

# 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

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**

Mr Rodney Carter - Group Chief Executive Officer, Dja Dja Wurrung Group

Mr Nathan Long - Program Manager, Land Strategy Djandak

Mr Nate Perry - Program Manager Dhelkunya Dja Policy, Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation

**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 land on which we are 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 impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee.

I would also like to welcome any members of the public who may be watching these proceedings with us in the room here today. So, before I get into the other formalities, I will just take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you. I am Sonja Terpstra, I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Mr Clifford Hayes is the Deputy Chair. Ms Melina Bath, over here in the room. Mr Andy Meddick. Joining us via Zoom is Dr Samantha Ratnam, and Dr Matthew Bach will be back momentarily.

So all evidence that is taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council Standing Orders. Therefore, the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action from 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 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. Could I get each of you to just state your name and the organisations that you represent. So perhaps we will start with you.

**MR CARTER:** Thank you. I am Rodney Carter, I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Dja Dja Wurrung Group, which is a corporate entity.

**The CHAIR:** All right, thank you.

**MR LONG:** Yes, Nathan Long, I am Program Manager for Land Strategy with the Dja Dja Group working through Djandak.

**The CHAIR:** All right, thank you.

**MR PERRY:** Nate Perry, Program Manager, Dhelkunya Dja Policy, also with Dja Dja Wurrung Group.

**The CHAIR:** Great, fantastic. So, with that, I will ask you all, when you are ready, to give your opening comments. And, when you are finished with that, then there will be opportunities for us to ask you questions. So, over to you.

**MR CARTER:** Thank you. Through the Chair, if it is okay, thanks to the committee for inviting the Dja Dja Wurrung to come along today to share with you upon our submission. And, if it is okay, we have scripted some of the wording around the submission and I just want to reiterate our position to the committee. So, I am a Dja Dja Wurrung person, Dja Dja Wurrung speaking, a Jaara person. That is my grandfather's country, I am very fortunate. My grandmother's country is Yorta Yorta, someone with (indistinct words) person, a wongi, of Yorta Yorta Country. So I feel very comfortable being here today, but I would also like to acknowledge my ancestors and the challenges that they had in their lives and the legacy they have afforded us, this opportunity at this point in time to speak to you.

So, in starting this response, the Dja Dja Wurrung would like to acknowledge our ancestors, as I have just done, who little did they understand how significant it would be for the extinction processes brought to Country by the newcomers and then taken up by their descendants. We would also like to acknowledge Djada, who have

struggled to establish Dja Dja Wurrung's position with the state and from our legally binding Recognition and Settlement Agreement.

We have, whenever allowed to, leave the guarding of the environment, as our ancestors once did, for the benefit of all, which was all people that needed land and sustenance to survive. People who have made that possible, and those who continue to work towards a future which respects Dja Dja Wurrung rights as a Sovereign Nation lead with vision and integrity.

From the beginning of the setting aside of my ancestors and people as being of any usefulness, we now, at a point in time, are noting the brilliance that modern science's evolution – science sits by with no clear solution for ecosystem decline. And we should neither expect it to as it is only a tool for us to use. The time is now for traditional owners to be put back into the landscape to set things right and once again guard the environment.

We ask the committee to, and those that have read our submissions, to pause for a moment of silence to reflect on those who have fallen and passed before us through this struggle and acknowledge their tireless efforts. Thank you. Through this ongoing effort they have passed on a high level of obligation. This is our inherent right as we are obligated through law to care and manage the physical and spiritual health of Djandak.

A future together is as one with all of our children, their identity, Victoria's identity to be built upon the truth of our history as we plan for a better future. The House has requested the Environment and Planning Committee enquire into, consider and report on the decline of Victoria's ecosystems and measure to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species.

The Dja Dja Wurrung believes that whilst this re-meet and direction is a worthy one, for us to truly respond in a manner which will address the need to provide a level of commentary on the task that enables the committee to provide others a fully informed position. We have requested that the committee consider our rephrasing of the direction of the House so that we can provide a response that informs and may begin to enable the people of Victoria on understanding how to live on Djandak in ways that heals and returns our murrup, our spirits, including Bunjil's creation to Djandak, our Country. And we see being here today is consideration positively towards that.

The Dja Dja Wurrung clan's Aboriginal Corporation requests that the Environment and Planning Committee enquire into, consider and report on the continuing decline and, in many cases, extinction of Bunjil's creations, including the tool with fire, as you have seen today, our blood, gatchin, water, and our mother, Buck, Djandak, our Country. The knowledge, places, and murrup, the spirits, connected to these anjara, the people, who are intrinsically connected to all things.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, we would restate our request that the committee walk with us on Country to better understand the issues and impacts on Djandak, Dja Dja Wurrung Country so as to understand the benefits we can bring to the institutional structures with improved approaches and creative achievable actions that can be undertaken to address these challenges we face together. We encourage this of the committee and inform the committee that our responses always look to address the questions which we have rephrased above to ensure we are able to give it the considerations it deserves.

At the least we ask that our submission is read outside under the sky country and in the air that connects us all, and we hope you have had the opportunity to do that. As one of the initial groups to go through a settlement, the Dja Dja Wurrung has an obligation to ensure that others are not left behind. We must, in this response, ensure that all traditional owners, their rights and aspirations and their right to practice self-determination is also respected. We not only request that this is a leading outcome of this inquiry, but we demand, and rightfully so, that through our agreements with the state it is ensured that together we meet our collective obligations to ensure we are meeting the intent of the united declarations on the rights of Indigenous peoples.

Ecosystem decline has been occurring since colonisation, dispossession and invasion of our land. Even strangely today we feel our land is occupied. We managed Djandak, our Country, sustainably for millennia through following our law and ensuring we met our obligations to care for Djandak. Through taking this approach we not only enabled species to live through massive changes in climate, volcanic eruptions and massive shifts in ecosystems all whilst nurturing a productive and prosperous environment. That is what Australians love about Australia today. One way to help understand this is at a rudimentary level to think about how we describe our place on Djandak and how we look to our place in it. In trying to understand Bunjil's creations of Djandak, western approaches ask the question, 'Why did Dja Dja Wurrung use Djandak in this way?'

This is a why. Questions like, 'What is the threat causing ecosystem decline' are so normalised, and why wanting to find out is the natural, unquestioning response to the approach of agencies and governments. The plants are managed as in a botanical garden. The animals as they are in a zoo. And the people, my people, are only allowed to look in, not touch, or feel, and to lend what is needed, to tend to our plants, animals and country. It is only when we examine another culture, my people's culture, do we realise that these modern learnt approaches are flawed. In Dja Dja Wurrung law, Djandak and all of Bunjil's creations are a given. They are real, as a species, and also connect us as stories and songs. And I heard Monica mention that today.

They are spoken of factually as our kin. Djaara's response to accepting Djandak and all of Bunjil's creations is to live with them in the best way that we can. A simplistic and therefore brilliant approach. The contrast may be encapsulated as following. For Djaara, these are Bunjil's creations, therefore let us live with them in the best way possible. A key outcome from that is harmony. For western science, what are Bunjil's creations? Therefore, let us keep finding out more and more and more. A key outcome is experiment. The first approach provides a moral response. The second provides an empirical response. We request that the committee address the moral impacts of the continuing decline, and in my cases extinction, of Bunjil's creations, again including wi, as fire, gatjin as water, Djandak as country. The knowledge, places and murrup, the spirits, connected to these and Djaara people are intrinsically connected to these. I will ask Nathan now to share some more of our story with you.

**MR LONG:** Thanks Rodney. Firstly, I would just like to acknowledge the Yorta Yorta nation, of whose land we sit, and I would like to acknowledge all the elders, past, present and emerging, as well as all of those back on Dja Dja, on country, that we are talking about today. So, far too often, western society looks for the detail and understanding everything before moving forward. To ensure we are the controller, as a master. Djaara looks to Bunjil's creations as friends and family. Rather than seeing ourselves as the ultimate, we are humbly a piece of the puzzle. The Dja Dja Wurrung world view is to see ourselves as part of country. We are embedded in country. We are country.

Just as our ancestors, and murrup, are also part of country. Our ancestors, and murrup, including the plants and animals, from the smallest to the largest. Soil, gatjin – water, and wi – fire, are all part of our living landscape. They hold our knowledge; they hold our law. While some of these remain, others have been lost, or removed from country. Our living landscape has been damaged, disrespected, and in many cases violently colonised. And so, we are traumatised.

Our landscape, and our spirit freedom, continues to be damaged, disrespected, and impacted by the structures and approaches that we continue to oppose on country. This is the ongoing impact of ecosystem decline on Dja Dja Wurrung. We will not be well again until country is healed. Our spirits and landscape need healing. Our spirits, those plants, animals, fire, water, and soil, must return to country. Our people must return to country. To return our people without their spirit is unthinkable. How can we ask people to return without their spirit? And that is what we do if we ask people to come back to country without the animals and plants that they are connected to, present on country.

We ask that the committee to acknowledge and respect our moral and spiritual connection and obligation to country. So, we look to address the points of the inquiry in a systematic approach, and then provide commentary within which we will attempt to positively challenge the committee to look not only within the current system for a solution, but to reimagine the system through our eyes and hearts, and establish a system which may be able to result in the reversal of ecosystem decline in the state of Victoria.

So, the extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity and the likely impact on people, particularly first people's and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate change impacts. Since invasion and colonisation, there have been majors impacts, including the persecution, hunting and extinction of many of Bunjil's creations. And perhaps more disturbingly, there has also been the colonisation, dispersement and disempowerment of our murrup, or spirits.

Murrup knowledge of many of these species, including gal gal, or dingo, are essential to manage and maintain the health, and therefore ecosystems, of Djandak. Through work that Dja Dja Wurrung are undertaking, with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, to improve the understanding of the state of the importance of our spirits in maintaining functional landscapes, we currently have a vision for gal gal, the dingo; for yung, the quoll; and barramul, the emu, to be present in the landscape. These key species, as examples, have suffered to the level of being completely removed from country.

On Djandak, they have purpose, and are needed; as the mesopredator, yung, the quoll; the apex predator, gal gal, the dingo; and major seed disperser, barramul, the emu; and ecosystem engineers like lawan, the mallee fowl; and soil engineers like pirri, or pademelons. The loss of these species, and the associated degradation of country, and carried by Djaara to this day. And the continued degradation and ongoing decline continue to impact and affect Djaara. We must reverse the ongoing loss and degradation of Bunjil's creations, and return our murrup to Djandak. These creations of Bunjil, our murrup, and Djaara, have lived through massive shifts in climate, through millennia, and successfully endured the recent ice age. This has been enabled through listening to our country, and understanding our place on country. As part of country, and respecting the knowledge and murrup of all of Bunjil's creations.

If important species such as gal gal, yung, barramul, lawan and pirri, are not present on country, and present where they should be, then how are we able to enable positive change as a result of climate change, and enable the transitions that will continue to occur? Since colonisation and dispossession, our country has been mixed up. Land has been turned upside down. Order and places of plants and animals have shifted, and new plants and animals have been brought in. This is directly the result of the governance and processes through which successive governments have failed to listen to country, and see their place in it.

We need to return a balance to our country. Not just in the ecosystems, but in the governance of these ecosystems. We must reframe our, and the state's, place on country, to place Djaara and murrup on country. Listening to country, hearing country, watching country, learning from country; so we can properly care for country, and speak to country.

This use of a legislative framework protecting Victoria's environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species. Given the legislative framework intended to protect Victoria's environment is failing, and does not consider the connection of species to the end environment, their connection to place, and their use and availability to traditional owners, it is argued that the adequacy of the legislative framework is poor, if not inadequate, to protect and enable a living culture, but in these embedded in the living murrup of Djandak, to grow.

Let us fix it together. It is requested that directions given to reform legislative frameworks, such that traditional owners do not just have the right to access and interact with natural resources on country, but they have the right to access a quantum of resources required to maintain a living culture. With this policy reform, it would be essential to establish parallel programs to look to quantify, what is the quantum, and establish pathways to address and reverse this policy program gap.

Our law, and practices, require to take only what is needed, and with healthy ecosystems Djandak actually gives that to us. That needs to be there. At the moment, if we went out on to country to harvest yams to make bread, or kangaroo grass to make bread, it would be impossible to do, or it would cost us thousands of dollars per loaf to be able to do. Whilst you have got access to the resources, and the plants, and the animals, the barrier is the quantum that is available.

The adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems. There are mature and well-developed programs and funding approaches which look to protect and restore Victoria's ecosystems, through the application of empirical approaches to weigh up the best outcomes and the highest return on investment. Whilst this approach is worthy, and considerable, the question needs to be asked of how these programs fit in the broader understanding of Djandak, or country, and how they are able to ensure that traditional owners are not only informed of the programs, but actively included in the power of these programs.

In programs that are focused on the species or systems in isolation to its connection or place in Djandak, there is a lack of meaning. This results in an ability to rationalise loss, or lack of investment, and a lower priority ecosystem or species. This lack of investment is able to be achieved because of the lack of consideration of each species' or system's place, and the value and the health of Djandak. As a result, considerable investment goes into areas of high empirical value, to biodiversity, whilst rationalising away the need, desire or opportunity for species to move between and across the landscape freely, and without hindrance.

These flawed approaches reinforce the fragmentation of landscape. So again, rather than asking, why should we invest in species, ecosystems or locations, we should be asking how we resource and invest in programs that adequately support species and ecosystems on Djandak to heal and remain healthy, both spiritually and

physically. As long as investment in ecosystems is driven by empirical evidence and decision making, there will continue to be a decline in ecosystems and species.

We suggest that a more appropriate investment model is based on resourcing traditional owners to return to their landscapes, ensuring that every block of public land has at least one traditional owner adequately resourced to talk to that place. Not necessarily to do something, but to be able to speak for it. And that investment levels are based on the need of the spirits of country, rather than a pre-defined investment pool. Designing, developing and delivering adaptive legislation and policy that can evolve over time is a task that we would suggest is yet to be achieved, although it is a worthy aspiration. It is certain that species will move, some will not survive, some will increase dramatically, and what we see and understand today will be very different from what we see and understand in 20 or 50 years, as our ancestors once did.

We will garden our environment at the crossroads, and we have an opportunity to work with Djandak through this change, and create a future for Djandak. And we get on with it, or we can try to stop change. Wait until we have enough information, and continue to try and stop the bad things whilst we watch change happening, or we can just actually get on and roll our sleeves up, and make a difference.

To enable us to speak for our Djandak, we need to be empowered to guide and support change whilst listening to Djandak. This needs to be achieved by empowering cultural governance to oversee and guide decision making, informed and supported by empirical approaches but ultimately driven by the accountability of those whose knowledge systems and cultural context has guided and supported change over millennia. As a minimum, Djaara need to be able to speak for Djandak and have a strong voice in the decision making table. For too long we have been seen as a group that needs to be informed of decisions, and at a stretch, engaged in the decision making process; but rarely are we handed accountability to make a decision, or be accountable for the decision.

We will implement a proactive approach to decision making, moving to heal Djandak, actively learning by doing, through listening, hearing, watching and learning from Djandak. To create a framework to allow Djandak to heal Bunjil's creations, in the context of climate change, we need to be empowered to be accountable for decisions, through either the relaxing of permitting and approvals, or through delegation of accountability to Djaara, to manage, move and support change in ecosystems that will enable change at an appropriate timescale.

Opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding first people's connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria. The opportunity to restore Victoria's environments are wide and diverse. There have been major disruptions to the environment, ecosystems and cultural landscapes of Victoria as a result of colonisation. Restoring of these must sit within a program of healing these landscapes, otherwise they will never truly be restored. They will never be well again. By healing landscapes we will restore them, but to restore them without healing, they will remain damaged, left like a wound untreated.

By empowering Dja Dja Wurrung to be accountable for healing their systems, we explicitly allow an understanding of how we actively work to allow the environment to change. Rather than stop change, we embrace it and work with it. And lastly, from me - and then I will hand over to Mr Nate – Djaara have inhabited central Victoria for thousands of millennia. Djaara's spiritual beliefs, described as dreaming, tell of the birth of Djandak, and subsequently the people, plants and animals. Despite modern science's attempt to establish an ever-increasing date of occupation, Djaara's belief is that we have always been here. At the time of British invasion, 1788, the continent now called Australia was cared for by hundreds of nations of tradition owners of first peoples' nations. And they set a very high bar for biodiversity conservation. So, I will now hand over to Nate to finish off the story.

**MR PERRY:** Thank you. Similarly, I would like to also acknowledge that we are on Yorta Yorta nation today, and the traditional lands of Yorta Yorta people, and also acknowledge their ancestors and elders, and similarly the Djaara elders with whom we speak today. So for the understanding that all things have in murrup, Djaara, connected places, geological events, natural events, plants and animals, by defining each one of them as a totem. These totems work to be revered and to provide a spiritual connection between all real world things, and in particular connected individuals, their families and social structures, to be practically applied as having responsibilities as guardians of their world.

These systems of connecting people to each other, and their world, is also described as moieties, as a moiety system, and can tell the story of how Djandak was created. These are stories across Australia, from Tasmania to the Torres Strait, across deserts and dense rainforests, woodlands and savannah plains, to grasslands, all across countries. They tell the stories of creation, and how one must behave and be true to law.

Today Djaara are working to maintain cultural birthrights, cultural practices, despite the structural disadvantages created from the effects of the invasion and ongoing occupation of Djandak. Djaara connection to Djandak extends through law, kinship, ancestors, song, dance, symbols and birthright, among other things. The murrup connections Djaara have to certain lands and waters on country, to animals, to all the biodiversity that is in our landscape.

We think of that, Djandak, as the living, breathing being, and if you take one thing out of the environment it can alter the balance of biodiversity around you. And we have a connection to all things on our Djandak, be it the smallest insect playing its part in the ecosystem, to even breaking up the tree that has fallen. It could be as big as a human being playing our role in the environment, to make sure that the balance is right in a fractured ecosystem, so that we may live more sustainably into the future, to ensuring our future generations can have a better baseline to start with than what we have today. Therefore, we must actively practise our customs and traditions, and teach our ways of being land managers, reclaiming, reviving, rejuvenating our language and cultural practices, and reaffirming and protecting our traditional knowledge, to guide cultural practices, and the way Djandak is managed, now and into the future.

We seek to build an economic base through healing Djandak, and restocking the Djaara supermarket by having more food and fibre in the landscape. Djaara culture is the foundation of our community's spiritual, social and emotional wellbeing, and we need to protect it, pass it on and help others to understand and respect our ways. Future generations of Dja Dja Wurrung will grow up to be observing their elders healing Djandak. They will be trusted to the highest as to reasons on why we heal Djandak, and how it brings health to the land and people. Their children and grandchildren will see culturally valuable plants and animals return to Djandak, and know their stories. Therefore it is with this authority Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation requests that the Environment and Planning Committee consider, report and address the continuing decline, and in many cases extinction, of Bunjil's creations, including wi, gatjin, Djandak, the knowledge, places and murrup connected to these and Djaara, who are intrinsically connected to all of these.

We request that the response of the committee firstly acknowledge the ongoing impact of ecosystem decline to Dja Dja Wurrung. We will not be well again until country is healed. We also seek an acknowledgement of our moral and spiritual connection and obligation to country. We request action of the committee to reverse the ongoing loss and degradation of Bunjil's creations and the return of our murrup to Djandak. We seek reform of our place, and the state's place on country, to place Djaara and murrup in country, listening to country, hearing country, watching and learning from country. So we can properly care for country, and speak to and with country. I request an approach, and again reiterate, let us fix this together.

Further, we request reform, and reiterate that the legislative framework shift, such that traditional owners do not just have a right to access and interact with the natural resources on country, but that they have the right to access a quantum of these resources required to maintain a living culture, as Nathan outlined. We seek to establish parallel programs that look to quantify what this quantum is, and establish pathways to address and reverse this policy and program gap. Our law and practices require us to take only what is needed, but with healthy ecosystems, Djandak actually gives back to us. And what does this shifted framework look like? We reiterate again, firstly by resourcing traditional owners to return to their landscapes; to return Djaara to Djandak. Secondly, to ensure that every block of public land has at least one traditional owner adequately resources to talk for and with that place.

Finally, that the investment levels are placed on the need of spirits of country, rather than a pre-defined investment pool. This framework will allow Bunjil's creations to heal, by empowering Dja Dja Wurrung to be accountable for decisions through either a relaxing of permitting and approvals, or through delegation of accountability to Djaara, to manage, live and support change in these ecosystems, and that will enable change at an appropriate timescale. Now I will ask Rodney to make some final remarks.

**MR CARTER:** Thank you. And in closing, we just want to acknowledge the courtesy of the committee to allow us to speak to you today, which was really important to us, culturally, and for those that are dependent on us, and on our mob. We brought some materials today, and we really wanted to impress upon the state, and this committee, our capability. Where we are lacking is the capacity, and that can always be an argument, not just

for traditional owner group entities, but I think this idea of shifting resources from bureaucracies and government towards community controlled entities such as ours for the Dja Dja Wurrung people.

So finally we would like to reiterate the commitment of the state itself toward self-determination of traditional owners. Throughout the statement, it says nothing for us without us, and we would like to believe that there is truth that sits behind that statement. We believe we have presented a position in itself, and throughout our response and how we wish this committee, is to be able to outside of what it needs to do in its own business, to be able to walk with us. We are available at your invitation, if it is seen by you to be helpful at all. And that is, as we have touched on in our story with you today, is to heal Bunjil's creations, and Djandak as country, and ensure that the intent, again, of nothing for us without us, can actually be achieved.

So we look forward to answering any of your questions if you have got any. Hopefully, we are well known for coming up with good solutions, and we have got some crackers that we have been doing for the last 6, 7 years on country that are not largely known to a lot of the public, because we are probably not good at media, but we are learning. And again, just re-extend the invitation to the committee, if at all you can, to meet with us on country, and our ancestors, our elders, and us would be extremely pleased. So thank you.

**The CHAIR:** No, thank you. Now, I will just let everyone know we are again running short on time, because we could sit here for hours and hours, but if committee members do not get a chance to ask you questions today we will submit them on notice to you. So Dr Ratnam, we will start with you first.

**DR RATNAM:** Yes, thank you Madam Chair, and thank you so much for your really powerful submission, both here today, and the one that you provided to us as well. I think it is really instructive, what you are asking us to do in terms of starting to think about the questions that we have asked, and reframe those. So I thought it was really powerful, and absolutely what the community needs to hear and to think about.

I wanted to ask you to expand on some of the points you have raised, in terms of – your submission talked about western science, what that means in terms of experimentation. You talk about care for country, this is the Djaara approach about living together in harmony, and I want to ask you if you all have any examples of, where you are working for example with DELWP, or say government, maybe a good example of where that relationship, and working toward harmony, is actually working well. But then also an example where it is not working well, and how things should be improved, and what they would look like if we actually used an approach of living and working in harmony, rather than that kind of very scientific experimentation approach.

**MR CARTER:** Could I just start and say that for us to use harmony, we are practically – it is idealistic, it is a dream, it is a vision, and we would want to aspire to it. So a lot of our country plan, and this idea of our philosophy that we bring is visionary, and it is something to aspire to. It is always challenging whether we actually practically get to that point. I might ask Nathan, do you want to give a species' example? Because we have got a few, and he touched on some of the species that we are working on.

**MR LONG:** Yeah, so I think we are looking for the harmony between the science and the knowledge. It is very much coming at it from an understanding of how the science respects the knowledge. Because in the past, science puts itself in a position to question the knowledge, rather than support the knowledge. So one of the things we are doing at the moment is looking at how we put back in yam daisies back in the landscape.

So how do we return an important food source that has been decimated across the landscape, back into the landscape? By using science to support knowledge, so knowledge – there is knowledge there, with people, the process by which people do that, they go out and they look at a place, and they listen to a place, and you will understand the place. By doing that, you know whereabouts things should be, and you come to a knowing. So you understand that the yam daisy should be here, or there should be kangaroo grass here, or here is a spot for fire, here is a spot to camp, or here is a spot for – yeah, a whole range of different things.

But by understanding cultural knowledge, you can understand where these things should be. Science is an enabler to understand that well, if yam daisies should be here, why are not they here? How do we go through a process of understanding how much damage has been done to the soil, what are the weeds doing, how we have to change the fire regimes, or the grazing regimes? Are there problems with slugs, are there problems with snails, are there problems with fertilisers that have been put there, are there problems with chemicals that have been put there? Has the water regime changed? How do we – so science enables us to heal country, whilst the knowledge gives a direction and the objectives and the reasons behind why you do it. So science informs, the knowledge is the thing that guides and directs.

And that is how it works together well. When science tries to tell knowledge what it has known for 60,000 – 120,000 years. It is like science does not question gravity, because it is known. Knowledge is known. We need to accept that, and science needs to accept that, so it can support and enable knowledge, not question knowledge. Or else we—

**DR RATNAM:** Thanks very much, that is really helpful. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Dr Bach?

**DR BACH:** Oh, I pass over my time to—

**The CHAIR:** Sure.

**DR BACH:** —another member. Thank you—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Hayes?

**DR BACH:** —gentlemen for being with us. I will submit a couple of questions on notice.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Hayes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you for your submission guys. I particularly like a couple of things you said, especially garden the environment, I like that concept, and the idea that let us fix this together. I mean we cannot do it any other way, really. So we have all got to go on a journey, and I like that you say in your submission about getting the committee to re-imagine the system through our eyes and hearts, to establish a system which may be able to result in a reversal of ecosystem decline in the state of Victoria. And you talk about listening to country, hearing country, watching country and learning from country, so that we can properly care for country, and speak to country.

How – I mean I think you can take this committee on such a journey, and you are quite perceptive of it – but how do we spread this in a wider message to the community. Because we have got to take the whole of the Victorian community on this journey with us, really, to enable what you are seeking.

**MR CARTER:** If I can, the Dja Dja Wurrung so interconnected with many people who want to do leadership on country. Part of the vehicle, I think, is what happens through the Biodiversity 2037 strategy, and we were lucky that we made a significant contribution to the content of that document, and Minister Lily D'Ambrosio was really supportive, and so was the department.

Dja Dja Wurrung has been fortunate that we are actually a member of the Victorian Environments Forum, which is held for the CEOs and the leadership, and that we are able to be present with the CEO and participate in that. Connecting Victorians with nature, where we want a greater degree of our people that live here to understand and appreciate biodiversity – these hard words to understand. The ecosystem function and what that means, and how things support each other in a systems approach. We want the general public, the common person, the children to now be better informed.

So I think there are processes, and there are systems to apply, and be activated, and the challenge going forward is how good can we be as traditional owners to articulate and describe and come up with creative solutions. So there is any end of possibilities, I think, around that, and we do have the systems and the vehicles. I think it is then holding the leaders and the masters within the system, the bureaucracies, to account, to get on and do what we are all paid to do. So, I figure a greater awareness for the committee around what buttons and levers it can appropriately and sometimes cautiously push are very exciting.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Hopefully. That is our job, with your help. Yes, but can I just ask one other thing. You talk about accessing a quantum of resources for traditional people to live on the land, and maybe more than traditional people, to actually live from the land. But in your imagination, can that be done on public land as it is, or do you need resources to buy back land, or to make more land available. Just from how you imagine it now?

**MR CARTER:** Yes. Ideally, our dispossession would be addressed in part by becoming freehold landholders, and I think given the status and the economic value of land that is not going to be easily addressed. But it is not a vision that we would not want. But in a business case, and a systems approach, and when we are exploring to be the kangaroo grass farmers of native oats and grains, the native cereals – we can do that in a

collaborative manner, with agriculture and those holders of titles of land in agricultural context, to do commercial activities. So that is the approach that we take, in business case, and morals, and we do that because it is something that climate change, adaptability or survivability, as a society that we all need, not just for my people.

And I could waffle a little bit, if it is okay? And invertebrates, so insects, need these foundational structures and vegetation so that they are more abundant, because guess what, then there is other things in the system that need to eat them. And then if we are growing native grains, then we do not have herbicides and pesticides, expensive imports that kill the insects that the animals want to eat. So now we are putting a mosaic of native plants back across private land. Those plants now need to be flooded, so in agricultural context you would want to de-engineer levy banks, and those systems that can strain the river systems. To have water. And we could talk all day about these things. But that is our philosophy, and our practical methodology to heal country, make it useful for everyone, and ultimately for us, we think, in an unusual way, or whacky way, your help will stem maybe ecosystem decline. And Nathan touched on it.

What was sad for all of us, and we emotionally have to deal with it, is that there will be things that continue through extinction processes, and our children, grandchildren will not be fortunate enough to see, feel and experience what we had. But if we do not do something now, out of the box – and that is what we are proposing, something out of the box – we will definitely be worse off. Because that is what science and history sadly tells us.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Terrific, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** All right, well with that, we are going to have to draw this session to a close. So thank you all very much for coming in and speaking to us. It has been really insightful, and I am sure you will receive plenty of questions on those from committee members.

**MR CARTER:** Look forward to it.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you so much.

**MR CARTER:** Thank you. Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Yes please, that would be wonderful. Thank you.

**WITNESSES WITHDREW.**