

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

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Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESS

Mr Peter Hylands, President, Australian Wildlife Protection Council.

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. I would also like to welcome any members of the public that are watching this broadcast at home.

Before I go further what I will do now is just introduce the committee members for you. I am Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of this committee. To my right is Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair. Further down the table, Melina Bath; Mr Andy Meddick, down the end; up at this end we have Bev McArthur and Dr Sam Ratnam. Welcome.

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, 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.

With that, we would invite you now to provide your opening comments but ask that you keep your opening statement to a maximum of 10 minutes, and this will allow all committee members to ask questions in regard to your presentation and your submission.

Could I also please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones—anyone appearing via the online link—when not speaking to minimise any interference.

I keep forgetting to introduce Mr Grimley because he is online. I am so sorry. I do that all the time. With that we will get underway. If you could provide your opening commentary and please 10 minutes, and then we will ask questions of you. Thank you.

Mr HYLANDS: Firstly I want to thank each of you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today. We are going to something slightly different. I am going to talk for about 5 minutes, and then we are going to show you a film. What is occurring across the Australian continent is that Australian species are being replaced by species from other continents. Even in the remotest places in Australia the patterns on the land are of hoofed animals and not the soft-footed natives of Australia. Look down on the earth on which you stand. Many of those plant species are also from somewhere else. Add climate change to the mix and the disaster unfolds before you.

In Victoria pre fires there were some 2500 species which were in some sort of trouble. The Victorian government claims that all wildlife in Victoria is protected. This statement could not be further from the truth. There are currently 88 native species on the Victorian government kill lists and permits to kill these animals are very easy to obtain. While politicians and their public servants, or most of them at least, are not themselves killing Australian wildlife, many are engaged in actively promoting and enabling the killing. So this enabling of ecosystem decline is overwhelmingly a publicly funded activity.

What I want to do here, as time is short, is to paint you a top-level picture of where we are heading. That means visiting neighbouring mainland states. Biodiversity has no understanding of borders; however, this colonial idea brings with it significant difficulties for biodiversity. The circumstances for wildlife in New South Wales are extremely concerning, and the situation has deteriorated dramatically over the last decade directly because of

New South Wales government actions, now magnified by last year's wildfires. The same has occurred in South Australia where the poor record for ecosystem decline and loss of biodiversity is astounding. In Queensland the devastation of the natural world continues at pace. So all of it looks grim, and it is becoming grimmer still.

Australian mammal species are in the front line of this targeted removal. What is very clear, as I have looked closely at these matters over many decades, is that state governments do not appear to learn any lessons from the past behaviours of others, choosing instead to adopt, often it seems without any understanding of the consequences, the very worst of these policies, with increasingly dire impacts on the continent's ecosystems. Australia is very different to many other countries around the world in that state governments, now enforced, by commonwealth government attitudes, because they actively encourage, turn a blind eye to and promote the killing of wildlife and the clearing of lands. These things impact severely on many native species. The compounding effect of these behaviours when combined with the other building blocks of extinction—in the Australian Wildlife Protection Council's submission to the inquiry—are becoming so serious that more and more Australian species are being pushed to the brink.

Prejudicial conduct in relation to these matters by the Victorian government include the flow of information. While the environment department boasts a 3-minute service to those killing wildlife, it takes me, the AWPC and undoubtedly others investigating the circumstances relating to ecosystem decline and biodiversity loss up to 12 months to extract the most basic information from these government departments that claim openness and transparency. Without any consideration for the consequences and harm done to a significant number of people living in regional Victoria, information is leaked to those doing the killing of wildlife while the individuals likely to be impacted by these activities are not responded to when they ask about what is occurring. The anxiety created by this behaviour is extreme.

Let us keep the numbers simple here, so I am going to give you three numbers. The first is 23. That is the number of red kangaroos counted in the Victorian government's kangaroo survey in 2017. The next number is 270. That is the latest number I have for Australian wildlife rescued from public lands, including state and national parks in Victoria during the catastrophic wildfires of last summer. The third number is 724 694. This is the number of kangaroos for which permits were issued to kill commercial harvest species since the beginning of 2018, and that includes this year and a small addition for joeys. So when residents and business owners complain about the slaughter and butchering of wildlife and the abuse and danger that the Victorian government has delivered to their doorstep in the middle of the night, they are described as unreliable and as having no evidence. They are completely ignored. So the government messaging reads: 'There have been no complaints, and governance and programs are working well'. Even heavily redacted, the correspondence between public servants obtained under FOI is shocking and clearly needs to be dealt with.

Victoria is now divided into shooting zones, an intellectually moribund idea with negative economic consequences. Wildlife is also being killed en masse in state and national parks in Victoria and on its Ramsar sites. Those responsible for these actions are not accountable the situation is not managed and as a result the boundaries of what is and can be done are pushed to ever greater extremes. A rethink is required before it is too late. Thank you.

Now we are going to watch a quick video. We have spent several weeks travelling around, COVID allowing, interviewing people around Victoria, and this is a small selection.

Video shown.

Mr HYLANDS: Those individuals who were subject to the shooting do not know when the shooters are coming. Both parties in Dunkeld run tourism businesses of a type, and it is clearly impossible for them to have people staying with them under those circumstances. I guess the point is: an activity that is conducted by very few people can have a very significant economic impact across a very large number of businesses in this state. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much for that. It was a very sobering film, seeing those sorts of images. I might lead off with a question perhaps. In your submission you talk about removing biodiversity conservation functions from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and creating an independent department to oversee these activities. So I guess my question is: what benefits would removing those conservation functions from DELWP and creating an independent department have?

Mr HYLANDS: What has happened in DELWP is very similar to what has happened in other environment departments across the country. There has been a cultural change over the years, so what we have now is not a conservation culture; it is not a culture that understands wildlife. It is a culture that is there to enable the killing of wildlife. We see that kind of attitude over and over again, and it is a constant process. Really we want to remove those responsibilities for wildlife to a department that is properly equipped to deal with the issues—not to propagandise about species, which is what is occurring.

The CHAIR: Do you see it as a conflict of interest or a conflict between those two priorities, I guess?

Mr HYLANDS: Yes, it is a complete conflict of interest, and the wildlife lose every time. You have to understand in the last 10 years just the sheer number of ATCWs being issued, and the number of wildlife that it covers has increased to a very remarkable scale. I sent you a link—to each of the committee. What I have done is an update of all these things beyond the document that you have. It is almost as if the wildfires of last year—and my wife and I spent two months in the fires. We were in Cobargo and Mallacoota and many other places, so we were witness to it and we were witness to the aftermath of it. It is almost as if those fires had not occurred. Nothing has changed.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Grimley, to you—a question?

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Hylands, for your presentation and video. It was very confronting and very pertinent to the inquiry. If I could just draw your attention to the terms of reference, point (e), which goes on to talk about the:

opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country ...

Your submission included a recommendation to accelerate emission reduction policies and review fire hazard reduction policies. My question is: what is your view on engaging Indigenous communities in these discussions on fire hazard reductions and how can this best be achieved—because, as we know, they have been doing this for 50 000, 60 000, 70 000 years, so they might know a thing or two.

Mr HYLANDS: Indeed. I have had a very deep relationship with Australian Indigenous people for nearly half a century. I spent a lot of time in Arnhem Land, in very remote places in Australia. So I have actually been living with Indigenous people who worked on many projects together, and we still have those projects running, particularly now to the west of Alice Springs in the Tjoritja national park. Clearly what we need to see is greater inclusion of Indigenous voices in these matters. What we are seeing from the Victorian government I think is that there are a lot of Aboriginal flags stamped on the bottom of government websites. Often what is occurring is—and various industries use this technique as well—to engage Aboriginal people in the support of the killing activities that are going on. Now, my priority is to make sure that Indigenous people are fully informed about what is occurring to the nature of Australia, what is occurring to the biomes across the country, and many people are aware of these issues.

All those years ago in Arnhem Land the old ladies would burn the land very carefully. When we travel across Arnhem Land now, what we see is large numbers of young white students or people working for environment departments running up and down the sides of roads and helicopters dropping incendiaries out on a very large scale. So we end up with these vast areas burning all at the same time. What has occurred with burning in Australia is that there is a very significant change. Okay, there is climate change, but we need to think carefully and look back actually at what Indigenous people were doing and how they were burning.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Well, that is a wonderful segue, because this is a topic that I have studied a little bit in my time in here and then out on country and up in Far North Queensland. Indigenous cool firestick burning, Mr Hylands, I think is something that we should be learning how to do in Victoria. That is my personal view. But also I think there is a lot to be learned from others in parts of our country. Could you elaborate a little bit more about your knowledge of firestick burning, how it exists and how they read the landscape? I would like to understand how you understand it for the committee.

Mr HYLANDS: Well, one of the things we should think about is that within those landscapes there are many food plants. We have worked on a number of projects in relation to that, and why the sort of gentler approach to burning is so important is it preserves those landscapes as well as all those plants as well as the

native animals. So it provides a much gentler approach to managing the landscape. And I think that is one of the lessons we can learn. I suppose what we worry about in terms of fires is those fires that started in 2019 in Victoria were allowed to burn for a very long time. How that can be stopped earlier is probably a critical issue, because once they get going nowadays, they become more and more problematic. So I guess a more detailed burning regime is probably what is required. You know from all the hearings in relation to burns that they are important, but if we are going to learn something, we need to look back at the history of how Indigenous burns were actually conducted is probably my point.

Ms BATH: Thank you. I have a follow-up, if you do not mind and if there is time. Thank you. It was interesting sitting in Orbost in late December and listening to some of the locals there saying that they could see it was going to come through the Snowy Mountains national park and come down to Mallacoota. One of them used to work for whatever DELWP was in previous incarnations, and he was very frustrated about the fact that Parks seemed to have a philosophy that they would not burn at all, even to protect, so they would not put firebreaks in and burn to slow the onset of the fire. Now, I would like to know your opinion on that. But also, if we do those mosaic burns at the right times, how would that affect these mega-fires?

Mr HYLANDS: I mean, I am not really equipped to answer this question in a scientific sense, but I guess one of the things that I would think about is what has happened to those forests. They have been fundamentally changed, so they are probably more fire prone by what has occurred to them. There are a lot of mono-aged forests across some of these regions, and I worry about some of the country towns I go to across Victoria where you see pine plantations right up against the towns in amongst the forests. I think those kinds of mixtures are particularly dangerous. It is about how we manage these landscapes and these forests to ensure that we manage them in a way that they do not burn in such a catastrophic sense. And I guess with climate change now, all these things are much more complex, and it is going to be much harder for places with large numbers of trees to be safe in the future unless we deal with the issue of climate change very quickly.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thank you. Thanks, Mr Hylands. Yes, it was a really disturbing film, and it is a really challenging sort of area that gets to me quite deeply. You know, I think often we say that we pay respect to the Aboriginal people at the beginning of lots of meetings, but how much respect we pay to their methods of conserving and looking after this land I doubt. Maybe we should see more Indigenous people in DELWP, or something like that—

Mr HYLANDS: Yes, I am sure that is right.

Mr HAYES: because I really picked up on what you were saying, and I have often noted the conflict of interest in DELWP—you know, talking about looking after our environment and planning seeming to be continually at loggerheads. I just think that that goes to the heart of a lot of issues. There is this push for development in population numbers and economic development being prioritised over all the other things that DELWP and councils and governments are meant to look after, such as the environment, habitat, animals and things like that. Although they are mentioned in planning schemes quite often, when it comes to VCAT or EES procedures the economic issues are always prioritised. I just want to get your comments, because I seem to be picking up that what you are talking about is a cultural thing in Australia—that really right at the heart of our decision-making we are making the wrong decisions.

Mr HYLANDS: Well, I think that is right, and I think bad economics is part of that. I mean, you can see from the films that we are quite happy to sacrifice knowledge-based businesses across the whole of Victoria so that 56 people can go and shoot kangaroos. Now, that extends into many different areas, so I would like to see a regional Victoria with much more knowledge-based activity in it. As you know, there are more and more people moving to the regions, and that has to be thought through properly in terms of their economic future. I do not have any problems with developing wealthy economic regions outside of Melbourne—I think that is a very good thing to be doing—but I think it is how you actually do it that is so important. I think Australia is a very precious place, and all those things that are Australian have to be integrated into that process. I think that some of the most impressive people I have met anywhere in the world, and we travel a lot, would be Australian Aboriginal people, and many of my friends in the north of Australia particularly.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Bach?

Dr BACH: Thank you very much, Mr Hylands. I enjoyed your presentation very much. It was very fulsome but I confess, Chair, because of that and the nature of some of the other questions, I do not have any questions myself.

The CHAIR: No problem. All right, thank you. Mrs McArthur, any questions?

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Mr Hylands. I am interested that you would like to create another authority. Would you not be confronted with the same issues? If we have got people in the other authority that are not doing their job properly, would a new one be any different? That is the first question.

Mr HYLANDS: Well, I guess one of the things I would say about DELWP first is that somebody needs to give a close look at that department. It needs a review.

Mrs McARTHUR: It is not the only one, mind.

Mr HYLANDS: No, it is not the only one. I am not talking about a sort of large mega department, but in creating a new department there may be an opportunity, and I might be being naive here, to actually have a new beginning and do something that is profoundly beneficial to the state of Victoria and to its people and its natural systems. You know, I am—

Mrs McARTHUR: The eternal optimist?

Mr HYLANDS: Yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: Fabulous.

Mr HYLANDS: Where we came to with this was that we could see that what is currently occurring is a complete disaster and it needs something else to happen. We have not done a huge amount of work on what that department might look like, but I am happy to spend a bit of time and effort on it if that is helpful.

Mrs McARTHUR: Now, with regard to how we make safe places for our wildlife, I was interested in the High Country area, where grazing had occurred in various parts. The fires came but that area was of course not burned because green regrowth had occurred, and it actually became a safe refuge for the native wildlife in the fire. We have by and large said grazing is not appropriate in the High Country, but we have not done anything about, as you say, the department being negligent in not removing the noxious weeds and growth that should not be there, let alone the other introduced species of pigs and dogs and cats and foxes and everything else. So if grazing creates a refuge for the wildlife in the absence of everybody else doing their job properly, would you not see that as a solution?

Mr HYLANDS: By grazing, what—

Mrs McARTHUR: Mountain cattle grazing.

Mr HYLANDS: Yes. Clearly, I mean, one of the biodiversity issues for Australian native wildlife, and I touched on it in what I was saying earlier, is that Australian native animals are being replaced by animals from somewhere else. When I am out in the desert country somewhere—150 kilometres out of Alice Springs or something—you no longer see any signs of Australian native wildlife. There is almost nothing there. What you do see is you see lots of horses, lots of cattle, and a lot of these animals are effectively wild. You see camels. There are a whole range of things that you see out there—donkeys—but almost no wildlife. There are a number of species in Victoria that have that potential to do grazing. What we are doing at the moment in places like the ACT is removing kangaroo species and replacing them with cattle and calling that ecological grazing. Now, I think that is a very silly idea. I would have thought that alpine places—I worked on two big projects for the Victorian government I think back probably in the last 15 years to look at the alpine economies, and I did the same thing for New South Wales. I spent a lot of time in those places, and I think it would be a sad thing indeed if we ended up with a lot of cattle and other non-native animals in some of these very fragile alpine environments.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mrs McARTHUR: Can I just say—

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, we have got two more members to go, so—

Mrs McARTHUR: Sorry. Just, as a farmer, the kangaroos survive very well with cattle because they love the short grass and the whole environment of water available.

Mr HYLANDS: And I think it is a question of where the cattle are, isn't it? I do not think we would want them everywhere—we do not want them in every kind of landscape, in every kind of biome. And if you travel across Australia, they are pretty well everywhere nowadays.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you, Chair. Just a couple of quick questions. Thanks so much for your submission and your presentation. You have provided an overarching view of some of the issues and solutions. I just wanted to go to a couple of specifics from your submission that we have not covered today. They are quite specific. In your submission you identify concerns about the ability of Victoria's environment department to protect habitat and wildlife due to internal conflicts. Can explain your concerns, and how do you think this should be addressed?

Mr HYLANDS: Well, again, this is about the conflict of interest that goes on. I think the previous speaker described it perfectly in relation to the issuing of ATCWs. What we have got is a marketing department for killing and not a department that cares about biodiversity conservation. I can say that because I have experienced it ad nauseam in Victoria, and it has got a lot worse. I am often speaking to people who are on the front line of this—many wildlife carers, those kinds of people.

The other thing I wanted to quickly say is that Victoria has one of the most toxic relationships of anywhere in the country between that department and the wildlife carers. That relationship is typically quite poor, and I think that was reflected by the previous speaker. That is totally unnecessary, and it comes out of that department culture which has developed over the years and has not been managed properly. I mean, there needs to be a just and proper management approach to these issues, and that is what is completely lacking in DELWP. And I think the behaviour of DELWP and Parks Victoria combined in relation to wildlife conservation is appalling, so we need something else going on here. If you look at the number of permits to kill native Australian wildlife in public lands in Victoria that DELWP have issued to Parks Victoria covering, I do not know, nearly 20 000 animals in the 12 months during the fires and following it, that is totally unacceptable.

The CHAIR: Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Hylands, for your presentation today. I have just got a couple of points for clarification there that I would like and I think it will illuminate everybody here. We are talking about the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning as a behemoth of a department here, but it certainly did not always exist in that way, did it? At one point in time it was two separate departments, and if my memory serves me correctly, it was the DPI, the Department of Primary Industries, and then the DNRE, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, and they had very clear and distinct responsibilities. Am I right?

Mr HYLANDS: I think that is right.

Mr MEDDICK: So then, when we saw this merging of these two departments, somewhat over 40 years ago now I think, what we have seen then—if I am taking what your estimation of the scenario is correctly—is that over that period of time, even if it did not occur at the beginning, significant weight has been given to the old DPI side of things at the expense of the DNRE side of things. So in other words, for the department that had the concern for wildlife, if we had a fifty-fifty balance at the beginning of this iteration of the merging of the two department, that has now somehow become so massively disproportionate that the wildlife is given next to zero consideration in comparison to the other side of things? Is that a fair estimation, in your view?

Mr HYLANDS: Yes, I think that is very fair, and that is the balance that now needs to be redressed.

Mr MEDDICK: Hence your argument for the separation again.

Mr HYLANDS: Yes, I think so.

Mr MEDDICK: Okay. My next question comes to the fact that we hear all the time that kangaroos, for instance, are in plague proportions out there. But we had a previous witness speaking about the breeding cycles of all macropods, and your concerns also concern me about the establishment of an industry. Given that all industries only ever seek to increase their market share—they never talk about a decrease—we are not seriously going to be thinking that here is an industry that has been created around pet food, and even now human consumption, that is going to sit back and go, ‘Well, you know what? That’s okay. As the numbers decrease, we will decrease our market share and therefore our profitability’ and think that is all right. They will always seek to increase it, and we could foresee perhaps a scenario where they push for the commercial farming of macropods to make up that shortfall. I foresee it—I do not know what you see; I would be interested in your views—but if that does not happen, coupled with the breeding cycles that we have heard about of all macropods, doesn’t this represent, with this massive increase in the killing of kangaroos, perhaps a crisis point for population numbers in the future?

Mr HYLANDS: Yes, it does. In Victoria back in the 19th century there were 16 species in this family. Seven are now extinct, and I would put four more species sort of ‘in trouble’. If you look at the eastern and western grey kangaroo populations in Victoria, these are vast scale exaggerations. If you look at the population numbers that came out of the surveys, the 2017 survey gave a mid-range population of about 1.4 million, I think from memory. The 2018 survey gave quite a similar mid-range number. In 2019 ARI—the Victorian government—estimated a population of just over 1.3 million kangaroos for 2020. Now, we suddenly have an increase of 41 per cent, or whatever it was, that takes the population up to 1.9 million.

Now, the department says it has not changed its methodology. I have very great trouble getting information out of them nowadays because they know what I am going to do with it. Now, clearly what they have done, or what it looks like they have done, is they have gone to much greater trouble in counting kangaroos, because they arrive at these population numbers by counting very few of them on transects. There are about 3000 kilometres worth of transects, I think, being flown in the 2018 survey and about half of that in the 2017 survey. So we end up with these enormously exaggerated population estimates which provide the opportunity to give a quota that says, ‘This industry is sort of sustainable’. Well, even with a commercial quota of 95 000, which we have this year, and ATCWs for 95 000 eastern and western grey kangaroos, that is about 190 000 all up. When we total those up, remember that we had a population of 1.4 million at the beginning of 2018—that was their estimate. As I said to you in my opening remarks, permits have been issued to kill 725 000 if you take this year’s quotas into account. We also estimate that Victoria lost 200 000 kangaroos in the fires. So we are talking about nearly 1 million kangaroos missing since the beginning of 2018 off a base population of 1.4 million. So how on earth can we have a 41 per cent increase in the population of just these two species? It is clearly absurd, and the Victorian government should not be in a position where it is promoting these numbers without carefully checking what has gone on. The fact that they desperately try and hide as much information as they possibly can when we ask them questions—it becomes rather obvious that there is something wrong.

The CHAIR: Sure. Thank you very much. I am conscious that we are just right on time now, so we might have to leave it there. Thank you very much, Mr Hylands, for coming in and giving evidence today.

Mr HYLANDS: It was a pleasure.

Witness withdrew.