

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

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Dr Samantha Ratnam

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PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr David Davis

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Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES

Ms Rebecca Cook, Head of Prevention, and

Ms Mhairi Roberts, Policy and Advocacy Manager, RSPCA Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's 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 who may be watching these proceedings via the live broadcast.

At this point I will take the opportunity to introduce the committee. I am Sonja Terpstra, and I am the Chair of the committee. This is Clifford Hayes, the Deputy Chair. There is Dr Samantha Ratnam. Appearing with us via Zoom is Mr Stuart Grimley. Back in the room is Mrs Bev McArthur. Down the other end is Ms Nina Taylor, then Dr Matthew Bach, Ms Melina Bath and Mr Andy Meddick. And I did not give anyone a promotion then by calling anyone 'Doctor' at the wrong time.

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 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. For the Hansard record, if you could just begin by stating your name and the organisation you represent first.

Ms COOK: Rebecca Cook, RSPCA Victoria.

Ms ROBERTS: Mhairi Roberts, RSPCA Victoria.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much. Now I will invite you to make your opening statement. If you could please keep it to 10 minutes, I will give you a 2-minute warning as you approach the end of that time. Then of course the bulk of the time after that will be to allow us to ask you questions. All right, over to you.

Visual presentation.

Ms COOK: Thank you very much. Firstly, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear today. The RSPCA, for those who are not aware, is a non-government, community-based charity that was established in 1871, so nearly 150 years ago. We work to prevent cruelty to animals by actively promoting their care and protection. The RSPCA has become Victoria's leading and most trusted animal welfare charity.

The welfare of Victorian wildlife populations is undeniably impacted by the decline of ecosystems. As an animal welfare organisation, we have long been concerned about the welfare of animals that are impacted by human activities and our impact on the environment. While species extinction, wildlife conservation and animal welfare are often framed as separate issues, they all involve ensuring the wellbeing of animals as individuals or as species.

The RSPCA recognises that the state of an ecosystem directly affects the diversity of populations, the likely survival of species and the welfare of individual animals within it. Considerations of wild animal welfare thus require finding a balance between maintaining the viability of an ecosystem and protecting the welfare of

individual animals. The RSPCA believes that wherever human activities have the potential to have a negative impact on wild animals, whether directly or indirectly, we have a duty to ensure that they are conducted in a way that causes as little injury, suffering or distress to animals as possible. The RSPCA supports the establishment and maintenance of national parks and conservation zones in areas of environmental significance to preserve genetic diversity, promote biodiversity and protect native animals from human impacts. The use of such areas should only permit activities that do not compromise animal welfare. At the same time, the RSPCA recognises that these areas alone are not sufficient for the conservation of biodiversity.

When considering the impact of ecosystem decline on native animals, we highlighted two case studies in our submission—that of kangaroos and native ducks. We know that Melbourne's growth corridor is having an impact on kangaroo welfare by reducing available habitat for kangaroos. In recent years we have seen examples of kangaroos becoming displaced or landlocked, which significantly impacts the welfare of those individuals. We are concerned that there has been no long-term monitoring of kangaroo populations and that therefore the impacts of increased development through kangaroo habitat is unknown. We are also concerned about the kangaroo harvesting program in Victoria. The RSPCA is opposed to the killing of wild animals for commercial utilisation unless it is carried out as part of a wild animal management program that is justified, supported by scientific evidence and has clearly stated aims. Shooting should only be permitted in areas where the need to manage the kangaroo population has been adequately justified—for example, where the specific situation has been assessed and there is a clear need for population control rather than for commercial purposes.

In regard to native duck welfare, we are concerned to note that data provided by the aerial survey of wetland birds in eastern Australia each year illustrates the dire conditions that native wetland birds are facing. Many waterbird species have abundances well below long-term averages, in some cases by an order of magnitude. We are very concerned to note that while there has been a small increase in available habitat, such as in the Murray-Darling Basin, we have continued to see a decline in game bird abundance. This is in direct contrast to what has been the understanding where habitat availability and game duck abundance have a positive relationship. While there is no explanation as to why this could be the case, we know that there is a long history of dry conditions, possibly exacerbated following the 2019–20 bushfires. It is not clear if this is an aberration or the beginning of a crisis in native duck populations.

Unless this is properly understood, we do not believe that duck hunting should continue, as it is likely to increase pressure on a population that at this stage seems unable to rebound with improving habitat. This is in addition to the significant welfare impacts that hunting has already on individual ducks. Instead, RSPCA Victoria would like to see increased opportunities for birdwatching and ecotourism in the areas that have been open for duck hunting. Ceasing duck hunting allows the opportunity to significantly increase birdwatching and wetland tourism while simultaneously getting the Victorian community to engage with our natural environment.

We also acknowledge that in some circumstances it is necessary to manage populations of wild animals, native or introduced, and I will talk briefly about this now. There are three main reasons just used to justify the management of wild animals: to protect the welfare of individual animals; to help conserve a threatened, endangered or vulnerable native species; and to reduce adverse impacts on human activities or the environment. It is noted that in most cases these problems have arisen as a result of human activities or interventions. Any measure taken to manage wild animals must recognise that whether a species is native, introduced or viewed as a pest does not affect its capacity to experience pain, suffering or distress.

A little bit about introduced species: introduced species contribute to ecosystem decline through the destruction of native habitat by grazing and/or compaction of soil, making it difficult for native vegetation to grow. They also compete with native animals for food and habitat or directly predate on native species. It is worth noting, however, that their welfare can also be impacted, whether that be through a changing climate or through direct management by people. Introduced species should be proactively managed where it has been demonstrated that they are having an impact on ecosystems and native animal welfare. This management should aim to reduce these impacts rather than just be focusing on reducing the population size of a certain species. Species must be managed in humane, effective and target-specific ways. However, some methods of introduced species management are not humane and can cause significant suffering for animals before death. In addition, some methods of introduced species management can also pose risks to native wildlife. The RSPCA believes there is a continued need to improve current control methods or replace them with more humane and effective

alternatives. The RSPCA supports the research and development of humane alternatives, including the replacement of lethal methods with humane and effective non-lethal methods.

Finally, cat management, I heard as we came in. We spoke at length in our submission about humane cat management, as this continues to be a complex issue because cats are considered both a pet as well as a pest in the environment. The lack of a universally agreed cat definition causes confusion and conflict, as we have just heard, inconsistencies in legislation and difficulties in implementing cat measurement initiatives. The most important definitions are those of feral and for domestic cats, as these have profound consequences for the treatment and fate of individual cats. Because of this, in 2018 RSPCA Australia developed the *Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia* report, which aims to identify current best practice approaches to domestic cat management to help address poor welfare and high euthanasia rates of domestic cats and mitigate their impacts on humans and wildlife. The report contains 21 recommendations, but I will just highlight a few, including consistently defining cats across all jurisdictions, establishing a cat management advisory group, introducing 24-hour cat containment, cat owner education and developing a coordinated approach to the management of feral and domestic cats to ensure that laws and strategies are complementary, not opposing. And that is us. We thank you again for your time and the opportunity to speak today.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you very much. All right, Mr Grimley, over to you: question.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your submission and all the great work that you do. Part of the terms of reference relate to legislative solutions to facilitate species protection. In the opinion of the RSPCA, does the legislation that we currently have go far enough in prosecuting those who commit crimes against animals, and what does the RSPCA believe they would like to see changed in this particular space?

Ms ROBERTS: I suppose that is quite a complicated question because depending on, I guess, what class of animals you are speaking about is what legislation they fall under. So for example, management of introduced species often falls under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act*. There are always going to be the general provisions of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* as well. And if you are talking about native species and management perhaps of overabundant species, then there is also the *Wildlife Act* that comes into play. I suppose it really depends on the context of the animals that you are thinking of and how that, I guess, interacts in terms of activities and that type of thing, so it is probably a rather complicated question. I think there is always room for improvement. I know that there is a plan to review the *Wildlife Act*. The *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* is under review as well. Some of the key things that we are looking for under that piece of legislation is to recognise that animals are sentient, so they can feel not only pain but also positive states such as pleasure and that type of thing. I think there is always room for improvement in terms of the legislative framework, but yes, what might need improving will depend on the circumstances.

Mr GRIMLEY: Wonderful, thank you.

The CHAIR: Do you want to have another, Stuart?

Mr GRIMLEY: Yes, if I can. That would be great. You also stated that introduced species need to be proactively managed with humane and effective methods. Can you provide examples of what these methods might encompass?

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, I think there are a lot of methods that are used. Commonly, I suppose, with introduced species poisons are used. Shooting is another tool that is regularly used, but it depends on the particular scenario or the type of animal how humane or relatively humane particular methods are compared to others. For example, 1080 poison is a poison that is quite commonly used but one that we do not think is humane. I know some research has been undertaken to look at alternative poisons such as PAPP to be used instead. Shooting can be relatively more humane than other lethal methods, but only when it is carried out by competent operators. Generally we recommend professional shooters. Also the terrain where they are shooting from all plays into that, so again it really depends on the context and the species. But we would also really love to see more research put into looking for alternative control methods, especially looking into more non-lethal methods, because a lot of introduced species management and even management of native species is often lethal. So if there is an opportunity to look at that, that is definitely something we would be really supportive of. I think the proactive piece is also really important. I think making sure that we have a really good understanding and justification of why management needs to occur is really important, but also being proactive in making sure that if we can intervene earlier to have better welfare outcomes for animals, then we should.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Taylor, I know you are an avid keeper of cats. I know that much.

Ms TAYLOR: But they are indoor cats.

Dr BACH: That is what they tell you.

Ms TAYLOR: No, no, they do not want to go outside. I tried to take them out on a lead.

Dr Bach interjected.

Ms TAYLOR: No, they will not. They stay inside.

Ms COOK: You can be a Safe Cat, Safe Wildlife ambassador for us.

Ms TAYLOR: I am happy to do that. I was just going to actually ask—although the feral cat management is very, very important—just with climate conditions and the abundance of waterbird populations, how you see the impact of the changing climate on the waterbird populations. That is where I was going.

Ms ROBERTS: Well, as Bec mentioned in our opening statement, every year the eastern Australia waterbird count is conducted, which is showing a really long-term decline in waterbird numbers. I suppose that is not looking at the causation of that, but we know that in dry periods there are lower numbers, and as we mentioned there is that really direct relationship between greater habitat and water availability, meaning you will have better breeding and higher duck numbers. Where you have dry conditions, you are likely to see lower numbers of ducks. I suppose that is why we were concerned with the 2020 data, because it showed that, while I think it was still the fifth-lowest on record in terms of available habitat, it was slightly better than 2019, but the duck numbers do not seem to be increasing with that available habitat, so that is something that is concerning. I suppose we do not know why that is, but until we do know, that is why we are really concerned that hunting continues because that obviously reduces the population numbers further, as well as having obviously a lot of animal welfare impacts too.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thanks, Chair, and thank you, Ms Cook and Ms Roberts, for your presentation. I wrote some notes. You spoke about the state of ecosystems being directly proportional to animal survival and viability. That works. You talked about human activities causing the degradation, potentially, and you also spoke about duck populations. I am interested in your perspective—and I will ask a question in 2 seconds—about human activities that promote and support habitat improvement. I take you to the Heart Morass in Sale. The Heart Morass sits between two Ramsar wetlands. It is 3000 acres and there have been countless hours of people from about 15 years ago, when it was a salt pan—it is now a beautiful wetland where all species are flourishing, and I could list them for you if I had more time. I am interested in what the RSPCA, which has been around for a long, long time—almost as long as our state Parliament—is doing in terms of habitat restoration and preservation.

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, so it is not something that we are, I suppose, directly involved in. I suppose operationally we are predominately here to care for animals, or our inspectorate is here to investigate under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*. But I do take your point and agree that it is a really important piece of the puzzle to ensure habitat restoration. I know there are a lot of great groups where that is their focus, groups like Landcare, that do go out and restore habitat. I think restoring it is really important. Protecting the habitat that we still have available is also really important. I suppose when we speak to other opportunities at wetlands, we would be really keen to see infrastructure built, because obviously we would not want to encourage people to go out and see the natural environment and degrade it further. So I think it is definitely a really important consideration.

Ms BATH: Thank you. To that point, it is interesting you mentioned Landcare, because they have been amazing over decades and decades—a great support to improving our landscape and our ecosystems, whether it be on private land or in combination with public. But I am interested: the group who runs Heart Morass is Field

and Game, and of course if you want to close down and stop all hunting, you have to ask yourselves is it fair on them? They have put all of these hours and hours and hours into it, and they have loved it. That is their responsibility, they have chosen that, but in doing that, if they walk away—if they do because you have closed duck hunting—what will become of those wetlands? Will the RSPCA, for example, look to take those over as a responsible area?

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, I suppose it is an interesting point you raise. I think it is really great that they do go out there and care for the wetlands. But from our perspective we are looking at the welfare. When we talk about duck hunting, we are looking at the direct welfare impacts of hunting and using shotguns, which really are not humane because, as I am sure you know, the shot scatters, and so therefore the likelihood of injury is a real issue. Habitat restoration is not within our remit, I suppose. While we know it is important, we know that there are organisations where that is what they look after, so it is not necessarily an area we would step into. It would be a shame if another group stepped out of it, but I do not know that I can comment much further on that.

Ms COOK: Yes. I am not sure we could comment on who could take it up, but you would hope someone did.

The CHAIR: Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Hi. Thanks so much for your submission and for appearing today. I just have two quick questions. First of all, just following on from Ms Bath's comments on Heart Morass, were you aware that Heart Morass is actually filled with water that was stolen by a former Field and Game spokesperson, Gary Howard? So the only reason it is actually there and has got the water in it is because it was stolen from another water catchment. And he was convicted of doing that—so he has actually caused degradation to another waterway. Secondly, I am concerned about the decline of species as well. I am referring to the recent GMA survey, where it identified that less than 20 per cent of duck shooters can actually identify species that they are actually supposed to be shooting. Does that concern you, then, about the long-term viability of any of these species?

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, especially I suppose the likelihood of shooting off-target species that are already classed as vulnerable—so it is definitely very concerning—but also the long-term viability of game species that are already in decline. If there are some years when we know that some particular species that might be on the game list are protected and people cannot identify them, it is definitely a really great concern that numbers will continue to decline if nothing is done for them.

Mr MEDDICK: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Dr Bach.

Dr BACH: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Ms Cook and Ms Roberts, for your presentation. It is wonderful to have representatives of a group of course that was founded by a conservative politician. I just note the simple fact that those of us on the centre-right actually invented the entire concept of animal welfare. That others have jumped on the bandwagon is a great thing. You are all very welcome.

Mr Meddick was talking about threatened species and his concern about a decline in species, and I share that concern. I was interested to note in your submission that you spoke for example about a lack of data when it came to kangaroos. The group who we had presenting just before you arrived talked about a lack of data when it came to ducks. We have heard on numerous occasions about a lack of data regarding threatened species as well. Keeping on that theme, I wonder if you might speak with us—because this has not been a particular focus of your presentation; you focused on other elements of our terms of reference that are entirely relevant—on threatened species. How do you feel that we do here in Victoria to seek to support threatened species, and if indeed there are things we can improve, what would they be?

Ms ROBERTS: Yes. This is an area that I know a lot of groups work a lot in. Zoos Victoria is one that comes to mind that does a lot of work in threatened species recovery. I think there is always more that we can do, and there is always more funding needed and understanding of some species. Sometimes there is not a lot of understanding about the biology of species or there is not a lot of historical understanding, so it is hard to understand what is happening with species over time. So there is definitely, I suppose, space there. It is not an area that we work in a lot because obviously we are focusing more on the welfare of individuals and populations, but we definitely recognise that the welfare of threatened species is often impacted by a range of

factors, and when we see species decline we know that often a lot of welfare issues go alongside that, whether that is increased predation from habitat loss or starvation because there is not enough food available for those species. So there is definitely—and I think as we said in our presentation, we do think about conservation and welfare quite separately but they are very much interlinked. But it is not a space that we work in a lot, specifically looking at recovery of threatened species.

Dr BACH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thanks very much. Thanks for your submissions today and your answers to questions. You talk about native animal population controls and whether we need them or not. I want to point out that the threatened species we talk about are declining exponentially but one species that seems to be increasing exponentially is the human species. You talk about our human activities and the impact of them on ecosystems and increased development being of concern. Should we not be looking at our population control—not by shooting or poisoning? Here in Australia we mainly import our population. It seems to be an economic objective to increase the population but it does have other costs, and I wonder whether you would like to comment on that.

Ms COOK: It is probably outside of our area of expertise, I would say.

Ms ROBERTS: I think the only thing I would say to that is that we do acknowledge that human impacts do impact animal welfare, and it is something that I think we need to be aware of, and how we can reduce that impact as much as possible.

Mr HAYES: The graphs match each other: as the humans go up, animals decline.

Ms COOK: Potentially.

Ms ROBERTS: But I think as long as it is something that we are aware of and we try and reduce the impact and save as much habitat as we can for the animals; it is really vital.

The CHAIR: Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Very quickly, because we are running out of time. I was going to ask you whether you could show us that cat slide again, quite quickly. The reason I ask is that we have heard in the hearings so far that co-dominant themes that are threatening ecosystems are climate change, habitat loss and invasive species. I think there was some commentary about how we can manage it humanely, so I would be interested to understand that a bit more, if possible.

Ms ROBERTS: Yes.

Dr RATNAM: Because we are looking for solutions and how to be constructive, and that was a good slide.

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, for sure. I think that is why we referenced the RSPCA Australia report, because that did have a lot of recommendations in it. Some relate to obviously domestic cats and how we can minimise pet cats' impact on wildlife that is in our urban areas but also the complexities of the management of feral cats. I suppose the spectrum of cats as well is another complexity in terms of that. We term a feral cat as being one that is completely independent of humans—so no reliance on even, I suppose, scavenging off humans and that type of thing, so they tend to be much more rural. But then you have domestic cats that can have really low sociability and sometimes are referred to as feral, but how we manage them would be quite different. They are often, at least, in peri-urban areas and also in, I suppose, more urban areas too. They tend to come in through our shelters, and I think the management of them is quite different. I think the techniques that are used are very different between how they are managed.

The report we referred to has 21 recommendations in it. Things such as developing a cat advisory group would be really beneficial to start to address some of those complexities for cats. Having, as we said before, consistent definitions in legislation as well would be really beneficial because they can differ. As I was saying before, there are I suppose several pieces of legislation. Cats are also—I did not mention before—under the *Domestic*

Animals Act as well. They would also fall under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act* for cats on public land. So it is quite complicated, and there are a lot of interplaying factors for cats.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you.

The CHAIR: And just following on from that theme, I remember I did read your white paper on cats some years ago, and the themes that you are talking about in terms of the labelling of the feral versus the owned or semi-owned or whatever, I think does cause confusion. Because you do hear people talking about a feral cat, and it is like, ‘We don’t actually have feral cats’, you know? So it is interesting, but it is complex as well, because like you are saying, cats are domesticated pets, and then, you know, they are left behind or escape or whatever. But sometimes local councils actually have some desexing programs that are free for people as well. So I am just wondering if you could enlighten us on some of the roles that perhaps local councils are playing and can play in assisting people I guess managing or maintaining the responsible pet ownership of cats. Is there any insight you can give, where you have got examples of where councils have been playing a partnership role in that space?

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, I think there is definitely a lot councils can do. Containment of cats I think is a really important piece. Some councils put in overnight cat curfews, but what we would really like to see is a 24-hour cat curfew—so people keeping their cats safe at home. It is good for cats, it is good for wildlife, so we think it is a bit of a win-win. As Bec mentioned before, we have got our Safe Cat Safe Wildlife campaign. So we have got a few councils that have signed onto that; we can then provide councils with information to help educate the owners in their local government area. Desexing initiatives, as you mentioned, are also really helpful. So there is quite a lot councils can do. I suppose the difficulty is that we do have 79 local government areas in Victoria, so some councils are doing a really great job of managing cats in their area and other councils probably need some more support to do so. But I suppose from a state level it would be really great to see some legislation that required confinement of cats to people’s properties, and that definitely would need to go hand in hand with an education campaign—you know, the carrot-and-stick approach. But I think that would really help, especially in urban areas, obviously keeping that as a separate issue to feral cat management. But, yes, from a state-based approach, confinement would be really helpful, and then at the local government area. If that is not possible, then, yes, 24-hour cat curfews and desexing initiatives are really helpful.

Ms COOK: Just by the way, we worked with Latrobe City Council at the end of 2019 and start of 2020 on a broader animal welfare prevention project, and desexing was a major component of that. And it was really well received by the community, and that was free desexing for community members. We were pretty much swamped with that.

Ms BATH: And their pets!

Ms COOK: Yes!

The CHAIR: It would probably be fair to say, too, I think one of the problems for people is that they want to have a cat, but the cost of desexing can often be quite high. So that is why it is good to have that kind of assistance. And you probably heard some of the other submitters, but certainly a bit of a theme that is emerging through this hearing is that there is a lack of data—like solid, robust data—around a whole range of things. I am just wondering, in regard to cats—and I am not disputing for a moment what cats do when they catch wildlife, but they also go for rodents and small mammals, and little farm cats keep mice down and those sorts of things—do you have any robust data around predation rates and what cats are actually going for? There is no doubt that they kill wildlife, but I am also noticing that some cats are more predisposed than others, and I do not know whether that is a breed thing. I do not know what it is, and also, in saying that, undesexed male cats are the ones that do the spraying and the fighting and all that kind of stuff. So are you able to kind of highlight any of those differences, and is there any point I guess in highlighting those differences, or should there just be a blanket approach to managing it? And what can we learn from data in that space?

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, there definitely is research into the types of animals that cats predate on. So I know they have done studies on that. I am not sure whether that has been done in urban areas, but more so with feral cats, so I am sure we could find that and provide it to the committee. In terms of the differences between different types of cats, that is not something that I am aware of. You know, female cats roam too, and as soon as they roam, then they have the ability to predate. I am not aware that there are any sex differences or breed differences, but we can definitely have a look and take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Sure, okay. That would be great. Thank you. We have got a few more minutes, surprisingly. Mrs McArthur, would you like to ask a question?

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you so much. Just before we go any further, I do not think you did answer Mr Meddick's question about Mr Howard, which is probably a good thing because I am suggesting that Mr Howard be given the opportunity to respond to Mr Meddick's accusation about theft. But I am interested in the cat issue—

Mr MEDDICK: He was convicted.

Mrs McARTHUR: I beg your pardon?

Mr MEDDICK: He was convicted.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well—

The CHAIR: Anyway, can we have a question that is relevant to the terms of reference, please?

Mrs McARTHUR: We have heard that there are millions, if not billions—I am not sure of the exact number, but there are an extraordinary number—of cats in the wild causing extraordinary amounts of damage to wildlife. You have got some suggestions about classification and so on. How is that immediately going to help us to reduce the wild cat population? Once they have escaped from domesticity into the wild, we need action probably much quicker than a kind of classification program or another inquiry or an investigation. So what immediately can we do to reduce this cat issue with wildlife?

Ms ROBERTS: I think that is where our suggestion for a cat advisory group comes into play, because that can help with questions like that about management of cats. But I know that already there is management that is being undertaken, because cats have been declared a pest on Crown land. So I am sure that there is management underway. As we said in our opening statements, we do support proactive management of introduced species where it is justified, effective and humane. That is something we are supportive of. There are already tools out there to manage feral cats. There are control methods available—

Mrs McARTHUR: But are they working?

Ms ROBERTS: I think the control methods do work. I suppose it is probably more a question for land managers rather than the RSPCA. It is not something that we, I suppose, are directly involved in. We are concerned with ensuring humaneness of control. But I would definitely put that to land managers.

Mrs McARTHUR: I guess another issue that gets raised with introduced species, and it is in the current conversation, is brumbies. What is your view on either the removal or the eradication of brumbies?

Ms ROBERTS: Similar to other introduced species—so where it is justified and there is a need to reduce the impact that feral horses are having on the environment—then we are supportive of that if it can be demonstrated that there is a need to do so to reduce the impact that the horses are having, rather than necessarily just reducing the number of feral horses. For us it is about demonstrating that the impact that they are having on the environment has been reduced. Again with any control that is conducted we would like to see the most humane control methods available used to do that, and that might be a combination of control methods. So yes, definitely it is something that we think needs to be managed proactively and, as I said, with our key points about it being justified, it being effective and it being humane.

Mrs McARTHUR: How would you compare their impact on the ecosystem to that of wild deer and wild pigs?

Ms ROBERTS: All introduced species that are demonstrated to have an impact should be proactively managed. I believe they have slightly different impacts. They might graze slightly differently. I suppose their feet, depending on the compaction of the soil, might have different impacts, but I think land managers should, where there is a demonstrated need, proactively manage all introduced species and not target out single species for management.

Mrs McARTHUR: So by 'land managers' in this instance you are referring to state government instrumentalities?

Ms ROBERTS: Yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay, thank you.

The CHAIR: Just back on the cat theme for a moment, I know you advocate for humane management of animals. Are you able to speak to any research that might be being done? I talked about desexing, but are there other ways of managing and keeping fertility rates down in some of these animals, like cats? Is there any research that you are aware of that is being done in that space?

Ms ROBERTS: Do you mean in terms of feral cats or domestic?

The CHAIR: Either.

Ms ROBERTS: I suppose with domestic cats it is a bit trickier. They are owned, so we definitely, as I said before, promote containment and desexing programs. For feral cats I think other tools are used in terms of poison, trapping, shooting and that type of thing. But in terms of humaneness, we can maybe take that on notice and provide some further information to the committee about that.

The CHAIR: Okay, great. All right. Well, thank you very much for your presentation today. We really appreciate you coming in and giving your evidence.

Committee adjourned.