

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 23 February 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

WITNESSES

Ms Michelle Thomas, President and Shelter Director, and

Mr Steven Kuitert, Wildlife Rescuer, Surveyor and Photographer, Animalia Wildlife Shelter and Rescue.

The CHAIR: I declare open the 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.

Of course I would like to welcome any members of the public who may be watching the live stream of these proceedings today as well.

Before I go any further, I would just like to acknowledge my colleagues who are sitting on the committee with me today. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. We have Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair; Ms Melina Bath; Dr Matthew Bach, who will be back momentarily; Andy Meddick; Dr Sam Ratnam; and appearing via live stream is Stuart Grimley.

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

With all of that, we welcome your opening statements, but please if I could remind you to keep your opening comments to a maximum of 10 minutes which will then allow plenty of time for the committee members to ask questions. If I could also just take this opportunity to remind committee members or anyone else that is appearing via live stream to mute your microphones when not speaking to minimise any background noise. With that, we will get underway, so Michelle and Steven, welcome.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you.

Mr KUITERT: Thank you.

Ms THOMAS: Do you have my PowerPoint presentation?

The CHAIR: PowerPoint presentation? Looks like we do.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you. Hopefully that is the complete one—I sent two in.

Visual presentation.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you for allowing me to speak today, everybody, and I am speaking with my 30 years plus of experience in wildlife rescue and care and education within the community. Ecosystem decline in Victoria—the onslaught on our environment and our native animals is relentless, but what is it we know about the removal or loss of a species from the landscape? Not enough, if anything at all. Study and research on the effects on our Victorian ecosystem is almost a redundant art. It has become all about industry and production. Authority to cull wildlife permits are issued without any checks to ensure there is actually a problem. Any landholder can ring several agencies and declare that they have out-of-control numbers of kangaroos without the need to prove it. Grossly overestimated numbers to support kangaroo harvest give free meat to the pet food trade, shoe trade and Asian traditional medicine trade—yes, they sell kangaroo testicles to humans as aphrodisiacs. Fire, drought, habitat destruction, secondary poisoning, baiting, introduced predators such as

foxes and cats and competing herbivores—deer, rabbits, pigs, goats—are all causal factors of ecosystem decline in Victoria.

With the introduction of sheep to this country chlamydia was passed to our iconic koalas, a cruel disease that either blinds or renders them infertile. Our only hope came at the 2012 Australian wildlife rehabilitation conference: 'Chlamydia and koalas: progress towards the development of a vaccine and understanding this debilitating disease', by Dr Adam Polkinghorne. Cow attack is also the fate of a koala. Cattle often trample koalas to death that are crossing through paddocks to food trees. Our koalas keep the trees healthy. When all is good in the environment, they do not overeat the trees. Humans remove their trees to plant timber and paper plantations, leaving few if any of the food trees for them to eat—a failure by us towards our koalas, and it is just the tip of the iceberg.

Across the peninsula we are losing species at a rapid rate, domestic cat predation being a huge problem, preying small mammals such as bandicoots, antechinus, feather-tail gliders and pygmy possums, reducing them to areas of small remnant populations. Greens Bush is becoming overrun with deer, which are becoming more aggressive towards humans during mating season. A desperate bid to provide koala food trees is underway in an attempt to save future koala populations, but it has been up to local friends groups to implement, another failing of our government. Wombats have all but disappeared from the peninsula, with individuals often only found on private property. These soil-turners can move 45 kilos of dirt per hour and transfer fungal spores and turn leaves that are on grasses back into soil, helping to prevent bushfire fuel loads, but many people do not think of the role in the environment that our wildlife plays and how it benefits us. Lyrebirds do similar with their ability to turn over leaf litter at up to 1.66 tonnes per hectare over a nine-month period.

Shooters nowadays put flyers in people's letterboxes and approach landholders telling them if they do not shoot out the alpha male kangaroo they will have a population explosion. This is simply not true. The alpha males keep the young subordinate males from being allowed to mate. This is how the kangaroo mob hierarchy works. However, the constant shooting on the peninsula now has people at their wits end, worried that a stray bullet will come through their window and making it necessary to call the police often. In actual fact shooters may be causing a future problem. We simply do not know the repercussions of removal of certain species from the landscape often until it is too late. Brushtail possum removal from the ironbark forest in north-west Victoria nearly wiped out the trees because the scientists did not realise the mistletoe would take over and come close to killing the trees.

As a Wildlife Rescuer and licensed rehabilitation shelter I have been called out to rescue, collect or seek veterinary attention for victims of planned burns, habitat destruction, predation, cruelty cases, vehicle collision, heat stress events, mass strandings of birds, electrocution and habitat loss. There is not much I have not seen. Starting out I had to learn to harden up very quickly and get on with the job at hand. Post Black Saturday fires left the region with huge losses of animals. After personally overseeing and conducting the recovery effort for the bushfire-affected wildlife across Murrindindi shire, focusing mainly in the area known as the Taggerty triangle, which included Marysville and surrounds, most bird and animal life had been wiped out, and what was left to recover was with minimal assistance from the government. Volunteers like myself undertook those efforts over 45 days. What habitat was left was salvage-logged by Grollo. Huge mountain ash that had survived the fires because they were mature trees were cut down.

Jump forward to the Black Summer fires of 2020 and nothing has changed. Everywhere I went was being salvage-logged. These trees were still healthy individuals that often had already started to produce epicormic growth to ensure their survival. This time it was used as firewood, adding insult to injury and leaving the Gippsland region in shock. These burns in some cases were mosaic and left areas untouched. Many areas, however, were decimated along with the wildlife. Unnecessary clearing of roadside vegetation was cited as safety concerns, but when sawn through they were solid living trees and the largest trees of the region because they had not been logged, often home to greater gliders that had survived the initial fire only to meet untimely deaths when their homes were destroyed. The scale of habitat loss was unbelievable.

Our native animals go hand in hand with their environment and have a symbiotic relationship with specific moth species that are solely reliant on koala faecal pellets for survival, assisting in the breakdown of leaf matter further and returning to the soil as usable nutrient. Most of our large marsupial wildlife are herbivores in this state. Turning soil, insect control, grass cutting, brush pruning, pollination offering, fungal spore spreading,

their value to the landscape should not be underestimated, yet our government agencies have invested more money on management programs, a nice word for killing, than trying to understand the actual relationship between wildlife and ecosystems.

I go to great lengths to study wildlife in its natural habitat and spend as much time in the bush as I can. The birds are less and less as each year goes by. Spraying of Roundup herbicide, which is a known carcinogen, has the ability to reduce the lengths of penises in our large land marsupials. The research provides more evidence that atrazine messes around with the way that our hormones are balanced within our bodies, says study author Andrew Pask, a geneticist at Melbourne University. He is not just referring to wallabies but to all mammals, including humans. Joeys born to mothers drinking contaminated water had penises that were 20 per cent shorter and significantly thinner than the control group, and genes responsible for normal testicular function were also altered. This became very relevant to me when I had a black swamp wallaby joey come into my care that ended up with three out of four heart valves just swinging in the breeze, making her heart not able to properly function when she reached maturity. We made the decision to euthanise. I questioned the specialists and the veterinarians, 'Was this something that I caused?'. They said, 'Absolutely not. This happened in embryonic stage'. We will never know if this is the result of Roundup. However, her mother was hit on a road routinely sprayed with Roundup every two weeks.

I do not profess to know everything about the environment, but everyone with half a brain can see our wildlife is in huge decline and with it our environment and ecosystems. Scientists are telling us that we are witnessing the sixth mass extinction event, and we are failing to do anything about it. Instead, our government appears to be hastening it. We need to protect the native, indigenous wildlife that works with the ecosystem. After all, it needs it to survive, and we need it to survive. We must make an attempt to do something about it and the subsequent ecological collapse. We may then stand a chance of preserving the amazing and beautiful flora and fauna of this state for future generations. Thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. I might throw to you, Dr Ratnam, first.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you very much for the very powerful presentation and for the incredible work that you do. I have got a few questions to start off with. You have outlined some of this, especially in your opening statement as well. You talked about some very concerning experiences you have had over your 30 years as a wildlife carer. Can you share with the committee your firsthand experiences in a bit more detail of the impact of native forest logging on wildlife? You have talked about it in both your submission and your presentation this morning, but I particularly want you to expand on what your experience has been.

Ms THOMAS: Yes. I have walked through native forest logged coupes, old-growth forest, and I have found so many pieces and parts of greater gliders and yellow-bellied gliders scattered amongst the debris on the floor. They are not being protected. They are not being looked after by the officers. We now have wildlife officers—well, they are actually called forestry and wildlife officers. They spend more time trying to keep people out of the logging coupes than actually protecting the animals that they are supposed to be protecting. So yes.

Dr RATNAM: If their role is supposedly to protect the wildlife within those coupes, what would that look like if that was actually happening—if the wildlife was being protected? Are there practices that need to be used more, as opposed to just keeping people out from protesting et cetera?

Ms THOMAS: We need to stop the logging of old-growth forest, ultimately. That is the only way of actually protecting our greater gliders and our yellow-bellied gliders. The small remnant populations of trees that are left behind when they decide that that logging coupe has some greater gliders or some yellow-bellied gliders in it is not enough. It is not enough for the food for the animal, because they need that entire area to eat. Because they are folivore specialists they are eating the gumleaves, and they need a huge amount of the gumleaves to be able to survive. They need the moisture. And with global warming we are actually seeing less of a dewpoint in the middle of the night. When the dew is sitting on the leaf and they are eating the leaf they are getting a drink, and when they are getting that drink, that is keeping them healthy. But when you remove all of that out of the environment, then you have got very dried leaf. They also burn the coupes after they have finished doing the logging, and that then dries out all of the leaf in the coupe because it is radiant heat that is washing over these leaves. So what leaves are left are then turned into basically just dry, horrible wastage. That practice needs to be stopped.

Dr RATNAM: Another question: your submission challenges the pretty widespread belief that the more common species of wildlife—for example, kangaroos—are not at risk of decline or extinction, an assumption that is used to justify the harvesting and killing of these species. Can you share with the committee the research highlighted in your submission about the so-called common species and the role they play in ecosystems?

Ms THOMAS: Our common species are intrinsic to the very role and the production of the ecosystem. We just do not understand or know exactly how many different common species are carrying around seeds and pollen and are also helping to keep the environment back in amongst. The problem with the kangaroo harvest is it also includes a lot of the other species. It includes the black swamp wallabies. And you might have one black swamp wallaby to 40 kangaroos, but if that gets shot out, then you have lost that, and they carry so much more around in their environment. They move pollen around in their coats, so it actually sits in their coat as like a dander, and they move fungal spores around in the environment as well. They contribute a huge amount. So do the possums and the gliders. There are things like the birds that are out there that are actually moving fruit, so things like lilly pilly from the lilly pilly trees that are moving. The flying foxes are out there—they are moving the seeds and the spores from the lilly pilly trees and from a whole vast array of trees that need protection in Victoria that are now only found in far east Gippsland. So to enable a recovery of the ecological system we actually need to have a pause and a review of fire burning practices and our logging practices and just see. Give the environment some time to recover. That is all it needs.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might just have a question if I may. The Victorian government announced its native forest transition package, and part of that was to move away from native timber logging. They had announced an end to the logging of old-growth forest immediately, with all logging in native forests in Victoria to cease by 2030. I am not sure if you were aware of that or not. Do you welcome that as an announcement?

Ms THOMAS: I do, but it is not enough, because there will be nothing left in 10 years time. I have been down there. I have driven around all of these logging coupes. There is very little left.

The CHAIR: But it is a welcome announcement nonetheless.

Ms THOMAS: It is welcomed, but it does not do enough, and it has actually changed the protection overlays for a lot of the animals as well.

The CHAIR: The other thing was that you note in your submission there are some inconsistencies between the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* and the *Wildlife Act*. Can you describe these inconsistencies and suggest possible solutions to these inconsistencies?

Ms THOMAS: Well, the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*—when we are talking about wildlife shelters, we often get told by our wildlife officers that they do not want us looking after pinkie kangaroos or pinkie wallabies or anything like that. They do not want anything that is a pinkie, because they think it is too much effort for us. Now, let us make that decision, because that is what we do. At every point in time we have the law thrown at us to try and throw us off what we are trying to achieve for the environment, and it is in vast contrast to what is actually happening out there.

The CHAIR: So do you think a more collaborative approach is warranted as a solution?

Ms THOMAS: Yes. We definitely used to work with our department as wildlife shelters a lot better—or the department worked with us better. Now all wildlife shelters feel in Victoria we are being attacked by our department, the very department that issues our licences, and that we are constantly the ones that are trying to help the environment but having everything thrown back in our face. Authority-to-cull permits—so it is okay for somebody to go out and shoot a kangaroo, but they do not want me to look after its joey and bring that back. For every kangaroo that is shot, if it is a female, it is her, it is her joey at foot, it is her joey in the pouch and it is her joey in utero that is sitting there in stasis. So that is four generations that are lost, and each of those joeys takes two years to get to full maturity and it is another year on top of that before they can actually breed. So what is actually happening out there in the environment is completely different. For us to be told we cannot look after the wildlife or we cannot assist it, to be pushed out of bushfire zone areas and to be not allowed to go in there during the black summer fires was horrendous and put most of the carers in Victoria in a state of high stress.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thank you very much. Thanks, Michelle. Thanks for your presentation and your opening comments. Also, Mr Kuiter, I have not heard your opening remarks yet but I would like either of you to address this. I am sort of talking in the overview here, and I notice some critical words about DELWP, and sometimes the interests there, the discretionary decision-making powers, do not go in favour of our animals. So land, environment, water and planning are sort of at odds with each other when they should all be working together, I imagine. I think we have got problems here with planning and hearings in VCAT and EESs and things like that where decision-making tends to be biased towards development, agriculture or economic things and not really looking after environmental matters. I really think that maybe if either of you want to make comments about that process, I think we have heard people talking today about expert evidence being given by consultants that tends to sort of negate the interests of the environment and puts commercial and development issues at the forefront in this decision-making process. Is it possible that you think that there should be some sort of overhaul of planning in Victoria that would put environmental matters and looking after wildlife and habitat to the fore?

Ms THOMAS: Yes, definitely. I am not sure if you are looking at my documentation or whether you are looking at Tina Lawrence's document.

Mr HAYES: I am looking at Tina Lawrence's. I am sorry.

Ms THOMAS: Tina is not actually appearing today.

Mr HAYES: Yes, I can see that.

Ms THOMAS: I have not actually spoken to a lot of that in my supportive evidence.

Mr HAYES: No. I notice that. Leave that.

The CHAIR: Perhaps what we could do is, you might want to put that on notice, Cliff, and you could ask Tina to respond in due course if you like.

Mr HAYES: Yes, that would be good.

Ms THOMAS: Because I do feel Tina is better equipped to answer your question specifically.

The CHAIR: Would that work?

Mr HAYES: Yes, that would be good. I just noticed also that Steven touches on it a bit in his talk about VicForests and developers.

Ms THOMAS: No, Steven has not done a talk about VicForests.

Mr HAYES: Okay. Sorry.

The CHAIR: Perhaps that can be directed to Tina on notice then.

Mr HAYES: The Frankston freeway plantations.

Ms THOMAS: That is me.

Mr HAYES: I am sorry. I have got Animalia here

The CHAIR: Do you want me to come back to you? I can come back to you, Cliff.

Mr HAYES: No. That is all right. I have said my bit. Unless Steven does add something different when he talks to us.

The CHAIR: Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you both for coming. Michelle, can I just say, as an opening statement, I want to thank you for your 30 years of service to animals and wildlife in Victoria. It is an

extraordinary effort, and there are not too many of you who are left who are around with that type of experience, so thank you.

I share your concerns on ATCWs, and I wonder if you can just elaborate here, because I certainly am not sure how many people around this table have actually seen an ATCW form. I am referring particularly to the box that talks about that you must have explored all non-lethal methods of control, and it does not actually state that you have to prove that to anybody—you merely have to tick that box. I am wondering if you can just confirm that for me—that I am not reading that incorrectly.

Ms THOMAS: That is 100 per cent right, Andy. I actually did a little exercise myself. I rang up the department on a private number and actually told them that I was a landholder and that I needed a cull to kill all the kangaroos on my land because they were eating me out of pasture. And they said, ‘Yep, no worries. Just go to this form; tick it and tick it and tick it. This is what you’ve got to do’, and they gave me every instruction. At no point in time did they offer me any education about non-lethal methods. All they did was support the harvesting of kangaroos. And they said, ‘Oh, and by the way, if you want, we can get some shooters in, and they will shoot out all the kangaroos and they will take the bodies off the land for you and they will actually be able to use that meat. Because you being a farmer or a landholder, you don’t actually want to have any wastage, do you? And you don’t want to have carcasses laying around on your farm’. And I said, ‘Oh, that’s great. Very much appreciated’, and jumped off the phone. So they did not know who I was. They just offered up all of that information. It was horrific.

Mr MEDDICK: Yes. And farmers that I have spoken to, certainly in the western region of Victoria, have been telling me that they can often get these approvals within 24 to 48 hours, and yet other groups, such as environmental groups, who are looking to translocate kangaroos, for instance, often face years of trying to prove what they need to do. Is that also your experience?

Ms THOMAS: That is exactly right, and 300-page documents just to prove that where they may be translocated to may be suitable habitat. Do not worry about the fact that, you know, the farmers have come in and ripped out all of the native vegetation, but they are worried that the kangaroos might overeat the vegetation in an area where there might be translocated to. But we are often talking about an area that they are going to be translocated to that is pristine environment for kangaroos—that there is no issue with numbers or safety of the kangaroos when they go to these areas—but time and time and time again those applications get knocked back by the department, and they cite cruelty. Well, I can tell you, citing cruelty is not a good enough excuse anymore, because the cruelty by the shooters is absolutely abhorrent.

For the last four weeks I have been running down to a property on the peninsula where there is a kangaroo hopping around with just a little bit of his front arm left and another female that has been shot through the side of the face and half of her jaw is blown off; she is surviving on her body fat. Then there is a juvenile that is slowly starving to death that is accompanying that female; but there is no food source for that baby or that juvenile that is at foot, because it is actually too young to be at foot. It has been pulled out of the pouch by a shooter. It has been thrown on the ground. They have tried to stomp on it, and they have actually broken its forearm and then it has got away from them in fear. And this the sort of stuff that our wildlife is facing on a daily basis. When you look at my PowerPoint presentation, you can clearly see animals, koalas, in trees that have been crushed against them in logging coupes. This is not good enough, and it deserves better for our wildlife.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you for that. I have just got one more question, if that is okay. And I am serious, I could sit here and talk to you for hours about this particular subject. I might just say, Chair, that the farmers I have spoken to were actually farmers who wanted to translocate kangaroos and who were prohibited from doing so by the walls put up, as you rightly say.

I just wanted to briefly touch upon failures in the system, particularly around koalas. You quite rightly brought up the Cape Bridgewater scenario, with what happened there. And I can speak from personal experience because I was one of the first on the ground, and I spent a few days there helping to take those animals to rescue. It was one of the most abhorrent things I have ever seen in my life.

I note that the government has actually got, currently, the *Wildlife Act* under review, or will be in about a month—submissions will be starting to take place. What has already been suggested to me is that perhaps in

that review the penalties surrounding cruelty to wildlife, no matter where they come from—whether they come from within the ATCW system, for instance, or exterior to those situations. What happened in Cape Bridgeport was that there was supposed to be a koala management plan undertaken and followed through with. Well, that certainly was not the case, so there was a breach there. So the penalties—it has been suggested that the minimums are not enough. They are not saying necessarily that we should have standardised—this is the minimum that you get, or attributable penalties—but the range is certainly not deterrent enough to prevent people from doing these things. Would you see that as a sufficient deterrent, or at least something that the department or the Office of the Conservation Regulator should have in their armoury, that the penalties for cruelty to wildlife should be set at a much higher standard, but then education of the judiciary as well so that they understand the way that the general population views the lives of wildlife in this state and that they expect heavy penalties where cruelty can be proven? Do you think that is a fair thing to ask?

Ms THOMAS: Yes, and the world is focusing on us at the moment. The world is looking at us after the Black Summer bushfires. They know how much the animals suffered during those fires and they know how many animals we lost from the ecosystem. We need an urgent review of the laws, and we need an urgent updating of penalties, because they are just not enough. For a farmer or for somebody to be able to poison three-hundred-and-something eagles and then get away with the paltry slap on the wrist that they got is incredible—just incredible. The department is here to supposedly look after our wildlife, not just hand out very easy fines to get around.

Mr MEDDICK: Just one last question then, Chair, if I may just indulge: do you think an independent office of animal protection should be established with those prosecutory powers?

Ms THOMAS: Yes, because at the moment it is not working.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: It has been most interesting listening, and you can hear the level of passion that you have and your commitment to wildlife animals and their wellbeing. It would be remiss of me, again, not to—there is a broad-reaching commentary that you have had in this presentation, and I think I feel the need to just pull up a couple of your comments. One relates to the timber industry, a comment around, Ms Thomas, that ‘If we don’t stop now, there’ll be nothing left’. And I put it to you that 94 per cent of our state of Victoria forests are under a national park or a reserve or are inaccessible or unsuitable and will not be touched by forestry through national parks and reserves, that only 6 per cent is available and that of that only somewhere between 3000 and 3500 hectares are harvested and replanted every year. Now, this is notwithstanding your passion for the environment, but I would hate to think that someone listening to this would think your ‘There’ll be nothing left’ comment means all the forests being wiped out.

Ms THOMAS: All of our native old-growth forest—we have got less than 1 per cent of native old-growth forest left, and that is what we want you to stop logging.

Ms BATH: Right, and I will let VicForests make their contribution and talk about what is and is not logged in terms of old-growth forests, and they will say that there is not any. In terms of regulation, I am interested to understand your position on our national parks and our forests that are not under, we will say, industry, and I am interested to understand how well you think they are managed, genuinely, and what improvements could be made through our native parks in a better management system.

Ms THOMAS: Our national parks need to not have dogs going into them any more. All of our parks—for instance, the Pines Flora and Fauna park in Frankston often has people walking through with dogs. Those dogs constantly are attacking koalas or wallabies—anything they can find. They go to bush and they rustle out quail that are living in there, and they usually catch them. They are decimating our environment. It is domestic dogs that are going in. If we are going to protect the environment and if we are going to have an inquiry into the decline of ecology in this state, we need to actually be aggressive about what comes out of this and actually achieve something, because otherwise this is just a talkfest.

Ms BATH: I have one supplementary question, thanks, Chair. Thanks, Ms Thomas. It is really interesting that you raised The Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve because I have some information that speaks about the

southern brown bandicoot, which was once upon a time in that area. This is not a gleeful commentary, but unfortunately it no longer exists there. It has vanished from there; it expired probably a decade ago, my understanding is. So I am drawing to our attention that even our managed areas need to be managed better, and there can be loss of species from that location when—

Ms THOMAS: The failure of that location was that there was over \$20 million put towards a fence that was supposed to be a predator-proof fence. That fence had had cuts and a car had hit it opposite Bullarto Road, and that fence still sits in that state where that car hit it to this very day. It has never been fixed. Parks said, ‘Oh, that’s not enough money for us to maintain the fence’. We had friends groups that were willing to actually do the maintaining of the fence. It was not going to cost them anything. That \$20 million was set aside as a predator-proof fence to make sure that the bandicoots were protected, and, yes, they went extinct 10 years ago, right around the time that that road went through. That road to nowhere down the peninsula went through 27 kilometres of untouched virgin bushland that was protecting the very animals that it needed to protect.

Ms BATH: Thank you. So if there had been maintenance of that fence—

Ms THOMAS: If they had used the money as maintenance and actually decided to use it—but they turned around and said, ‘No, we don’t think it’s worthwhile doing it because the locals are just going to cut through the fence and it is going to cost us way more than \$20 million’. They would not have even used \$1 million in maintaining that fence if they had done it the right way. I do not know where they could spend \$20 million on the maintaining, because all it is is zipping it up with some wire when they cut through the fence, and that costs about \$150 a year in wire. So it is no big deal, and the maintenance on that fence is a very sore point for me.

Ms BATH: I am sorry I raised it. However, it does show what a small difference can make in the right spot. I guess that is your point.

Ms THOMAS: Yes, and had they have done the right thing—but that was all Abigroup and pushing through that they did not want to support that park. They planted trees in the park. It was a very paltry exercise of planting trees. In fact Steven’s mother was asked to do the tree planting, and they said, ‘Oh, well, we’ll plant them in October’. Well, you do not plant trees in October. You plant trees in April, when they have got all of winter to get through and be supported by the winter rains. Of course they all died, and then they put fences up to prevent the rabbits getting into the new growth for the trees. But then they came along and they put signage on the fence, and the very signage that they put on the fence actually broke the fence and allowed the rabbits to get in. It was just diabolical to watch ineptness at its finest.

Ms BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We have got two more questions over here, but just before I do I might just indulge for a second as a follow-up to that: you talk about the road going through and the activities around that to try and mitigate the impacts of wildlife, do you think it would be worthwhile if roads like that are being built in the future—and I have seen this in Holland, for example—that they accommodate wildlife by using wildlife corridors? They might actually provide a tunnel underneath the road or overhead-type corridors, and if they do that should a plan be part of where you are going through an area like that? Should there be a plan specifically for wildlife that would include something like that? Is that useful or not?

Ms THOMAS: Yes, definitely. I have actually got recommendations. In your handout that I have given you today I have got 17 different recommendations and that is actually the second recommendation, and it should be a top priority because we are killing them on the roads. We have to have roads. I want to get on a road and go somewhere fast too. But in comparison with Victoria, when you go and drive in New South Wales—you go through New South Wales and there are beautiful, long, winding roads through native, beautiful bushland; you get into Victoria and they are horrible, stagnant, boring roads that have got just these horrible big fences down them, and you sit in your car going, ‘I just want to go to sleep’, whereas when you drive in New South Wales through their bushland areas, and I have done a lot of it, they are just beautiful, relaxing roads. You sit there and you bliss out, but you do not get bored because you have sort of got to go around the bends and you have got to keep your wits about you.

The CHAIR: Sure, I understand. You say that is a—

Ms THOMAS: That is a perfect fix to our situation.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. I will throw to Mrs McArthur. Do you have any questions?

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. My apologies for being late, but I have been at the road toll inquiry, and I am glad you have raised the issue of roads because wire rope barriers are a major issue that I see in my area for the destruction of wildlife. What do you think about the fact that the government have put wire rope barriers not only down the middle of roads but on the sides and no self-respecting kangaroo or wallaby can negotiate them? What would be your recommendation to government about wire rope barriers and wildlife?

Ms THOMAS: Well, I can give you the example of the road down to Bairnsdale. It is just horrendous. You travel along that road that takes you between Sale and Bairnsdale and you have got exactly that. It is echidnas, it is wallabies, it is wombats, it is kangaroos, it is koalas and it is birdlife, even, sometimes that are getting hit because they cannot get over the barrier that is in the middle, so they end up being the road runner waiting for the truck to run them over, and it is just horrendous. Every time I travel that road, which is very often, I think to myself, 'What will I find today, and will it be alive?'. Nothing is ever alive and nothing is ever salvageable—as in, if there is a joey in the pouch, it has already been run over 50 000 times and it is dead. There is nothing coming off that road that is living. So, yes, the wire rope barriers are not actually helping the wildlife. They are not there to help the wildlife. But those wire rope barriers actually spend more time being repaired than they do being proactive.

Mrs McARTHUR: We needed you to make a submission to the road toll inquiry, I can see that. I will just try and incorporate your evidence.

Mr HAYES: Animal road toll.

The CHAIR: I might throw to Mr Grimley because I am conscious of time. We have got about 2 minutes left, so I apologise, Mr Grimley. Do you have a question there?

Mr GRIMLEY: That is okay. I will be short and sharp. Thanks for the presentation, Michelle and Steven, and thank you for coming in. I had a different question, but I will go to the topic that we are talking about in relation to the roads. I do not have a copy of the paperwork you have handed out to the other committee members there, unfortunately, but can you tell me your thoughts also on the virtual wildlife barriers that I and Mr Meddick have espoused in the chamber on many occasions and are currently being trialled in Queensland and Victoria? What are your thoughts on those?

Ms THOMAS: They are working. They do make a difference, and I think we should be taking every step to try and mitigate destruction of wildlife on our roads. So I welcome those to be used. And any underpasses and overpasses that we can add in—they should be built into our road programs now. Australia is supposed to be a forward-thinking nation, and yet all of this sort of stuff has not been happening in Australia, but it has been happening worldwide for years. It is not rocket science to do this.

Mr GRIMLEY: Wonderful. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you very much, Michelle and Steven, for coming along today and for presenting and providing your evidence. Thank you for appearing at the committee, and you are welcome to go.

Ms THOMAS: Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Witnesses withdrew.