, this was not like that.

Mr MEACHER: Okay. I will take that. I will accept that. But that is what they did historically, where they would walk transect across a coupe, mark it on a map and then write up a report of what they had seen. You are not going to see Leadbeater's possums in the middle of the day or in any daylight. They only come out at sunset, and they are back in bed in their tree before dawn. It depends on the survey that you conduct, and the survey has to be designed with the intent of finding the animal, and if that is going to stop you logging a coupe, how strong is that intent going to be? That is where citizen scientists have come in recently, where they do go in in the night and they are using infrared and all this modern equipment that has not been available to VicForests before the last few years.

Ms BATH: I think you need to clarify. I am sorry, but you need to clarify the commentary around what VicForests is doing, because we are talking about lots of surveys there that were not what VicForests has done that work on. That work was done through Melbourne University, I think, and laser et cetera. We need to compare what it is with what it is. This is no disrespect—

The CHAIR: We are going to have to leave it there.

Ms BATH: This is no disrespect to Mr Meacher whatsoever, but—

Dr RATNAM: But I think just to respond, my question was based on what VicForests told us they were doing to be able to assess the presence of species that are threatened before they go into a coupe, so I was just asking what that experience was of people who have been in the same area who are not VicForests—what is their assessment of VicForests' work in that regard? That is what he was answering.

The CHAIR: That is the question on notice. We are going to have to leave it there, Mr Meacher. Thank you very much for your contribution and your presentation. It has been really, really interesting.

Mr MEACHER: Thank you.

Committee adjourned.