

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 11 May 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 John Kotsiaris, Nature Conservation Campaigner, and

Mr Matt Ruchel, Executive Director, Victorian National Parks Association.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the various lands which each of us is gathered on today and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I would like to welcome any members of the public who may be watching the proceedings via the live broadcast as well.

At this point I will 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. Joining us via Zoom are Ms Nina Taylor, Dr Samantha Ratnam, Mr Stuart Grimley and Dr Matthew Bach. Back in the room we have Mr Cesar Melhem, Mr Andy Meddick, Ms Melina Bath and Mrs Bev McArthur.

All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975*, and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, 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. If you could just both, for the Hansard record, please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Mr RUCHEL: I am Matt Ruchel. I am the Executive Director for the Victorian National Parks Association.

Mr KOTSIARIS: I am John Kotsiaris. I am a conservation officer at the Victorian National Parks Association.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. With that, I will ask you to make your opening comments. If you could keep it to about 5 or 10 minutes, that will allow us plenty of time to ask you questions, so over to you.

Visual presentation.

Mr RUCHEL: Thanks. So I will be quick with our opening comments. Just explaining who the Victorian National Parks Association are, we are a community-based, not-for-profit, supporter-based group. We have been around since 1952, so almost 70 years. We do sort of three areas of activity: advocacy—so conservation policy, biodiversity, nature conservation; citizen science; and we also have a very active nature-based activities program.

So I first off wanted to just put Victoria into context. It is a wonderful state, very diverse. This map is a model of what vegetation looked like pre-European settlement. I suppose one of the challenges that we have got is that we are the most cleared state on mainland Australia, with between 50 to 60 per cent of our vegetation and habitat types gone. That jumps depending on which land tenure on private land. In lots of ways we have got sort of a two- or three-track landscape. We have got very cleared and fragmented landscapes. We have still got some relatively intact areas out in the east and so on, and then strips. A lot of the remaining vegetation is on public land, but there are still important values on private land as well.

So all that fragmentation and reduction in habitats lead to large numbers of threatened species. There are about 2030 currently listed species in Victoria, 85 per cent of which are endangered or critically endangered. I will keep these comments general. There are a lot of drivers of ecosystem decline: habitat loss, invasive species,

frequent fire, changed water regimes, logging and habitat degradation and clearing, and of course a warming climate. All these challenges make the policy space complicated and the challenge also complicated as well, so we welcome the inquiry.

There are two other issues that I will just quickly touch on. As our name suggests, national parks are our key thing that we are interested in. We also work on biodiversity. Victoria has got a fantastic natural environment. While we have cleared a lot of it, it is very diverse. We have got alps, deserts, all within fairly close relationships. At the core of that is the parks estate, which is about 17 to 18 per cent of the state, about 30 to 40 per cent of the public land and 5 per cent of state waters. And there are two parts to it. The dark green is parks and different types of conservation reserves, the lighter yellow is the broader public land piece, but the red dots are the private land protected areas, and usually through Trust for Nature covenants and some direct purchases. And that as a total is what you think about as your protected area of state. It is very important. It covers large areas but also protects whole ecosystems and habitats. Often those more intact areas have the highest biodiversity values.

They have also got great social value. The parks estate has 96 million visits a year, 50 million visits to national parks per annum, or state parks—things covered under the *National Parks Act*—at least \$2.1 billion to the Victorian economy, 42 000 regional jobs and, according to DELWP, there are still gaps in the park estate. So while we need to properly manage our existing park estate, we also need to complete those gaps for a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system. The gap is probably 2.1 million hectares according to DELWP, both on public and private land—probably more if you calculate it a different way. We just note that we have not had any major new parks for about a decade, and we are actively pursuing new parks in central Victoria.

Just to touch on parks funding, it is a thing that tends to make people's teeth grind. It is not a huge commitment in the context of the state budget. It is less than 0.5 per cent of total state expenditure, or \$240 million-ish, \$260 million per annum. Thirty per cent of that comes from the Parks and Reserves Trust. The funding has gone up and down over the years. If you go from the peak in 2012 to now, you are probably still \$20 million to \$30 million under what it was then if you take into account CPI. The key issue in parks funding—and I am going to talk about this more—is around having a focus on ecological management. Parks Victoria is also unusual compared to other jurisdictions because it manages the metro parks, piers and jetties as well as the broader conservation estate.

And then the other one I will just focus on, and I think it is an area that is in need of much development, Victoria was a leader in the 1970s with the creation of Trust for Nature, which is a state classic 1970s quango. They have been very successful through covenants mostly, which is a voluntary arrangement with landholders for those important bits on private land, and some direct purchases, like Neds Corner. I suppose one of the policy things which we think is a really practical thing is to ramp up private land conservation, either supporting more covenants or investment in something like a revolving fund—which is starting to become quite a model in other jurisdictions—where you stump up the money, they can buy properties, covenant them and sell them on, so it is a one-off payment.

And I think just in conclusion, in general terms in our submission—we put in quite a long submission—there were lots of recommendations, and I suppose the four key points are: more resources for ecological management, monitoring and restoration; stronger laws and enforcement—we have got some new legislation, but it is not always enforced; completing the formal reserve system, which takes time but should be a sort of objective for all governments; and better planning and delivery, so early planning but also better delivery, because often the fall down happens in the delivery stage. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much for your opening remarks. Did you have anything you wanted to add there? Okay, we will go to questions. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: I was listening to what you were saying, and I am glad for your passion for our wonderful environment. What are some changes that you have seen recently that you do think are helpful? Because that might also clue in the committee to what is really needed for the future. What are some good things that you are seeing that give you hope but also that you think, you know, are the way forward?

Mr RUCHEL: There are probably two areas I can think of, both in the sort of legislative reform space. So while there was a lot of debate about the changes to the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*, which is the main piece of state environment law, the reforms there have put in place some useful tools that can be used—things

like a public authority duty, the capacity to protect areas under critical habitat determinations—and refreshed the legislation, which had been sort of sitting on the shelf for the past 20 years. The question with the FFG Act is now it needs to be implemented—the reform has been done, but it needs to be implemented. There is always debate about it. You could have gone further—you could have got done more, especially with the state of decline decline—but that is one.

The other one would be the marine and coastal space. So while we are disappointed that we have not had any new additions to the marine parks estate in recent years, the reform of the *Marine and Coastal Act*, a bit like the FFG Act, put in place some new tools—things like marine spatial planning, which is a sort of cooperative exercise for people to work together to come up with management of key marine areas—and also I think improves the base legislation for our marine waters. So they would be two areas worth looking at.

The CHAIR: Okay, great. Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, gentlemen, both for your submission and your evidence today. I have got a couple of quick questions. First of all, recently we had the Victorian Auditor-General's report into Victoria meeting its obligations on Ramsar-listed wetlands, and it is fairly scathing in what it has to say. How do you feel about that? Based on that report and your own observations, how is Victoria going in meeting its obligations to that international treaty? And then secondly, partly this sort of feeds into that, it was recently announced that the federal government wants to shed its responsibility under the EPBC Act to the states. Putting these two things in context then, do you feel that is a good move or not?

Mr RUCHEL: So firstly, on the Ramsar question, that Auditor-General report, you are right, was fairly scathing. There is a bit of a disconnect—and it goes to the second question in a sense—between international obligations and how the jurisdictions take account of them. So is not always a clear run for essentially a federal obligation for a Ramsar site and who is responsible for it at the state level. I think the Auditor-General's report on Ramsar was very clear. There was confusion about who was responsible for it and there was not a lot of appropriate allocation or clear allocation through the budgets, and this happens with environments stuff a lot. You cannot see it run through the various funding programs and hence it is not that accountable. So who is responsible at the end of the day? It is making sure that stuff is very clear.

On the EPBC stuff, look, we are opposed to the devolution of powers. The federal laws in some ways are stronger but narrower, I suppose, in simple terms. But again, they have had spasmodic enforcement. The federal government under a range of international obligations as well as being in charge of lots of the money has a clear responsibility on environment and should not abdicate it by handing it back to states, who often struggle anyway with dealing with the multiple of problems.

Mr MEDDICK: I guess, just as a quick follow-up question to see if you share this concern, a lot of people have raised with me they are worried about that eventuality, simply because the EPBC Act defines in some areas federal government funding streams where they are responsible for the funding of different environmental programs, and that that could see or lead to a defunding because the feds would just turn around and say, 'Well, we're not responsible for that anymore. That's a state government problem, therefore don't look to us for an income stream for those particular projects'. Do you share that concern?

Mr RUCHEL: I think that is an issue, although the federal government in lots of ways has reduced its commitment to on-ground programs. It is useful, I suppose, to think about it as splitting the sort of legal approval functions of the federal laws versus the commonwealth's responsibilities for providing money for things. For example, they do not provide any money for national parks, even though they sign up to the Convention on Biological Diversity, so no money comes from the feds for that. Their funding programs are spasmodic, and so what you end up with is peaks and troughs in terms of funding. So I think that is a real danger if the federal government walks away completely. But I think both for state and federal programs you really should be looking for consistent ongoing funding as much as the issues. It is not always about the quantum, it is about the consistency of that, and we see it a lot in this space. I have been working in this space for 30 years. It goes up and down, up and down. People get employed, they build capacity, they then disappear. The weeds and the pests come back if you are not on top of them the whole time. All jurisdictions need to play a role in that.

Mr MEDDICK: Cheers. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Just perhaps if I can do a follow-up question on that. I note your concern about federal devolution down to state level, but would you share a concern if that does happen? The federal government has

already made that recommendation; I think there was a review of the federal Act. Obviously funding streams that are set aside for federal programs, if there is a devolution to the state, should follow down to the state. You just cannot have devolution of responsibility to a state government without the associated funding. Would you agree with that, or do you share concerns around perhaps federal funding that might have been set aside for federal programs not then being followed down to the state level if they do devolve down?

Mr RUCHEL: Yes, it is a possible risk, but there is not a lot of federal money at the minute in this space. There has been in the past from time to time, but there is not a lot there at the moment. The way to think about it, I suppose, from the outside looking in, is that one of the biggest drivers of clearing in Victoria, for example, is state projects. So the state government is the biggest clearer in the state, pretty much, through major projects and so on. If you remove the federal oversight and the hoops that are jumped through there, you are sort of approving it for yourself in a sense. There is a sort of core conflict of interest there.

The CHAIR: But land clearing has been happening ever since colonialism.

Mr RUCHEL: Indeed.

The CHAIR: I note your comment around the government projects, but land clearing has happened for hundreds of years. There is a legacy there. So I get your point, but my question was more about the funding. Do you agree that if federal programs are funded, if it is devolved, that funding should follow? I note your comment that there is not enough. So are you saying there should be more federal funding and it should follow to the states?

Mr RUCHEL: I think we would be reluctant to see the federal government walk away, even in that context, from an ongoing commitment to environment and planning.

The CHAIR: I understand that point. But if they do and that happens, do you think then that they should fund state programs that they then devolve down?

Mr RUCHEL: Yes, I think with some careful consideration about how that works, because you would not want to just have it as another devolution that disappears into, say, grants or something like that. You would want some clarity.

The CHAIR: Yes, exactly—proper funding arrangements.

Mr RUCHEL: I think the preference, just to be clear, is that the feds keep some control of that, and that is provided, and that there is a more—

The CHAIR: But my question was if it was to happen.

Mr RUCHEL: Yes. I do not know. It is hard to judge on an if.

The CHAIR: But look at the Samuel's review.

Mr RUCHEL: Yes. Look, I think it is a bit of a double-edged sword for the state in terms of the challenge about: if you take the money, you then get the whole responsibility—

The CHAIR: Well, that is right.

Mr RUCHEL: so I will have a think about that.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thanks so much, Chair. Thanks so much, Mr Ruchel and Mr Kotsiaris, for your submission today but also your submission that you provided to the committee. It is really comprehensive and gives a really good template to work through and echoes a lot of what we have been hearing in the inquiry so far. Over much of this hearing we have heard lots of evidence about inadequate resourcing of environmental management, conservation and restoration, including inadequate resourcing of Parks Victoria. How much additional funding do you think is needed for national parks, and what do you think this would deliver if we actually met this funding need?

Mr RUCHEL: One per cent of the state budget is our provocative ambit claim, I suppose. It is about 0.5 per cent at the moment, so we are saying for parks 1 per cent. That point is really in some ways about trying to avoid the argument around—it is not a competition in a sense. Parks provide a whole range of services, both for visitor, economic and ecosystem services. Some of the ecosystem service things like clean water, stopping erosion, pollination are all worth billions of dollars. The health budget is 24 per cent of the state expenditure—something like that—education is in the 20s, security is in the 14s and 15s. You could take a point off each of those without making a huge difference—I know that becomes controversial. You could also think of it as a dividend exercise in the sense that, you know, you have got all these benefits; maybe there is a way of working it out where it is a dividend for avoided health costs, which are estimated even on current methodology at about \$240 million a year through the health and recreational benefits. So it is that sort of equation that we are interested in too.

In a lot of the funding programs it is again about consistency of programs over time as opposed to necessarily the huge quantum. Over time—we see it with Landcare, we see it with on-ground programs, we see it with parks funding—they go up and down. You lose capacity, you lose connections and you lose continuity. The easiest way to think about it is the pesky pigs, deer, weeds. If you are not there every year, you come back and you are starting again. So it is about effectiveness as well. So that would be the sort of ballpark that we like to talk about.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you. Could I ask one follow-up question if that is okay, Chair? If we have got time.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Dr RATNAM: Great. You also mentioned that Victoria has not created any new national parks in the last 10 years, and I wanted to ask you why this is an issue. Where do we need them? So where are the biodiversity hotspots that could be added to the reserves system? And I just want you to expand on why national parks are important in terms of both conservation but then also restoration, because we have heard a lot about habitat loss being a driver of biodiversity decline, and we are talking about conserving what we have but we are also now talking about creating new spaces and reserves. So if you could expand on that, that would be excellent.

Mr RUCHEL: So there have been some new national parks but not large new ones, just to make that clear, and some other reserves, but they are not always protected under the *National Parks Act*. So the key role of the national parks estate and the conservation estate—there are different tenures, and it is useful to understand the nuances of the tenures. *National Parks Act* things are more strictly protected, and things under the *National Parks Act* have four things. Essentially they reduce exploitation, so they remove logging and mining in some forms. In terms of the tenure, they provide a management plan. The management plan is not a sort of corporate management plan; it is a spatial management plan, so it is about managing the sites for ‘This area has got a high conservation value, this area has got a nice view, so maybe the visitor services should be there, and keep it away from the conservation area’. So good planning is important to protect those values. It provides regulations for managing behaviour, so there are no firearms in things under the *National Parks Act*. So it controls those sorts of things or littering or that sort of stuff. And then ideally you have got your programs and works programs on top of that. So that is what the national parks estate does. It fulfils a whole range of international conventions. Empirically there are a range of studies showing it is one of the most effective ways to reverse environmental decline, largely because it protects whole habitats, not just individual species.

Then the main gaps—there are a lot of gaps in the reserve system in Victoria. We have done a really good job on the public land estate, but there are still gaps. There is a big gap in the private land estate. We have been particularly active in public land on central west, so that is the Wombat, Pyrenees, Mount Cole and Wellsford forests up in central Victoria. It has been through the formal process, through the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council, and we are now waiting on a decision, which is now 12 months overdue in terms of the legal deadlines. So we understand COVID and bushfires and all the rest of it, but we are getting fairly frustrated and would like to see the parks agreed to and created.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Melhem.

Mr MELHEM: Thank you. Going back to the funding arrangement and the level of demarcation between federal, state and local governments, how is that working with life now? Are they working reasonably well together? I mean, you talked about the federal funding as actually shrinking in recent times. But what would you like to see change, because it is a three-way responsibility between the three levels of government?

The second part of the question—you mentioned something about infrastructure projects. I would not mind your view on what sorts of changes they have made to the landscape when they have started construction and how that has sort of fared at the end. When the project is completed, it is supposed to bring it back to preconstruction or even better—that is the idea, I have been told. There are sort of two questions there, so I am happy for you to answer them now or maybe take them on notice. I will leave it to you.

Mr RUCHEL: Well, I can quickly go on the funding question. So the federal funding largely does not go to the state. Well, it sort of does; it goes through regional delivery. So regional delivery is catchment management authorities. So the feds do not like giving money to the states much, because they talk about cost shifting and whatever else. That is not my view; that is sort of the vibe you get from the federal government. And so when they do provide money, they provide it directly to the catchment management authorities, who then hand it out for on-ground work. So that is one arrangement. When the feds remove money from that, the state then has to pick it up, so you have got this sort of roundabout of funding that goes on. Somebody will put some in, somebody will pull some out. What we would like to see is consistency of that.

Local government are also important players, so they get some of their resources from the state, but also some councils, particularly the peri-urban ones and some of the rural councils, do invest quite a lot in biodiversity programs and so on, particularly the peri-urban ones, but it is patchy. Again, consistency across the board would be great to see there. So that is probably the funding one.

The infrastructure question is complicated. It depends a bit on where the infrastructure is and what it is and all that sort of stuff, but reflecting on—

Mr MELHEM: Let us look at the EastLink project, for example. That is now over 10, 15 years—so preproject to today, or post project. That is a classic one because—

Mr RUCHEL: Yes, well, when I say infrastructure, I do not just mean the freeways. That one may have been—

Mr MELHEM: Well, that is part, yes—

Mr RUCHEL: So there are pipes, sewers and large-scale water infrastructure projects. Western Highway would be another one, if you are going into those sorts of things, where some of it is an incremental clearing. So what we are talking about are things that have high degrees of remnant or natural value, so it is where that impact happens. Even if you nicely landscape it and offset it, it does not actually necessarily equate to what was there before, so they are the sorts of issues across the board. From the environment side, it is death by 1000 cuts in some ways—you know, you have got a whole lot of projects happening all the time, small bits get removed, it does not look big when it is in one place, but if you add it all up across the state, it ends up quite significant. So it is: how do you balance that total significant impact with making it a big benefit? And there are little bits of that in the policy, but it is not very transparent.

The CHAIR: Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, guys. Thank you for your excellent submission—very interesting. I have got a couple of questions. One is about *Plan Melbourne*, which you have referenced. I am interested in biodiversity protection inside the suburban areas. How do you best see that protection of biodiversity? I am interested in that being put at the top of considerations. Could you put that into *Plan Melbourne* in some effective way so that sort of provision of looking after biodiversity first guided residential development as well as government projects? How would that best be expressed in a meaningful way, do you think?

Mr RUCHEL: I think one observation for *Plan Melbourne* is that it has actually got a really good policy in it about the protection of remnant natural areas. What there seems to be is a hole between what the actual plan says as a policy and what is in the implementation plan. The implementation plan seems to be the thing that drives a lot of the action. There has been some good stuff in the implementation around things like the Yarra River and protection of rivers, but there is nothing really explicit in there about protecting those natural areas that remain in the *Plan Melbourne* implementation plan. So I think the key thing there is to have some sort of—call it whatever you like—urban nature strategy, because it often gets mixed up with open space and forgotten. It is not just open space; it has got natural value. It can have multiple uses. Some of the creek lines, for example, are floodways, but they have also got really good natural value, so it is just being clear for those natural areas that they are there for a particular reason. They can still be used for other things, but there is long-term protection. So some sort of nature strategy and something clear in the implementation plan.

Mr HAYES: All right. As another follow-up question to that, you were quite scathing of the western grasslands management and what has happened there—a disaster. But I just want to ask about the idea of using offsets generally as a way of compensating for destruction of biodiversity in one place and saying that you can fix this or remedy it by offsetting. What are your general comments on that?

Mr RUCHEL: Our official policy is that we do not support offsetting. Essentially there are lots of mechanics and maths and models that go into trying to justify that offsets are achieving a like-for-like outcome, but a bit of it is nonsense when you unpack it. It is essentially a program designed by economists for an environmental problem. So it certainly makes it easy if you are on the property development side or something, because it gives a great deal of certainty; you can count your widgets, pay your money and there is your problem gone. What it is essentially doing is the development industry gets certainty whereas the environment wears the risk. The western grasslands reserve is the classic example of that. The property development industry got a payout from the state for \$500 million worth of free biodiversity assessments. The environment wears the risk of some long-term program on the never-never where a reserve may be put in place in the future. Even if you agree with the offsets, it is wearing the risk, and as we can see, it is not delivering yet. There are other flaws with that program—it is a very complicated program, so it would take me all day to go through them—but that is the core of it: the environment is left wearing the risk where everybody else has been given the certainty. So if you can manage that, often it is about the detail of sites and good planning, but at the detailed level, so the scale. The big problem with the Melbourne strategic assessment is that it is too broad, and 50 years delivery and how many election cycles that is just unsustainable.

Mr HAYES: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thank you, gentlemen. Thank you for appearing before us today. I would like you to help me unpack for the committee who the Victorian National Parks Association is. I have been having a look on your website and have read your submission. I would like to understand—and we are talking not fine-grained but just sort of generalities: how much funding do you get from the state Victorian government; how much would you get from large environmentalist organisations, so larger organisations; how much would you get from individual subscriptions to parks associations, mum-and-dad members; and roughly how many members would constitute the Victorian National Parks Association?

Mr RUCHEL: So we get—I cannot remember what it was this year—generally less than 5 per cent from state government. Somewhere between 4 and 6 per cent is the sort of average over the years, and that is mostly for citizen science programs.

Mrs McARTHUR: Four or 5 per cent of what?

Mr RUCHEL: Total turnover. So we turn over, I do not know, \$1.6 million a year or something like that. We have got about 14 staff—about 10 EFT. All of that is on our website. Most of our money comes from donations from supporters. Some of those are members, some of them are supporters. I am not sure what you mean by large environmental organisations. We work with everybody, really. We work with peak groups, we work with local groups. I do not really know what you mean. Not many of the big groups hand over much money, so we generally raise pretty much all of it ourselves from donors.

Ms BATH: Okay, thank you. That is interesting. And you have got 14 staff. I looked on your website—

Mr RUCHEL: About 10 EFT, so a lot of part-time people.

Ms BATH: Sure. And then it says on your website you have got around 1200 volunteers that would come out and do some programs.

Mr RUCHEL: Yes, so the volunteers are in a couple of forms. So obviously we are a volunteer association, so we have got a volunteer board and committees and all the usual stuff—finance committees and that sort of stuff. We have got a very active group of leaders, so there are bushwalking leaders who do voluntary activities with members and supporters who want to do bushwalks. There is a group of leaders who help with the citizen science programs, so they are for both marine and terrestrial. And then I suppose there is a split between the leaders and participants and working volunteers, if you really want to unpack it. So working volunteers, you know, if you are doing a citizen science project, you are actually doing some work. We also help with the odd on-ground project. We do not often run them, but we will go and support other groups by providing people to

those. So things like Project Hindmarsh out in western Victoria we supported for decades with people, but we do not have tree-planting capacity and all that sort of thing. So we have worked it out recently, and there are as many volunteer inputs from those cohorts as there are staff, so in terms of hours it is the same, pretty much.

Ms BATH: And part of this is also lobbyists for government, because you have certainly been making representations about your views to the state government on various things—

Mr RUCHEL: That is right.

Ms BATH: and parks and the like. I noticed on your website you have got something. It kind of disturbs me a little bit when you say, ‘Hands off our parks’. Now, I know that looks good on the beach and it is a very clear message, but from my point of view, many people would seek to say that our state parks, national parks, have very many areas of improvement to be made in terms of—and we are talking about threatened species here, so in terms of pests and weeds—managing our parks. Is that message meant to say that we stay away? What does that actual message say?

Mr RUCHEL: That was in response to particular development proposals, so that is really what that is about. So where there were large-scale development proposals, the ‘hands off’ thing—that is where that is used. I think it was responding to proposals for the Prom, proposals for Point Nepean and a couple of others. It is probably legacy there. We use it from time to time where it is specifically about things that we consider inappropriate development of parks. So that is possibly—

Ms BATH: And you would lobby to government against those developments?

Mr RUCHEL: Yes, we unashamedly do advocacy. We do not like the word ‘lobby’, because we are not really lobbyists. We are campaigners and advocates.

Mrs McARTHUR: With charity status.

Mr RUCHEL: That is right.

The CHAIR: We are going to have to move on.

Ms BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I am conscious that other members have not had a question yet. Mr Grimley, over to you.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, gentlemen, for your submission. I have just got one quick question. It is in relation to one of the recommendations that you made in your submission, which was around the protection of the marine and coastal ecosystems through the creation of marine national parks that you spoke briefly about before. Can you just inform the committee in terms of how many marine regions have been identified within Victoria as a priority that should be converted into a marine national park or sanctuary.

Mr RUCHEL: At the moment Victoria has got about 5 per cent of its marine waters in marine national parks and sanctuaries. Marine national parks are generally slightly bigger; the sanctuaries are smaller things. The global benchmarks are around sort of 10 per cent, and that changes because the conventions are pushing on different things. We identified in a study that we did a few years ago now two areas where you could improve it. There are gaps in the reserve system, where you are seeking to create marine national parks to represent important biodiversity assets and habitat types. There are a lot of gaps there, where they are not represented. But also we identified a whole suite where there was potential boundary changes that would improve the cover, if you like, or the representativeness of the existing marine national parks, and there were lots of those. I have not got the list quite in front of me, but they are right across the state in each of the sort of bio-units or bioregions around Victoria.

I suppose one of the disappointments and frustrations is there has been a policy of no new marine parks for some time, and we are keen to see some sort of assessment which would be done at a statewide level, particularly to identify those spots and build on the early work that we have done.

Mr GRIMLEY: Those locations you speak about, are they able to be provided to the committee at some stage following this hearing?

Mr RUCHEL: Yes, I can provide the whole detailed report. It is quite a big report, so I will pull out the summary, and if you want to dig into it, there is a whole lot of detail there.

Mr GRIMLEY: That would be great. And just very quickly, what is the difference between a national park and a sanctuary, for a layman like me?

Mr RUCHEL: It is essentially the size. They are both protected under the *National Parks Act*, but the marine national parks are generally bigger and possibly a bit more remote and the sanctuaries are like Ricketts Point, which is in the bay and is very small. It is only really about 10 hectares, from memory, so it is fairly small. It is still protected, but it is a pretty small area.

Mr GRIMLEY: So they fall under the same regulations?

Mr RUCHEL: Pretty much, yes. There are slight nuances but not much.

Mr GRIMLEY: Okay. Thanks, gentlemen.

The CHAIR: Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Look, I will not overstep if other people have questions, because I did have a go at the start. So if other people still have questions they want to ask, I will not take that time.

The CHAIR: Mrs MacArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay, thank you, Ms Taylor and Chair. Just so you do not think we are singing from the one hymnbook, if you want to lock up more land and have new parks, I would be certainly encouraging the federal government not to fund them, because if the state government wants to be responsible for the policy formulation around parks then perhaps they can pay for it.

Mr RUCHEL: There is no funding from the federal government for parks.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, there is. You said that it is haphazard or it is sporadic—

Mr RUCHEL: No, no, not for national parks. The federal government has never provided any money to national parks. They do provide funding for some of the private protected areas, so the Trust for Nature type things, but they have never provided any support for public land protection.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, would you not agree it is far better that if one level of government wants responsibility for managing an area, they must be totally responsible for it and provide transparency about how they actually do manage it? What we have seen I think in Victoria is an inability of the state agencies to manage the estate, because we have got vermin and noxious weeds out of control in the areas they are responsible for, and yet some might want to impose further restrictions on private landholders or even expand the property that they might have under their jurisdiction when they are obviously incapable of managing what they have got.

Mr RUCHEL: Well I suppose it is that base funding question for us. We would probably agree that there needs to be more funding for management of parks and reserves. It probably should be more transparent. There is are ways of looking at that.

Mrs McARTHUR: Is money going to solve just how they manage the money they have got now—extra money?

Mr RUCHEL: Yes; well, in effect. So you want proper—obviously—staff and effective programs that deal with the multitude of pest plants and animals which occur both in parks in the public land and on private land for that matter. Sometimes the priorities are slightly different for public land versus what you would do as a private landowner in terms of the targets for species, but ramping up of particularly pest animal control and weeds we would certainly welcome from our side.

We would be happy to see further transparency in the funding at that level, but of course you would need the appropriate staff, you would need the staff to be able to be well trained, they need to use all the tools that they can use to control things and it needs to be sort of consistent over a long period of time if you are going to get the results that you need.

I sort of disagree—they do not do a terrible job; they could always do a much better job. So I do not think there is any challenge with that.

The CHAIR: And with that, we are out of time. Thank you much for your presentation today.

Witnesses withdrew.