

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Thursday, 11 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

WITNESSES

Ms Kerrie Allen, Spokesperson,

Ms Fiona Byrnes, and

Mr Arthur Byrnes, Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting (*via videoconference*).

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 is 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 who may be watching these proceedings via the live broadcast.

At this point in time I will introduce committee members to you. I am Sonja Terpstra, and I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. We have Mr Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair, and Dr Samantha Ratnam. Appearing with us via Zoom is Mr Stuart Grimley, and back to in the room we have Mrs Bev McArthur, Nina Taylor, Dr Matthew Bach, Melina Bath and Andy Meddick.

In regard to the evidence you will be giving today, all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council's 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, 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. Just before we begin, could I ask each of you to just simply state your name and the organisation you are representing for the Hansard record, please.

Ms ALLEN: Okay, I will go first. I am Kerrie Allen, Spokesperson for the group Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting.

The CHAIR: All right, thank you. And who else do you have at the hearing with you?

Ms ALLEN: I might introduce them in case they are having issues as well. Supporting me today I have Arthur Byrnes and Fiona Byrnes from northern Victoria.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you very much. Now, with that I will welcome you to provide some opening comments, but please ensure that your presentation is kept to a maximum of 10 minutes. I will give you a 2-minute warning as we approach the end of that time. If I could also just ask any other witnesses who are appearing to keep your microphones on mute to minimise any background noise. With that, we will hand over to you. Thank you, Kerrie.

Visual presentation.

Ms ALLEN: Thank you very much. And thank you very much, committee, for the opportunity to speak with you today. At the outset what we do want to clarify is obviously the issue of ecosystem decline is a far-reaching, serious issue. Our particular group's interest is in birds, hence why we have kept our submission on point just in terms of birds and the impact of shooting them. If we go to slide 2, thank you. The value of ecosystems, in our view, basically underpins pretty much everything—health and wealth for a start. We know that 75 per cent of all emerging diseases now are predicted to be zoonotic—in other words, transmitted from

animals to people—largely because of the way that we are treating our wildlife and our ecosystems around us. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat—everything is dependent on healthy ecosystems. You cannot put a price on this. Biodiversity, though, the World Economic Forum did put a price on. That they valued at US\$125 trillion, and I think we have seen just recently, with the impacts of COVID, what unhealthy ecosystems can cost us. We are talking billions. Unfortunately Australia is one of the most vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change and ecosystem decline. We are also a country that has arguably the most to lose.

Can we go to slide 3? Thank you. Australia is blessed with unique wildlife. I will show the results of a study in a moment that will show you just how valuable our wildlife is, but we know tourism contributes more to our country than agriculture, forestry, fishing, IT and media all combined, and nature-based tourism is the fastest growing component. Birdwatching, as an example, is now worth over \$40 billion just in the States, and we know that in the year ending December 2019 here in Australia there were 866 000 domestic—not even international, just domestic—birdwatching tourists. We had more domestic tourists overnight-travelling around Australia birdwatching than visiting the Reef, so we see this as a massive opportunity for Victoria. It is certainly a way that we can be on the same page as New South Wales and Queensland, for example, in terms of domestic tourism revenue.

If we go to slide 4, this is the study that I referenced before. Tourism Australia ran a comprehensive study in 2012. They asked 125 000 international travellers from 17 different countries: why are they coming to Australia? What is the attraction? And the answer is very clear: number one, wildlife.

So moving on, next slide. We know therefore that our wildlife is obviously extremely valuable, and bringing the conversation back to birds and native ducks, not only are they a potential tourism attraction for birdwatchers but they are good for our ecosystems in their own right. They eat the real crop pests. They are actually used overseas in rice fields because of this. Unfortunately, though, the science shows us that waterbirds are in serious decline, 90 per cent down since the 1980s. The annual *Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey*, which is the most robust long-term dataset available that we have, is painting an extremely bleak picture. In the most recent one, 2020, we saw a further fall just in game birds of 23 per cent just from 2019 and little to no breeding even though we have had rain, a massive red flag. Waterbird numbers were down a further 50 per cent in Victoria from 2019. It is not a pretty picture.

Could we go to slide 6, please? Thank you. I will not rest on this one too long; it is self-explanatory. This shows graphically the decline in wetland area, abundance and breeding over the last four decades.

Slide 7, next slide, please. Thank you. The number of birds killed, unfortunately, is far, far greater than what people realise. That table there on the bottom of the slide is the published harvest estimates for the number of birds killed every duck-shooting season in Victoria. Unfortunately that does not include the number of birds that are wounded, and you would have heard the statistics. Ballistics experts say that at least one in four birds shot are wounded only; they will fly away and die somewhere else. Mathematical simulations actually put that figure higher, closer to 1 for 1. But Norton and Thomas did a study in 1994 that clearly suggested we need to add another 25 to 67 per cent on top of these harvest estimates that you see here to account for wounded birds. Harvest estimates do not include birds left behind that are found quite often by volunteers—buried in pits. They do not include the ripple effect through the species of shooting one of a monogamous pair, and many of our birds are monogamous. They do not include the birds that are collateral damage. Unfortunately authorities do not have an understanding of where all the waterways are where duck shooting is allowed. There are thousands—it has been estimated up to 35 000. Obviously only a tiny percentage of these are monitored, which poses the real question: how on earth do we know what birds are there to begin with? What protected species are there? What is being shot? We just do not know.

Next slide, please. In terms of the impact on protected species, it is not just the eight game birds that call our waterways home. There are 130 species of waterbirds that use our waterways; 39 of them, in a recent count, were threatened or near threatened. I will not read out these examples. They were in the media loudly enough. Pretty much every year, sadly, there are instances of non-game and threatened species that are collateral damage, and unfortunately this is likely the tip of the iceberg, because most waterways are not monitored.

Next slide. This is probably the most disturbing quote that I have read. Arthur Rylah Institute, in regard to the impact of duck shooting on threatened and protected species:

... that is a separate question that can only be properly addressed by gathering robust data on the rates of non-target species ... killed or injured ... Such data do not exist and would be extremely difficult to gather.

I will just let that sink in, but how anyone can suggest that recreational bird shooting season is remotely sustainable with such a gross lack of critical data is mind-boggling.

Next slide. We know through the result of a freedom of information request just how extensive threatened and protected species being killed is. It is a serious issue. This table here shows—we were given tables for six years up to 1993, and one can only assume that this is pretty typical in any year—972 in this particular year just at the waterways that happened to be monitored, which was a small number. But you can see there the freckled duck up the top of the list. The freckled duck is Australia's rarest native duck, thought to be one of the world's rarest. It is getting shot in horrifically high numbers; the blue-billed duck—even a possum!

Next slide. This just shows you the six years that we got the data for. You can read that yourselves. In the interests of time let us just move forward.

Slide 12, please. Thank you. We do want to make a very serious and loud point that it is not just about ducks. Unfortunately the issue of quail recreational shooting is a serious concern that, pardon the pun, flies under the radar every single year. The Game Management Authority is also responsible for making recommendations on quail shooting, and it is perplexing why Victoria continues to have a full quail-shooting season when there is little data kept on their numbers. They closely resemble the critically endangered plains-wanderer, of which it is estimated there are about 250 left, and there are no accuracy tests required of shooters to shoot quail. To make matters worse, another freedom of information request we had last year came back with the response that only 13 compliance patrols took place for the entire season in 2020, which is grossly insufficient considering the factors I have just mentioned.

The CHAIR: Kerrie, you have 2 minutes left.

Ms ALLEN: Thank you. Next slide. The case of quail is compounded because for some bizarre reason toxic lead ammunition is still allowed to be used in shooting quail. I will not go into the medical reasons of why lead is an issue for humans as there is enough of that on the internet, but we estimate 5 tonnes of lead is being pumped into Victorian fields—a lot of them are used for food growing—as a result of quail-shooting seasons each year. Lead poisoning is a serious issue for ecosystems. It impacts threatened species such as white-bellied sea eagles, blue-billed ducks and protected eagles, and it is an insidious, cruel way for these birds to go.

Our final slide please, slide 14. In summary, as we put in our submission, a simple solution insofar as ecosystem decline is concerned, from a bird perspective, is to follow the lead of other states and ban recreational bird shooting in Victoria. We believe that taxpayer funds that are currently associated with bird shooting could be redirected to solutions which preserve our wildlife. One example that we have is wildlife crossings. No doubt other groups will raise this, but it is perplexing that overseas, places like France and the EU have hundreds of wildlife crossings, and here in Australia, where we have got beautiful wildlife to protect, I think we have got about eight—I think we have one in Victoria. So here is a classic, shovel-ready, if you like, opportunity for where we could put our focus. Hopefully I have got all that into 10 minutes.

The CHAIR: You have, with about 30 seconds to spare or less—actually, 3 seconds. Thank you very much for that presentation, Kerrie. We will hand over to questions now. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. You have given us a lot of figures; we look forward to fact-checking all those. I have got some stats I would like you to comment on. What are your membership numbers? Can all Victorians join? Do you reject anybody who asks to join your organisation? Where do you get your funding from? Do you receive any funding from Animals Australia?

Ms ALLEN: I am just writing down all those questions, Mrs McArthur; there were quite a few.

Mrs McARTHUR: Membership numbers?

Ms ALLEN: Yes. Can anyone join? Funding? Okay. In terms of membership numbers, I am not quite sure how that is relevant to an ecosystem decline inquiry.

Mrs McARTHUR: It just goes to the veracity of your organisation.

The CHAIR: If we could just have questions that go to the terms of reference, thanks.

Ms ALLEN: Thank you.

Mrs McARTHUR: So are you suggesting, Chair, they do not need to answer these questions?

The CHAIR: No, I am just reminding you: if we could have questions that go to the terms of reference, thank you.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Well, I have asked the questions. Do you want to answer them?

Ms ALLEN: I am happy to answer the ones that I can. As I said, the membership data—we are a not-for-profit incorporated association, we have a committee, we have non-voting supporters. In terms of numbers I am not going to comment on that; I do not think it is relevant. We are a relatively new association. Can anybody join? We welcome debate. We have banned people from our Facebook page; however, because we have found them quite intimidatory in nature. They are usually shooters, unfortunately. In fact our committee member details have been approved by consumer affairs to be suppressed online because of that intimidatory behaviour that they have witnessed. Funding—

Mrs McARTHUR: So not everybody can join?

Ms ALLEN: Our association is predominantly for people that are adversely impacted by duck shooting, so usually they are people who live or work around the waterways.

Mrs McARTHUR: So can anybody join, or not?

Ms ALLEN: As I just said, people who are adversely impacted by duck shooting are very welcome to join. That is why our society started—

Mrs McARTHUR: So it is discriminatory?

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Mr Meddick, to you, please.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your presentation here, and thank you also to—we have not heard from you—Fiona and Arthur for being here as well. Look, a key focus, Ms Allen, of this inquiry has been to collect data and to as much as possible ascertain at the veracity of that data, as Mrs McArthur put it then. So I want to ask you about, specifically in your submission, the GMA harvest estimates. You have listed just a few of the most high-profile examples of duck shooters deliberately killing large numbers of threatened and endangered species. My experience as a person who does go on the wetlands every year—my own personal experience—has been that shooters deliberately do that every single year. I have personally taken threatened and endangered species to care. The GMA survey relies upon, in their own words, the ‘honesty’ of the shooters in reporting bird numbers and threatened and endangered species. Given that they continually do that, first of all, how can we rely on the honesty of shooters to actually feed into that survey? And then secondly, in light of the Pegasus report—which found that the GMA itself was not honest in its reporting, in that it was compromised, severely compromised, by its membership being largely made up of shooters—can you just expand on that and where you think we might possibly go from there?

Ms ALLEN: Wow, so many comments. Thank you, Mr Meddick, for that. I think you are right; we are relying on shooters’ honesty. Those harvest statistics are a result of GMA telephone surveying shooters, so we are relying on shooters’ honesty but also their memories. I am sure a lot of them are quite genuine in their intent to provide realistic real numbers, but they would not be aware of the number of birds that they have wounded which have flown off. This was my point before. There have been so many studies on this. You can almost double the harvest numbers just by the wound rates.

We think an issue that is worth noting is that the WIT, the waterfowl identification test, is a once-off test, and it is likely that a lot of today’s duck shooters would have done it years ago. We have unfortunately seen the results of the knowledge gaps in the media recently. I think it was something like 80 per cent of shooters could not accurately answer a three-part question on waterbird identification, and that is a concern.

In terms of GMA being conflicted: yes, that Pegasus report was a concern. Have things improved since then? We are not sure. We have seen instances where residents' complaints are not taken seriously. They are dismissed. Councils' requests for exclusion zones have been dismissed. It has been very, very difficult to get what we believe is pretty basic information from GMA. We have had to go down the FOI path often, which is surprising. I think we know through another freedom of information request that the chair and other key members in that organisation, up until recently, had been duck shooters themselves. They had been members of Field and Game Australia themselves, so no doubt that would naturally cause some kind of a conflict.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you.

Mr HAYES: Yes. Thanks very much, Kerrie, and thanks, Arthur and Fiona. I have not got much to ask, because you have covered it very well. But I just want to say: is there some way that you could suggest that we could get reliable data, mainly because you hear so much confusion about the numbers, as the pro duck-shooting people say the numbers are actually on the rise—the number of birds that is—which is surprising? But I would love to be able to get that data, and I just wonder if it is possible to collect it or you could suggest a way it could be done.

Ms ALLEN: I do not think we can get an accurate understanding of what shooting at too many birds—

I notice that Arthur has come onto the screen there, and it is probably an ideal time for me to hand over to Arthur, who can comment on what he has seen personally. Do you want to comment, Arthur?

Mr BYRNES: Yes, I will have something to say. We live up right in the heartland of the duck shootings, and we see every year what goes on. This year and in drier years the duck population around here is declining rapidly, and I do not know where Field and Game get their figures from. They are in conflict with what we are seeing. Are you still there?

The CHAIR: Yes, we are here.

Mr BYRNES: Now, there is another point I would like to bring up. This area is an irrigation area, and there is cattle, dairies and organic, quite a lot of organic, where they cannot use sprays or drenches. Now, there is such a thing called a liver fluke. Now, people in Melbourne may not know what a liver fluke is—don't know it?

The CHAIR: No, we do. We do.

Mr BYRNES: We know it. Its life cycle depends on a snail which is in the waterways, in the channels, in the dams, and these ducks that fly around up here control these snails, and the organic people cannot use anything but this method to get rid of them, otherwise they are breaching their organic status. Now, they take the ducks away—they have got no control over these liver fluke without the ducks. Our family has some organic. We have got organic, and that is one thing that does concern us. If there are no ducks, there is nothing for the organic growers to control this fluke pest.

I could go on and on. With Kerrie, I could go on and on about the duck shooters. Not only are they a pest to us along the creek here, they lob shells at our house. They tell us, 'If you don't like living here, go and live somewhere else'. They are all very aggressive, and we cannot get anything from Parks Victoria or any of these other people that are supposed to control where they can shoot and where they cannot shoot. It is just a dog's breakfast. Nobody knows. If they do know, they are not putting up the signs to keep the shooters out. And anybody sitting in that room can imagine: if you are waking up of a morning and there is somebody lobbing shells or pellets on the roof of your house, it is not a very nice feeling. And there are kids along here and their parents will not let them out during duck season, out of their yard. They cannot go over to the creek. It is all invasive. It is like speedboats on the river. You cannot do anything else when the speedboats are going, and when the duck shooters are going up here, you cannot do anything. And there are a lot of things.

For the life of me—I am 80 years old—I cannot understand why people will say that going duck hunting is a family thing, where people can go along. They are teaching that generation, the younger generation—at 12 years old you can hold a gun licence—to murder our native birds. So anybody sitting in that room now who thinks that that is a good idea, it is beyond me. This is Picola out here where I live; it is not in America. And there are people holding guns that should not have guns. All they have got to do is to have a five-shot

shotgun—I think it might be up to eight shots now—to shoot ducks, and they do not even know what they are shooting at.

Fiona went in the other day to see Parks Victoria, and they said, ‘Look, we’re not going to oversee it this year. We’re not coming out to have a look, because it’s too dangerous’. Now, look, it is all right for us to sit out here and get pot shot at, but for Parks Victoria it is too dangerous for them to come out. Now, where is the logic in that one? It does not make us feel too good. And the police: I will ring the police, ring Nathalia police shop—nobody is there. Or I will ring Bendigo—that is about 110 k’s away—‘Oh, they’ll get back to you’. I mean if they do come back, the offenders are gone anyway, you know. There are people right along the waterways up here—from here to Albury to Mildura. It is the same thing. So we endure it.

And I am not a member of Kerrie’s group. Do not get me on to that lady—Mrs McArthur, was it? She was trying to divert us onto something that I could not quite get my head around about duck shooting, but anyway.

Mrs McARTHUR: Just your organisation. Love to hear from you—just what your organisation was about.

Mr BYRNES: Well, I am not in that organisation. I am flat out organising myself at my age.

Mrs McARTHUR: We are looking forward to Kerrie’s response actually.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Look, perhaps we might throw to Dr Ratnam for a question at this juncture.

Dr RATNAM: Sure. Thanks very much for your presentation and all the work that you do caring for our ducks and our wildlife. Just in terms of where the committee is at, we have been tasked with looking at our ecosystems and particularly the threatened aspect of our ecosystems. We have heard a lot in this inquiry so far about the laws that are there to protect wildlife and ecosystems and also to be able to implement those laws that are there to prevent but also look at breaches and punish breaches. We have been looking at the strategies to manage wildlife and particularly protect our threatened species. And we have been looking at whether there are enough resources to be able to manage our ecosystems and make sure our threatened species do not go extinct. Obviously you all are working in an area where you are seeing a number of threatened species, like you mentioned before in your slide, which are being actively hunted despite being threatened. Are you able to provide a comment from your perspective on what the adequacy is of both the laws to prevent the killing of the wildlife but then also the laws to enforce some of the breaches? What have you seen from your work about the efficacy of those laws?

Mr BYRNES: None. None. No, I have never seen anybody charged—or maybe one. Down near Nathalia, when we worked at this organic place, the police came out and moved a fellow on because we also had thoroughbred horses that were getting stirred up, and they got the police out. When we asked them to move, they got abusive, so we rang the police. But besides that one instance in the last 30 years, we have not heard anybody come out and say—and it is even worse now. Sometimes they used to drive around a bit, but usually by the time they got there the offender had gone. So it is a dog’s breakfast, all this business. You are not out on a lake. If you go to lakes at Boort and wherever where there are a lot of ducks and there are a lot of duck shooters, it can be controlled. But out in areas like this, it is impossible. Impossible. You are not allowed to shoot within 200 metres of a house. And the nature of this country, it has old titles and everything and the roads run right along the creek, and they are shooting from the creek onto the roads. Now you cannot get anybody to—

Ms ALLEN: I might just jump in there, Arthur, if I can just quickly. You make a good point that shooters are not supposed to shoot within 200 metres. We ran a survey a couple of years ago to try and flush out some of the issues that regional Victorians were experiencing, and we had responses from people that live in places we had never even heard of before. But there is shooting happening in some cases within 20 metres of people’s backdoors. It is appalling. It is one thing to say, ‘Yes, there’s definitely a threat to threatened and protected species’, but there is also a threat to people. Fiona, did you want to make a quick comment?

The CHAIR: I am sorry, but we actually out of time because we lost a bit of time at the beginning of the session. But what I will encourage members to do again is, as we always do, if any member did not get a question today, please submit some questions on notice. The Secretariat will be in touch to facilitate that.

Mr BYRNES: Could I just add that I am not against all duck shooters? Some of my mates are duck shooters, and we beg to differ. But a lot of the duck shooters are good, ordinary people with the wrong idea. We just have different ideas.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your contribution and your presentation today.

Witnesses withdrew.