

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Shepparton—27 April 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair

Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

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Ms Melina Bath

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Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES

Mr Victor Steffensen, Co-founder - Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation

Ms Monica Morgan, Chief Executive Officer, Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation

The CHAIR: Thank you. All right. 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 land on which we have gathered here today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, Elders and families. I particularly welcome any Elders or community members who are here today to in part their knowledge of this issue to the committee.

I also would like to welcome members of the public who are in the room today and who are also watching these proceedings, as well. So, welcome. So, at this point, I will take the opportunity to introduce the committee members who are here today. So, I am Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Ms Melina Bath, Mr Andy Meddick. Joining us via Zoom is Dr Samantha Ratnam and Cliff Hayes is the Deputy Chair, will be here momentarily. And here he is, just as he walks through the door. And Matthew Bach, as well, to be here momentarily as well.

So, all evidence that is taken today is protected by parliamentary privileges provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council Standing Orders. Therefore, the information provided during the hearing is protected by law. They 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. So, if I could get you to, just for the Hansard record, just to state your name and any organisation that you are appearing on behalf of.

DR STEFFENSEN: Yes. My name is Dr Victor Steffenson. I am the co-founder of Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation.

The CHAIR: All right.

MS MORGAN: My name's Monica Morgan. I am the CEO of the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. And with that, we will welcome you now to make your opening address. We normally keep to five minutes, but we are not going to do that today. We are going to let you talk as much as you like, and then we will have some questions for some of us at the end. Over to you.

DR STEFFENSEN: Question?

The CHAIR: Or give your opening address. So, whatever you want to tell us, you can. Yes.

DR STEFFENSEN: Yes. So, yes, I am the top of descendent from North Queensland, and also a (indistinct) practitioner for Firesticks Alliance and been working with indigenous knowledge for over – nearly 30 years now, and helping communities put traditional knowledge back onto landscapes and into the community, for social and environmental wellbeing. So, the role is really crucial in improving our landscapes and also the health of our communities, and also for the broader community, as well, and in the prime – indigenous fire management back onto Country.

And indigenous fire management is the outstanding one at the moment because the landscape is very sick and the fire is high on the agenda, alongside with water to start to, yes, revitalise it and rehabilitate, also with cultural values, as well. And over the years, I have worked with many communities, across many different States across Australia, and also internationally with doing this practice of reviving knowledge from landscapes, and helping communities to do that on their own Country. The aim of the Firesticks Alliance is to help communities to do their own business on their own countries and support them with training, if they need it, and whatever else.

The partnership building. And the aim is for the communities to run their own opportunities and their own environmental projects themselves. And then, once they are doing that, the role of Firesticks is to walk away. Within that, there has been a great need for training programs and that is because the skill set in Australia around fire management is not there, to the point, how our Aboriginal ancestors for thousands of years. The management of managing – sorry, the role of managing the environment through traditional knowledge is very complex layered and is very – there is all different levels of applications of fire for different soils and tree types.

Also, the social applications, as well, is very crucial as well for the health of our young people. Education from the social problems that we have in our communities. To create employment and all those sort of things. Education and all that. So, the training program is something that we kicked off. There is a three year training program in the Hunter Valley. It is our first one going. And that training program has got 40 trainees now, and including 10 national type trainees.

And the problem that we have is that we are only funded by (indistinct) and we get demand from government agencies and all sort of communities to want to do this training program in their area. We have trained practitioners from different communities that have been involved in the recent fire workshops across the nation over the last 15 years. And those trainees – sorry, those people are well capable to start filling roles as fire trainers and practitioners to support training young people to take on these roles into the future across all agencies and land tenures.

It is crucial that people are working together because that is one of the biggest problems with implementing such management on landscapes, is the fractured communities, and also the greed, for money and things like that around running programs like this, because it is fresh off the boat. And since those wild fires in 2019 there is a real need for everyone to work together and to ensure that there is no exploitation of our knowledge within the science, within western agencies and amongst the border community or any other community members.

It is crucial that Indigenous knowledge is shared in good faith, and shared in a way that we want to bring everyone – everyone to know this knowledge and to look after our Country into the future. To also work in areas in improving agriculture. Looking at the green economics, as well, within healthy landscapes. And if we do not have a healthy landscape, then we do not have a baseline for green economics.

And that is why it is so crucial that we make the Country healthy, not only for the green economic opportunities around managing landscapes, but also for the cultural indicators and knowledges, as well, that will further – show further benefits. Indigenous fire management is not just about burning. It is about many layered benefits that come from land. So, traditional knowledge is structured on a number of knowledge categories, which evolves every living thing on the landscape, including people.

And when we apply certain practice to landscapes, through indigenous management, there are seven-fold benefits that come from that. So, for example, when we burn, we are looking after trees. We are looking after the animals. It is creating employment. It is creating education for people. It is building the bridge of reconciliation between black and white people of Australia. It is just to name a few. So, I know and understand and also seen evidence that young people improve their lives when we get them on Country.

And some ministers would have seen that today, coming out today, when they saw the demonstrations today and the workshops. And it is also evident that non-Indigenous people also see the value in this, as well, and also improve their relationship with Aboriginal people, and also improve their relationship with the land, including third generation farmers, who can see the benefit of this knowledge to improve landscapes, to improve their livelihoods, as well.

So, it is a really important initiative that this Country is missing out on. And Australia has the opportunity to demonstrate this to the world, and lead in – in the battles against climate change, and also lead in – in activities that show how we can actually live with landscapes and sustainably through thousands of years of knowledge, that the Aboriginal people have successfully done over those thousands of years, to live sustainably. What I see across the landscape on the level of health across Australia is very alarming.

We have forests that are declining fast. We have a massive extinction occurring before our ears within our vegetation and within the animals. And it is really alarming. And that is not lately. That has been an alarm bell that has been ringing from the Elders long before the last 30 years we have been doing this work, which those Elders have now passed. Those Elders are Dr George Tong, Dr George Musgrave and Dr Tommy George, and among many others, they were the leaders in this program in the beginning of getting Aboriginal fire management happening across Country, just for this program.

And that has been followed on by many of our communities and proudly continue to go. But, what we have problems with is a lack of support from the government and from the border community, and I feel that it is really a shame that we have to get philanthropy support, including working with universities overseas. I just hope that in time that in the shortest time possible, that we start to see the government of Australia start to see the importance of this, and understand that this is investing in our future. This is investing in our young people.

This is investing in opportunities that follow around economy and all of those things that I mentioned. And at the moment, the investment and dollars are going down the drain, with wild fires and the desecration of our landscapes, simple because we have not got our act together. So, it is really important statement I am making today, that we continue to fight – to not fight. We continue to work, to get this right, and in a way that we work together. And already people from overseas have seen the value in this and yet again, we are struggling in our own Country to get something so valuable down the track, into our society and our environment. So, that is my opening statement.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to add to that?

MS MORGAN: I am an independent, so we are separate organisations.

The CHAIR: You can add to it, or make your own.

MS MORGAN: Yorta Yorta hosted a Firesticks workshop and hosted people through Victor and the organisation of Indigenous people from around Australia. So, we are very much supportive of the process of their undertaking. The Yorta Yorta Nation is actually traditional owner group. One of 11 within the State of Victoria. Yorta Yorta Country straddles both New South Wales and Victoria. So, we are not one State only. It is a Colonial system. And we believe that we are sovereign peoples in our own right.

The family groupings for Yorta Yorta Nation are the 16 family groups that remain after the invasion, and destruction of much of our Country and our peoples. We are about 10 ancestors and just around 10 ancestors, and about 100 remain out of thousands. So, the history of Yorta Yorta Country is the same as the history of all Indigenous peoples around the world. It is one of marginalisation, dispossession, theft, murder, and all those very unfortunate situations that happen with the colonialist.

So, thank you very much for the opportunity to be able to speak to you today. I am very honoured to be the CEO of the Yorta Yorta Nation. It has got a very long proud history of fighting for our fights as first nation peoples. And we cover the area such as – six shire countries, three on Victoria, three on New South Wales. We have multiple catchment management authorities. A whole array of government institutions that are on our Country. I just wanted to take you back a little bit. There is 370 million Indigenous peoples that constitute 5 per cent of the world population.

But, 15 per cent of our people are the poorest. It is an equivalent that what is happening here in Australia. The same thing occurs in Australia. So, Australia as a continent has Indigenous people as the poorest and most marginalised, and the least owning Country. In Victoria, our Yorta Yorta Country, 2 per cent of our Country is actually what you would call bushland, national parks, Crown land. The rest of it is cleared farm land. So, the biodiversity that is within our Country is absolutely at zero per cent.

And so, for Yorta Yorta people, our Country, our culture, our people are united with biodiversity. Our totems, our being, and who we are as a people are reflected in those. So, for instance, my uncle told us about our connection to the brolga. It no longer comes into the Barmah National Park, in many of the national parks anymore. You might find peers here and there around, but they no longer exist. Magpie geese no longer exist. So, the migratory birds that used to come from China and down through the north into your Country, and down to our Country no longer are following those flight paths.

We are very lucky if we even got ibis and the rest of those types of migratory birds. So, birds, terrestrial, animals. So, we have also our totems that we are related to. Animals that – marsupials and biodiversity that no longer exist in our Country, such as a quoll. And many, many, more are on the path of extinction. Look, it is the practices that come along with colonialism into our Country. On the other day we have had, in the Barmah National Park, the people who want to preserve their own culture and history, non-Indigenous people, to the detriment of First Nations people. The Yorta Yorta people.

So, feral horses. Pigs. Goats. All those – foxes, all the rest of them, had an absolutely debilitating effect on even the remnant bushlands that we have got in our Country. So, there needs to be some real clear pathways made for First Nations people, particularly Yorta Yorta peoples, and people within Australia, so that we can actually take control of our Country. We can actually instil our knowledge, our practices, such as what Victor was talking about. And also, return and reinvest into our Country, and can modify what has been happening to all the natural resource.

So, you can modify water. You commodified the separated everything else from each other. Extracted everything from the whole. And First Nations people are holistic. Our culture. Our spirituality. Who we are as a people. Whether we fire. Whether we – whatever we do in our practices every day is part of a process. And that has been virtually just caved away every – for the last 200 and something years, has just been caved away. But Yorta Yorta has prevailed. And we have stood up for the rights of our peoples. We have done this both on a national level, collaborating with the Firesticks on a national level, with the CSIRO.

We have also held climate change conferences here in our Country with nations around Australia. But, also, we have represented ourselves at international forums, as well. So, had the opportunity to attend the pre-com before the Rio De Janeiro in regards to putting Indigenous people's case about biodiversity and climate change, and all the fundamentals about what is good to us, for our Country. Of course, out of that you would have seen that the Agenda 21 came out of that and that is the area around Indigenous knowledge.

Unfortunately, we put a whole array of strategies on the table, but non-Indigenous people seem to be very, very keen on Indigenous property and knowledge. And we are very, very keen in not imparting it too much because it belongs to us. And when you talk about knowledge you have got to talk about the people who hold it. It is absolutely – also, we have participated in prep forums and New York in the declaration of the rights of Indigenous peoples.

The declaration, unfortunately, has, I think Australia, Canada, New Zealand and America were four nations that did not pass the declaration in 2007. Instead, waited three years later. But they have finally come over. Article 4 in there is self-determination and self-governance. And that is where the primacy of Yorta Yorta and all First Nations needs to be, in the right for us to self-determine and to be able to self-control and govern our countries and our peoples. We are – we live within Australia, but we are a distinct peoples of our particular culture and heritage area, or our traditional owner area.

The other thing that was very important that I wanted to talk about was the ILO Convention. So, the ILO Convention that happened 169, that talks about self-determination, but also the collective nature of self-determination. Self-determination, of course, as we know, is an individual right. We believe Indigenous peoples have a collective right to their Country and each other's governance.

We have been working a lot, Yorta Yorta, in this whole field for many years to fight for our rights. I mean, our ancestors come from here. We are a part of the mourning. William Cooper and Auntie Marg Tucker and Doug Nicholls and a whole array of people. Yorta Yorta has a strong history of fighting for our rights and in the 1939 that is where NAIDOC came out of, and also the right, the rights of land and started fighting for those things. We have also, over since 1970, right through, conducted many land rights applications over our Country.

We have done court. We have done petitions. We have done protests. I mean, we have been part of the tendency in regards to land rights. But I think the most important thing for us was the negotiations that we had with the Victorian government, in which we did a co-management agreement. The co-management agreement allowed for Yorta Yorta peoples to have joint management over areas of Country of those remnant bushlands that are remaining in our Country. So, the greatest one for us, which is our heart lands is the Barmah National Park.

And so, our of that we have a joint management arrangement, where we are putting together a process by which land management and biodiversity and climate change and all those types of assaults that are happening on our Country right now, we start looking at ways of being able to look after Country. To be able to bring our people back onto Country. To employ people. To strengthen our culture and our connections. The next area that we are looking at is here at along the lower Goulburn. So, those areas are very important for us.

And I think the most important thing that needs to be understood is that First Nations people have the knowledge, have the processes, and have the intent to carry through and be here for thousands of generations just like our generations before us. So, we have a whole of Country plan. And in that whole of Country plan it

looks at de-commodifying, returning water to a natural state, using bush and proper practices, such as firestick burning. But you cannot do those in isolation.

They have to all be in tune with the seasons, and about how things are applied into Country. And that is where our knowledge and our being is in place. So, Yorta Yorta people are the collective in our traditional Country. I think we are in the thousands now. And we are very strongly committed to working with governments, but also applying our rights in that process. And finally, just having access to land is not good enough. We need land rights. And we are looking at sole management and sole protection of Country, and returning many of those remnant bushlands.

Remember, 2 per cent of Country within Yorta Yorta is bushland now. All the rest of cleared farm lands. So, the biodiversity is a very, very critical stage in our Country. And we hope to put a written submission to you that will give more detail around all those species and what we are talking about. But this is just an overview. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks very much. All right. We will open it up to questions. So, Ms Bath.

MS BATH: Thank you. Thank you very much for both of you. Victor, we were out on Red Gum Country just before, with a demonstration. And it was fascinating, and I think we all want to thank you very much for your time and for Yorta Yorta for being there on Country. One thing that I would like you to talk to the committee about is you spoke about different types of Country. So, box Country, iron bark, gum Country, and that there is different seasons to burn those in, and different indicators. And then my supplementary question is, and this is a – that some would say, or western would say, there is only 35 days window to burn. So, can you speak to your perception of that? True or false.

DR STEFFENSEN: Yes, 35 windows to burn is false, based on climate change is false. Yes. It is cause burning windows are quite large, when we management Country, by reading landscapes the right way. For example, I have been burning since February this year, a large region now, and will continue on until August and close to September, and then start again when the rains hit and the wet season. It is a burning technique that follows the soils and the trees, and the curing of the landscape. And that is based on maintaining landscapes through old knowledge systems that were part of cultural practices, for men and women.

But, also, the burning for that way is to burn for food, and to ensure that there was a lot of biodiversity and ground cover always on site after fire. So, it was very gentle types of burning, and maintain the health of the landscape to build this resilience also against wildfires. When we look at the burning structure, it is a very, not only in maintaining land, it is following those ecosystems, but also on the landscape now we also an unbalanced landscape, which is sick landscape, another way to say it, where the ecosystems have the wrong vegetation and the wrong fuel layers.

And that consists of burning – adjusting your burns, again, on different timing, based on those soils, to burn for the right vegetation to come back again, to get back to the baseline of health that Aboriginal people have managed over thousands of years. So, a big window. And with the climate change that has come through, it has not changed my burning practices. It has only made me adjust to burning practices. So, for example, burning storm, burning Country when there is large amounts of rain in winter, and then I have conducted in New South Wales, southern Queensland and northern Queensland, seeing those changes.

Other changes of flowers and trees and seasonal blooming and animal breeding, that is also adjusted around climate change. Just like how we adjust to fire. It is also followed that way. And there is no alarm at the moment with being able to apply traditional burning techniques, effectively due to the change in climates, because I exercise that every year full time and I cross many paths of Australia. So it boils down to not understanding the landscape and what they say about climate change in the sense of that the window's getting smaller. Like I said, that is not correct.

It is all based on not understanding the land. So, that is why the training programs are so important. That they are learning this, because it is very complex. But what we see as agencies are jumping the gun and running off and without the – without any of the knowledge and calling it cultural burning, which jeopardises that knowledge. And so, yes, so that is a big risk for our knowledge and to demonstrate it incorrectly will undermine our knowledge and opportunities for Aboriginal people. And disrespectful knowledge holders, as well.

MS MORGAN: Can I add, though, that down here on this Country is vastly differently than wetlands. What is important for us is the water regime. If you do not get the water regime then it is a folly to burn, because they

co-exist. All seasons co-exist, and there is a different process for each. One season needs to flood. The other season is to burn, before the summer comes. And to then, before the growing of the grasses. So, there has to be a process. Unfortunately, the commodification of water has upset the balance of how the water flows, particularly along the Murray into the Goulburn, and you do not have the flood events happening in the right time of the year.

Instead, you have got the water events happening in summer and not in the winter, spring. You have got them in summer, autumn. And for us to have a seasonal approach to how we have flood, how we have fire, how we have all our other practices that may occur, like the weaving and all the gathering of medicines and traditional foods and those things, they all need to be inter-played into a proper calendar. It is all out of whack at the moment, particularly down here. Climate change is having an effect, but we have shown that with a water event that comes through in a right time, followed by a fire, a cool fire, and what Victor's talking about. All the plants and animals, to feed the fodder. The ability for animals and birds and everything to exist, all interplay with each other.

So, unless that is really understood, biodiversity is not going to return because we are not looking after the environment in a way that it needs to be looked after to encourage the return. The other thing is that we are going to have to get these remnant bushlands that we have only got in Yorta Yorta Country clear of all noxious weeds, feral animals, all the rest of them. If we do not have that and we do not have an area which is protected from that, and from really bad practices, such as fire, wood fire harvesting and closing down trails, and having habitats protected, we are going to have – Victoria is facing a, and particularly in the Riverina area around here is facing a real climax in regards to the return of biodiversity.

And only with the knowledge that people such as Yorta Yorta, and all traditional owners in the Riverina and all throughout Victoria and New South Wales and Australia, are you going to be able to get that regime right? So fire in itself is exciting and wonderful but it cannot stand alone; it goes in with the whole – so Yorta Yorta have put together our Whole of Country Plan in which we work closely with DELWP and we do get assistance in forest management, our water and cultural heritage, but there is a long way to go.

DR STEFFENSEN: Yes. And just to add a little bit onto that is that the water problems extend nationally right across the country.

MS MORGAN: Yes.

DR STEFFENSEN: And that Monica is correct, that fire and water are inseparable. Because when we manage the lands wrongly we manage the rivers wrongly and vice versa.

The CHAIR: I might just have a follow-up question from Melina's. And, Victor, when we were out on country with the demonstration you were talking us through how you burn and the differences between like the mosaic burn and perhaps the western approach. Can you unpack that a little bit for us and talk about how it is different, and then how things are managed on Country with mosaic burns?

DR STEFFENSEN: Yes. Well, the difference with western style burns is that they burn the wrong ecosystems at the wrong time, for one. And also they narrow their burning windows down to a very limited opportunity. And also they use tools like drip torches and put too much fire onto the landscapes that actually put too much heat into our soils and into the canopies and trees and animals. They wait for the curing of the grasses, they go too late where they burn a number of ecosystems at the same time. And they also do not understand the knowledge of burning for the right plants. And so the fires end up being the wrong fires mostly for the landscapes, and the majority are mostly wrong for the landscapes.

The other side of that is that they exclude the social factor of that, the benefits, by not allowing young children to learn about fire and be on fire grounds, like we did today, and women. And so they dictate the fire that has minimal opportunity and outcome. And whereas Aboriginal burning the benefits are sevenfold, or even more, that come from applying fire at minimal risk. And whereas western fire, they have a lot of risk in their fires because of the – simply because they do not understand the country and the landscapes.

So what that comes up with is more resources, more money for trucks and, as an outcome, burning less land because they have only got a small window and putting too many people looking after one fire when it could be easily looked after by less people with better understanding of landscapes. So it is a long way to go for like the western fire management, and I just feel that it should not be up to them just to milk Aboriginal knowledge and try and better and leave Aboriginal people out.

Because at the end of the day the whole community loses, black and white, and we lose the opportunities within the green economies and all these other opportunities come out of this into the future. And so we cannot allow, just like the leaves that smother some of our fire country and do not allow grass to grow, we cannot allow process also to smother opportunities and not allow the children of the future to see those opportunities demonstrated and blossom. Yes, so there is a stark difference.

The CHAIR: Yes. And so what you are speaking to is that connection to Country for your people, is not it? So it is like we are westerners, just we are burning because we are worried about fuel loads.

DR STEFFENSEN: Yes.

The CHAIR: But, where you are coming from, it is like your connection, your people's connection to that Country and managing the landscape.

DR STEFFENSEN: Yes. It is also the policies as well are coming in, and policies are used against the people, they are saying that they are not trained. And so today we missed out on an Uncle being there with the young ones because he was not allowed on a fire ground by agencies and polices. And that is just not on, when we are clearly demonstrating a very minimal risk practice that has clearly been demonstrated the right way and clearly have key people there that know what they are doing. And we had youse on there today with your nice clothes on.

MS MORGAN: Elders are very much a part of the equation.

The CHAIR: Yes.

MS MORGAN: Yes, because they pass down through the generations to the young people.

The CHAIR: Yes.

MS MORGAN: That is absolutely important.

The CHAIR: Just one supplementary, if I can; you mentioned about training, and I know that was something you talked about out on the country as well, which can you just sort of talk through how long it takes to train someone, to impart that knowledge to young people about how they manage fire in the landscape?

DR STEFFENSEN: Yes. Yes, to learn about Indigenous fire management you need to learn the trees, the animals, the soils, the layers of sick landscapes, how we apply and adjust our burns to climate change, to how we apply fires to livelihoods, how we apply that fire knowledge to built-up areas and development areas to be more beneficial for hazard reductions, for better opportunities around firefighting and all those sort of things.

So that sort of knowledge is what is needed for training. Where at the moment the training programs go for a couple of weeks and they are learning to roll a hose and fight a fire, which actually feeds – the only information that feeds people is the fear of fire. So the training programs we are looking at is three years, minimal, for young people to learn all of this information, because they have to learn all of those things.

And to learn that and get that into the system takes longer because people are so set in the social way of living, so living in towns and going back into a house and then being disconnected from landscapes. So for me to learn this knowledge in such a good way I had to live on Country and be on Country for a long time. And so that is why it is important that they hear this knowledge over and over again and learn the same things over and over again, plus new things and so it drums into them that understanding all the complexities around us.

It is actually, in a traditional way of managing landscapes, there were knowledge-holders on fire and that was their role, same as weaving or whatever, ceremony, whatever it may be, medicines. Certain people played those roles in Aboriginal society as actual knowledge-holders. And what we see today is a lack of knowledge-holders, and so what we need to be doing is building those skills and practitioners of the future.

And we have started our first training program in the Hunter Valley. And that training program has got, like I said before, 40 trainees now. And National Parks are also involved, we have got 10 there, and that is in New South Wales. We have got another one interested in Southern Queensland. Also in Orange area of New South Wales. And other areas, too. There is a few others I do not want to mention because I do not want to spark anything, because we do not have enough support.

MS MORGAN: Yorta Yorta have our own training as well.

The CHAIR: Do you?

MS MORGAN: So Yorta Yorta does training, and many other First Nations group here in Victoria, so we do work – so they get dual – they learn the CFA as well, because we also are part of that process, but also our Elders have been teaching our young people, so we are very lucky to have some Elders who go out and do mosaic burning and have started. It is really about what Victor was talking about. So that Yorta Yorta, in particular, we can be in control of that training and that process, it is about the legislative outcomes, it is about the policies and the processes and the – and you have to go and get that CFA training so that you can go and get – so you can do that.

Now, that should not be the case. It should be the case that First Nations within Victoria should have control of their own processes and also be free to be able to dictate when and where we do our mosaic burning in line with what happens with our water. So Yorta Yorta are most certainly looking at acquiring more resources in order that we can undertake that in our own country.

The CHAIR: Yes.

DR STEFFENSEN: Yes.

MS MORGAN: And we do that with the assistance of places like Firestick, on a national level. But, on a state level, First Nations people are speaking directly and trying to change the mindset within DELWP itself about how it processes it here in Victoria. Yes.

DR STEFFENSEN: Yes, and to further add to what Monica's saying, the training programs are regionalised. So just like Monica was saying, the Elders are involved in training their own people and we build it—

MS MORGAN: Yes, we do, yes.

DR STEFFENSEN: —build it for the communities to train their own people. And so it happens in every community. They are structured differently everywhere, they are not the same model, like western training. It is actually done that way. The other side of the training is that they get a diploma from that, and the other side of it is that we can also accredit Elders without going through the diploma; they already have that knowledge in their country so they have that qualification to be on fire grounds on a traditional thing. So that Monica can recognise her own knowledge-holders.

MS MORGAN: Yes, we do. We do. Can we get more to biodiversity? I mean I know that we have been talking a lot about fire. I mean fire itself if one instrument which is used.

The CHAIR: Yes.

MS MORGAN: But really we have got to start looking at there needs to be a return of lands back, particularly in Yorta Yorta Country. If we just have 2 per cent of Country – less than 2 per cent of Country is set aside for biodiversity and for bush. We need to be able to have a return of more Country into the stock. If we do not have that, then we have not got the – and there is not the corridors, there is not the corridors between each of the farm lands. You have got farm lands that are laser levelled, so there is no flow of waterways or bushlands or connected corridors at all.

So we are talking about a landscape that is so bereft of connectivity that we really need to start talking about how we are going to have that going. I mean we have lost a lot of our mammals, we have lost a lot of our terrestrial beings, and even through the waterways we have lost, you know – even they are noticing water rats, and a lot of those that create the stories. We have a lot of stories that are told through animals. And those animals, if we were able to show them to our children, it tells stories about greed, about looking after Country and about how to treat each other.

But if they are not in the Country any longer our culture in itself is bereft. And so really we need to start returning more of the Country back into bushland. If you do not start doing that, if anything, it is going to have a further decline because you have got such small pockets in which we can actually raise and foster return of lost animals and birds and other critters back into our Country. It is gone. And it is gone forever for all our children.

And of course then you need the water, and then you need to be able to grow back what they are going to eat. But it is all holistic. And that is where First Nations can give you that holistic view of Country and put back, just not – but story, song, dance. Because that is what we live for. That is what has been deprived of us, that access to be able to continue our culture, and with that it grows us strong, too.

DR STEFFENSEN: Also just adding onto what Monica is saying about land and that, like across Australia there is masses amount of land that are just sitting there doing nothing within environmental offsets, within mining companies, within council lands, stock routes, all sorts of land just sitting there and wasting away and degrading. And yet some of them get money to manage those lands and there is no management. And there could be proper opportunities to allow Aboriginal people to start managing those areas and start getting income through offsets and whatever else that comes from that. So there is a lot of land that is just locked away and not accessible.

MS BATH: Opportunity for it. Yes.

The CHAIR: All right. Mr Meddick.

MR MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. And firstly can I thank you for welcoming us all here onto Yorta Yorta land, thank you so much. And particularly out to Red Gum Country today, that was fantastic. And I am mindful, I am hearing something that I have heard repeated so many times, that there is all these discussions about biodiversity, there is discussions about land management, there is discussions even on the water flow of the Murray-Darling, and all these other places. But what I never, ever hear is the voices of First Nations people involved in all of that.

What we hear is governments, federal, state, arguing over water allocation and rights for farmland. We hear that all the time. And we hear the argument about, well, so much needs to be given over for environmental flows. Right. But it is not on the advice of First Nations people. There is no input into what happens with that water flow. And we heard today how important the relationship to that Country - out on Red Gum Country where we were today – was, not just between fire, but water. And how right now that land should be at the very least wet or have water of some description over the top of it. And it is not, it is dry, because of the mismanagement of that.

And what we also heard about was that there is no voice. As I say there is no voice, like all this water is locked up, and it is because of farm land, right. Because there is farmers fighting over, well, we have got to have more water so that we can do this. And there is a concern, and it really does concern me, that there are many sacred sites along rivers in Victoria – and not just Victoria, all over Australia. This is occurring all over Australia. And when these environmental flows occur because we have locked up all this other water for other reasons, that there are sacred sites, there are burial grounds, there are all sorts of different things that are being washed away from riverbanks, and it worries me—

MS MORGAN: I do not blame environmental flows for that.

MR MEDDICK: Right, okay. But, well, that is what I am seeking to sort of eke out. What needs to change? How do we do this better, how does it work?

MS MORGAN: The fact is in the Murray River and all the tributaries it is 100 per cent towards really, you may as well say, it is only 3 per cent, or even less than that, that is put towards waters that can actually water environment. The majority of it is called the working river and it is for produce, towns and commodification. And you have got the separation of water from land, and now you have got a water trade where privatisation of water – I mean I think we have got footballers maybe own more water than farmers these days, and it is traded on the open market.

It is upside down. It should be flowing – it should be dry now, this is when the time is dry, going into winter. Then it fills up and the floods should be happening winter/spring. That is when the floods start happening. It is not in summer/autumn. And it is a complete turnaround. Environmental flows are not the problem; 100 per cent of the river used to be an environmental flow. It is the commodification of what is what. And unfortunately there was an event a few years ago in the Barmah National Park and in Millewa because, our Country, that is twins to us, both have Ramsar sites.

They allocated an environmental flow, but unfortunately the Murray-Darling Basin Authority chose to put a water flow downstream and it toppled on top. So it got a bad name for that, unfortunately. In the Barmah

National Park I think there was horses stranded and stuff going on. But we should not even be talking about environmental flow; we should be talking about the river as a whole, how to restore the health of the whole river and how to – and when it comes to the bank erosions, that is because they are – because of the New South Wales, Victorian Trade Agreement and they are flowing the water through Victoria because New South Wales stuffed up their water regime up there and stole did water and did all the things.

So Victoria have to compensate for it. So it is flowing down the Goulburn from the Eildon and it is flowing from the Hume. And it is flowing at a higher rate and a higher velocity than it would normally. And we have got cultural heritage sites that are being diminished and many of our sites are shell middens or just higher mounds, because our people also lived along the river and we have a lot of mounds that will have burials in them, and they are at jeopardy at this very moment. We had to move a burial site from along the Edward River because of the high flows and move it up into higher country. It is changing the landscape drastically.

MR MEDDICK: As a supplementary then, would your suggestion be then, that before these water authorities, or anybody else, does any of these actions, that the very first thing that they should be doing is talking to First Nations people about what water management actually looks like for Country and then work everything else – so basically so reinventing the wheel.

MS MORGAN: Unfortunately governments—

MR MEDDICK: In other words, instead of going from, 'I'm a hydrologist with a PhD and this is what I say should go'.

MS MORGAN: Yes.

MR MEDDICK: Should it be the other way around, 'Come, speak to the people that have known this country for so long, know how this should work, and then work the policy from the ground up'. Is that where it should be going?

MS MORGAN: Absolutely, but governments have got tin ears, and Millennium Drought. So Yorta Yorta Nation, as all the Nations along the Murray River, we hosted an event and created the Lower Murray Indigenous Nations. And I actually worked with the Murray-Darling Basin and worked through all the Nations, 45 Nations, and we had a Head of Agreement in Canberra. When it was a drought they come to the First Nations people. We tried to tell them what was the best way around it. They have forgotten that there is – and there is going to be more droughts, they are going to increase. But they forgot.

And so now, because they have got water, they think let us just build more farms and more hungry farms, like almond plantations, all those plantations that we have got further down. But it is the upstream rivers and the upstream communities that are actually getting flooded at the wrong time of the year, and it is actually creating a problem for us, particularly the Nations a bit further up the river. Particularly when you go through the narrows, which is – they call it the Barmah Choke.

To us that is a natural event that allows water to, in the right season, is to hold back and act as veins throughout the two national parks and the wetlands. But unfortunately they see it as a problem and they are talking about ways to either dredge it or go around it. Because, of course, rivers as they are, they will create – if there is a problem they will create their own resolution to it. So they have been plugging it up.

And absolutely they should be listening. But we – all the Nations spoke. We did an agreement with all the state governments in the Murray-Darling Basin commissioned at that time, they all signed off, yes, we will talk to First Nations, particularly on the Murray Lower Darling and tributaries. But they have forgotten all that. So they will wait until there is a disastrous environmental event, then they will come running, but then they forget.

MR MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Now, we are running terribly short of time today, I am sorry.

MS MORGAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: So what we might do is, if other committee members have additional questions for you, we might get them to ask on notice—

MS MORGAN: They can send them to us.

The CHAIR: —and send them through.

MS MORGAN: Yes. Yes.

The CHAIR: So I really apologise to committee members who missed out today in getting a question to you.

MS MORGAN: Sorry.

The CHAIR: No, it is not your fault. We have been very happy to hear everything you have had to say today, it has been really fascinating. So thank you both so much for coming in and talking to us today and helping us understand this issue, so I really appreciate you coming in.

MR MEDDICK: Thanks so much.

DR STEFFENSEN: Thanks for the opportunity.

The CHAIR: Yes, thank you very much.

MS BATH: We will put some questions on notice.

The CHAIR: Yes, we will have more questions, definitely.

MS MORGAN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: So thank you, thanks very much.

DR STEFFENSEN: Thank you.

WITNESSES WITHDREW.