

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 12 May 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair

Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Stuart Grimley

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Ms Nina Taylor

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr David Davis

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Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES

Ms Michelle Wyatt, Environment Coordinator, and

Ms Krista Patterson-Majoor, Biodiversity Projects Officer, Macedon Ranges Shire Council.

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

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

At this point I will 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 Mr Stuart Grimley and Dr Samantha Ratnam. Back in the room, we have Ms Nina Taylor, Ms Melina Bath and Dr Matthew Bach.

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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 you both, just for the Hansard record, to please state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Ms WYATT: I am Michelle Wyatt from Macedon Ranges Shire Council.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: I am Krista Patterson-Majoor, Macedon Ranges Shire Council.

The CHAIR: Fantastic, all right. Well, with that, I will hand over to you for your opening remarks. If you could please keep them to 5 or 10 minutes, and I will give you a 2-minute warning as we approach the end of that time. So over to you.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: Thank you very much for having us here today. Michelle and I are both in the environment team at Macedon Ranges Shire Council, and we prepared the submission last year, with the help of our team. But also it was based very much on our biodiversity strategy, which was developed in 2018, and that is available on our website. It was also endorsed by our councillors prior to providing it to the inquiry.

Council and our community care really deeply about the health of our natural environment in the Macedon Ranges. We are concerned—very concerned—about the decline in ecosystem health that we are witnessing and those consequential impacts on our own health and our own economy. I think in the last 30 years in the Macedon Ranges we have seen Leadbeater's possum, gone; greater glider, gone; our bandicoots, gone—this is all in my lifetime—and many more plants and animals are now highly threatened. Even species that you think of as common, like koalas or kookaburras—there is evidence of their decline as well. You know, this is stuff that is cause for alarm. The causes of that decline are not issues that are unique to the Macedon Ranges shire. Things like the clearance of vegetation, the habitat, pest plants and animals, inappropriate land management practices and especially climate change are all putting these ecosystems under an incredible amount of pressure.

Ms WYATT: So from a local government perspective we want to emphasise that local government does play a really important part in this story. As you heard previously today, we play three main roles: we are a regulator, we are a land manager—Macedon Ranges council manages over 500 hectares of conservation

reserves—and we are the closest level of government to the community, so we are really well placed to facilitate community action.

So from our perspective there are five initiatives that we would really like to see the state government take as a priority. Most of these are outlined in our submission, which goes into more detail, but firstly we would like to see expansion of the public conservation reserve network. This includes implementing the recommendations of the VEAC *Central West Investigation*, which seeks to improve protection for the state government conservation reserves in and around our shire. Two, we would like to see increased funding for state government public land managers, such as DELWP and Parks Victoria. They often manage large tracts of land and struggle to conduct the conservation works necessary to maintain those ecosystems. Three, we would really like to see increased penalties for illegal native vegetation removal. Currently penalties are not really a disincentive for illegal clearance, and increasing them would provide a meaningful disincentive. Four, we would like to see increased funding streams flow to local government for long-term projects, including project management. Council budgets are often constrained and ratepayer money often necessarily needs to go towards some of our primary core functions, such as our roads and our rubbish and our community facilities, and often there is little left over for environmental management or environmental initiatives, which are often seen as discretionary. Five, we would really like to see consideration of different mechanisms to increase core funding for traditional owner groups to enable them to grow their organisations, which would then enable them to meet the demand on their services. Finally, recognising that private land is so key to improving ecosystem health, funding and resources are required to support public education and on-ground restoration works on private land, which is the majority of land in our shire.

I guess my final statement would be that the Macedon Ranges community really cares about the environment and they want to do the right thing on their properties. It is not a lack of will. It is not a lack of interest and desire. It is a lack of education, knowledge and funding that is really the barrier to achieving ecosystem restoration.

The CHAIR: All right, great. Thank you very much. Dr Ratnam, over to you.

Dr RATNAM: Thanks very much, Chair. Thank you so much for being here today and for your really excellent submission that you provided to the committee. It was really comprehensive, and it gives us a really good template to start working through some of the top issues that we should be focusing on. Your submission makes the point that approximately 87 per cent of the Macedon Ranges comprises private land. This means that private landowners play a critical role in protecting and enhancing local ecosystems. Can you expand on what you have said in your submission about how conservation on private land can be further supported and what role the state government can play in this? I know you mentioned Trust for Nature, farm advisory services and biodiversity incentives. So it is just a question on expanding on conservation on private land, how can we further support it and what role state government could play in this.

Ms WYATT: Yes, I will have a go at that and then maybe see if Krista wants to follow up. So those are the three areas that we see would be most beneficial. Trust for Nature provides mechanisms to permanently protect conservation areas on private land. They are under-resourced, to say the least, and struggle to also keep up with the demand for their services. So extra funding for Trust for Nature would be one area.

We have had a really successful private land conservation program in our shire where we provide one-on-one advice to landowners to help them not only with their grazing management but also understand how they can protect and restore their properties. It is a grant-funded program and it is a short-term grant, so without long-term funding that service will probably finish soon. So long-term programs like that, where you are providing one-on-one advice to landowners, I find are really critical. That is the feedback we have got from landowners in our shire—that it is the individual advice, not just workshops and website information, on their property that makes a difference, and that has actually seen almost everybody that has engaged with that program change their practices.

And finally, we all want more money but the funding is critical. Often landowners really do want to revegetate their property. They do not necessarily know which species to use or how to do it, and they often do not have discretionary money to invest in revegetation projects. So again, having some more resources flow, I would say, through local government or through community groups to private landowners is critical. Have I missed anything?

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: I think on that point about Trust for Nature, we offer a rate rebate for Trust for Nature covenants, so people do not pay rates on the land that is covenanted. But we have more demand for covenanting in our area than Trust for Nature can support, so there are landholders who are keen to do it but there is no ability for Trust for Nature to service that demand. They have had to prioritise where they focus their work, and Macedon Ranges is not a priority area. So there is a big gap in being able to support that change.

Dr RATNAM: Do you mind if I ask a question you can take notice? I am just mindful of the time. Just with what you just said about the supply not being able to keep up with the demand for the services for covenanting, for example, would you be able to give us any info that you have about the scale of the demand not being met by supply? So you know, how many covenants have been requested where Trust for Nature just cannot do that work because they are not funded?

Ms WYATT: Yes, we will take that on notice. Not a problem.

The CHAIR: All right. Mr Grimley.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for your submission. I have got a question just in relation to the terms of reference, in particular point (e), where it speaks about ‘opportunities to restore Victoria’s environment while upholding First Peoples’ connection to country’. Are you able to elaborate to the committee on how the Macedon Ranges council facilitates cooperation with First Peoples on environmental issues?

Ms WYATT: Yes. We engage with the three traditional owner groups in our shire, Taungurung, Dja Dja Wurrung and Wurundjeri, and we have programs to enable them to expand their knowledge of country in our shire. We are at the edges of the extent of their country, so we find that some of the traditional owner groups do not know our shire so well, so we have just started that process of inviting them to get to know, I guess, the shire. We also, similarly to Nillumbik, do engage traditional owner groups for on-ground works as appropriate, including for cool burns where we can. As I mentioned, we have a great desire to continue to work with traditional owner groups and to do more with them, including with their on-ground teams, such as the Narrap Team. They are very stretched for what they can actually do and how many services they can actually provide across their country, hence why I feel that expanding core funding for those groups would really help them grow their teams and grow their service capacity to enable them to meet the demands on their services. If they had greater ability to work across their country, we would certainly engage them more.

Mr GRIMLEY: Wonderful. That was going to be my next question: how do you think the government can undertake, as a priority, strategies and processes to ensure that our First Peoples’ connections to country are maintained with environmental issues? You mentioned funding. Are there any other issues at all that the government should be looking at?

Ms WYATT: I cannot think of anything off the top of my head. I guess promoting the good work that they do is always important. But I think that is probably a good question for the traditional owner groups when they provide evidence as well.

Mr GRIMLEY: Wonderful. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you for your submission. You mentioned illegal vegetation removal. What do you think are the reasons why people remove vegetation illegally? I mean, sometimes even the city areas will see deliberate vandalism of trees, and that is heartbreaking of itself, but what do you find are the reasons behind that?

Ms WYATT: There are probably multiple. For some people it might be ignorance—that they do not know they needed a permit. That might be some people. For a lot of people I can only speculate that they take the mentality of, I guess, a ‘do now, apologise later’ kind of approach because the disincentives are not really there. The penalties are quite low for removing vegetation illegally, and more often than not they want to pursue an activity on their property and would rather accept the fine than not. That is, I guess, anecdotally—I cannot say we have got evidence for that, but that is just anecdotally from our experience. Those would probably be the two reasons. I do not know if you have got—

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: Yes. I guess the reasons are to do whatever land management practice or how they would like to see the aesthetics of their block. We are in a lifestyle landholder area and people like park-like environs, and that damages native vegetation in a really significant way. The fines are a factor, but for council also the ability to follow up and to undertake compliance is probably an even bigger issue. I mean, we have got a bit of resources to do that but not enough. Rural councils have even less, and that is where big damages are going on. I think there are land management plans that people do as part of their planning permits. Who actually goes out and checks that that is actually happening? There are so many ways that we could support people to do the right thing, but the resources are not there to follow up. Does that make sense?

Ms TAYLOR: It is probably a bit of a chicken and the egg because to anticipate when they are going to land that if they have not sought a permit would make that difficult for anyone, wouldn't it?

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: It is two sides. That is right.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thanks, Chair, and thank you very much, Ms Wyatt and Ms Patterson-Majoor, for coming today. It always sort of sends a little fear into your heart when you hear the words 'Greater gliders are gone' and 'Leadbeater's possums are gone'. I guess I would like to unpack that a little bit more and understand, I guess, your baseline data for having those statements, because they are fairly substantial statements. So what are you using to back that up? How many were there once upon a time, what sort of stats did you use and what are you doing now to say that? Or does government need to help you assess the levels? I mean, do we think they are gone because they were there in great numbers? So unpack that please.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: So greater gliders is a really good example. Greater glider does exist in the Wombat forest. In fact the Wombat forest is one of its last holds west of the Hume, and that is why we talk about the VEAC submission and how important it is to implement some of those recommendations. The greater glider is in the Wombat forest. It is not in the Macedon Ranges, and surveys did find it in the Macedon Ranges in the 1990s—and that is on Mount Macedon in particular and also at Hanging Rock, I think, there was a record. We rely very much on the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas for the data to make those kinds of statements. But to be able to say that they are not there now we have undertaken extensive surveys in the last four or five years in conjunction with our Landcare networks to try and find where those greater gliders still exist. We are fairly confident they are not on Mount Macedon anymore, not even in the deepest little Baringo valleys.

Ms BATH: Thank you. And Mount Macedon is a national park?

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: Mount Macedon is a regional park.

Ms BATH: Activities that occur in the Wombat park are not permitted in your regional park—many of the activities. I guess that goes to my point about VEAC. The Wombat State Forest at the moment is open to people to walk their horses, ride their horses, ride their bikes and do—we will say—metal detecting and things like that. I guess there is an assumption that many have, and then there is an opposing view. I will put the case: greater gliders exist in the Wombat State Forest now, and these activities are currently being undertaken. I can ride my horse and take my bike or whatever through there; I can prospect. Many would argue that those activities are occurring and there are still greater gliders in that, whereas you are saying we need to exclude those activities to protect the greater glider that is already in that park at the time.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: The issue there is the Wombat is a state forest and not a park, so it is not permanently protected. It could well be logged, and that is more the risk for that population.

Ms BATH: But that is a separate argument to the fact that activities that many Victorians love, those who live in the areas or travel to the areas and provide tourism and the like or buy their petrol, they are very important to our regions. Greater gliders exist and VEAC has not had its way, in effect, or the report has not been endorsed. Greater gliders exist in the forest. So I am making that point. And the other thing is: I think you would have to check and see whether or not any VicForests activity is slated for the Wombat forest or whether it is always going to be an exclusion zone for those. I guess I am trying to challenge you to tie the extinction of things versus what we think could happen, and then I have got one follow-up question.

Ms WYATT: I might quickly answer that one. The decline of species is related to multiple things. Some of it might be due to activity in those habitat zones, their core habitat, but a lot of the reason for the decline in species such as the greater glider is lack of connectivity across a landscape. So when their habitat gets damaged or impacted and shrunk by land management practices or clearance or roads et cetera, these can be some of the greatest causes of decline, where they just cannot disperse and mate and repopulate an area. The greater glider at Hanging Rock, it certainly was there and it had been sighted by staff. It was there until the late 90s, and then it was no longer there. We suspect this was because there was just no suitable habitat or other greater glider populations in that vicinity. So it is not just about the activities in the habitat zone itself; it is also about connectivity across the landscape, which is really critical for threatened species. We did not emphasise that in our verbal submission, but that is probably the one. If there was an investment to be made in ecosystem restoration, it would be about looking at improving connectivity across the landscape, through public and private land, to help populations disperse.

Ms BATH: And isn't that a really interesting topic that you have gone to, because we yesterday heard from Mr Reid—they are both scientists, one is a farmer—and Mr Stewart. I forget Mr Stewart's first name—Andrew—Andrew Stewart and Rowan Reid. And they have been doing a combination between farming and forestry and they are creating these links, these corridors. So some of the focus probably for government needs to be how to support farmers and landholders to create those networks which connect.

Ms WYATT: Yes. For sure.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: The work that Rowan does in the Otways is a really good example of mixed species plantations and things like that.

The CHAIR: Great. Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thank you. Thanks very much for your submission and presentation today and obviously the good work that you are doing there in Macedon Ranges. I just wanted to ask a couple of things. One of them is sort of a big picture thing about planning and the planning scheme. A lot of people have talked about how economic considerations often come before environmental considerations at the last minute, when decisions are made at VCAT and things like that. I am just wondering about something that I was trying to ask another council: where do you think provisions could be put in the planning scheme to better protect biodiversity—at what sort of level if you want to really make it a high-level thing that biodiversity and conservation of habitat is a prime consideration?

Ms WYATT: I think with the planning scheme, at the highest level obviously would be best, ensuring it is in the state planning provisions. And to be fair to the state planning provisions, biodiversity is recognised and there are state government regulations around native vegetation removal. The intent of the policies is good and the actual provisions from our experience provide a good balance between trying to enable people to do things on their properties and protect native vegetation. I think they could always be improved a little bit, and the state government is trying to finesse those provisions where appropriate. From our perspective it is less about not having the policies there; it is more about how they are implemented and then enforced. So from our perspective the policy setting is okay—it is pretty okay. I think more effort could go into how it is implemented and enforced, particularly the enforcement side. The native vegetation requirements require a permit for removal of native vegetation under most circumstances, with some exemptions, which could be potentially finessed. But ultimately the permit provisions are there and the offset provisions are there and state government is trying to do their best to continuously improve those.

Mr HAYES: Okay. Going to implementation, where does that fall down? Where the planning scheme provides the protection, how does implementation fail, do you think?

Ms WYATT: I think it is partly around landowner knowledge of what they need permits for and landowners valuing the native vegetation that they have got on their properties so that they understand what they have purchased before they embark on a development proposal. Then it comes down to, from our experience, the enforcement and having the resources available to both proactively and reactively ensure that landowners are complying with their permit applications and having the resources to follow through on illegal clearance.

We are, I guess, a regional shire but close to Melbourne. The issues that we deal with are quite different to the issues in metro Melbourne, where you would have heard quite a lot about clearance of grasslands and other things. So our experience is a little bit different. I guess the other thing I would say though is, we are very lucky to have enough resources in our organisation to have an environmental planner to go and work with planning

permit applicants to help them avoid and minimise loss of vegetation as a part of their proposal. That is a really valuable resource. Most regional shires do not have that resource. Our environmental planner is busy all the time and is full. If that resource is not available, planning departments struggle to implement and enforce the planning and native vegetation regulations.

Mr HAYES: Yes, okay. Terrific. I was very interested in what you were saying about people wanting European-type gardens and things like that on a large sort of scale.

Ms WYATT: Yes.

Mr HAYES: The other question I had to ask you was about your Landcare, and you talk about it in your submission. We think that is very important, especially the stuff we heard the other day from Rowan Reid and Andrew Stewart on farm revegetation and agroforestry. I am just wondering about how you could involve Indigenous knowledge more in Landcare. I know the facilitators are often chosen by the group that is putting forward the submission, but is there some way that there can be council oversight or involvement of Indigenous knowledge in those programs or even a bit of Indigenous control, because the Indigenous people say, 'Well, they might listen to us, but we don't really get the final say in what gets done'—so just getting more of that in there. It is just an idea that keeps coming back to me. We talk about roadside management: is it possible for council to use Indigenous land management on roadsides?

Ms WYATT: Yes, it is possible, and we would love to be able to do that more. I think, as I mentioned previously, the traditional owner groups and on-ground teams are really stretched. Local government really wants to engage them for things like roadside management and to work with our Landcare groups. It is a fee-for-service model with traditional owner groups, which is appropriate, but it does mean that some of that funding has to come from somewhere to enable them to work with our Landcare groups or to do work on our own reserves. So there is partly a funding question and partly a resourcing question for those traditional owner groups about: how do they grow to enable them to take up the opportunities to work with Landcare?

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: What might be a good example of that is that our Landcare and friends groups are really keen to work with traditional owner groups. A couple of weeks ago we had a sharing circle with Taungurung members and both friends groups and council members. We all met on a couple of council reserves, and it was just an amazing opportunity for us and the friends groups and Taungurung to be on country together and to grow those relationships. That is the beginning of an amazing thing that we have now, and they are coming back; they want to come back in spring. It is just little events like that which are a profound change, and we are all really excited about where that might go.

Mr HAYES: That is good news. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I might ask a question now. I was looking at your submission. I think you were here when Nillumbik council was giving evidence and we talked about the Eltham copper butterfly. Similarly, you have gone into a fair bit of detail about koalas in your area, and you talk in your submission about data that you had or surveys from the 1960s. I would like to hear about who did those surveys and how that was established. You might say it was Landcare, I do not know, but who are the groups? And is it local community members who are helping you in that? And how are you then building that data? And do you then make it available to the public? Unpack it for us.

Ms WYATT: Yes. I will quickly answer, then Krista can probably take over. Our biodiversity strategy established a monitoring program for us which provides more coordination around how we do monitoring and where we do it and for what and with who. So we have got a range of monitoring sites across the shire, and we really do rely on citizen scientists to assist us, whether they are Landcare groups or individuals. We do spotlight nights, we have got a regular program of checking our nest boxes which we have installed and we do an annual bird blitz where we do bird surveys, and all of those involve the community. It is not just about collecting the data, because that is really important as well, but it is also about the community engagement and enabling community members to connect with nature and with wildlife. So that is a start.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: Yes, that is good, but I think the rationale for establishing that monitoring program was recognising that in our council we did have a bit of a dearth of—like a cold spot—of data, and we really do rely on the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas for the information, like that mapping of the koalas. So I guess we saw that as a gap across council. A lot of surveying had been done many years ago by a conservation

society, and that is where a lot of the old data was, but then for a long time not many people had been putting their information into the biodiversity atlas. Then consequently that informs the state government modelling and the priority setting. A council area might not come up well because it is just not surveyed well and that information is not on a state government system, but that does not mean that those things do not exist. So hopefully our biodiversity monitoring program will help fill that gap. But there are other smaller groups, like a koala project in the Macedon Ranges which is trying to gather the data of incidental sightings from landholders and other groups like that doing really great work.

The CHAIR: Yes. You provide a great example of how councils can help with local biodiversity. Obviously what we are hearing is Nillumbik has the copper butterfly and you have local koala populations, so whilst there are similarities, there are differences as well. But you both provide great examples of how data collection can be done at that local level as well and can then inform things. So how do you make that data you collect then available to the public to look at? Is it through that atlas that you spoke about? Or do you then let local community members know about these things that are happening in your shire? Tell us how you educate people around local biodiversity.

Ms WYATT: We do. We put everything into the biodiversity atlas. It is critical for us to do that. But that, as you have heard before, is not super user friendly. The community do not really connect with that atlas, so we do package up the information in other forms as well. We do write little reports as needed, and we try and use our general communications channels to promote the outcomes of survey efforts—Facebook, e-newsletters, that sort of thing. It is certainly something that we would like to do more of. In a world of a lot of information it is sometimes hard to get those sorts of messages out and the information out to the community, but I guess we do our best.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: We have an annual environment report, which is probably one of the new ways that we can share that information.

The CHAIR: And just a final question from me, and I have said this to a few other people: the top three—what would your top three recommendations be for us as a committee? From a practical level what would be your top three? I know you gave us five earlier. I mean everyone is going, ‘Money, money, money’, but on a practical, grassroots level, what could actually help you in terms of local biodiversity management and improvements locally?

Ms WYATT: Yes. I think it was actually six that I ended up running through. Yes, funding is really critical, and I guess that is always going to be the missing piece of the puzzle. I guess what you can do, which is free, is to increase the penalties, and that actually is revenue enhancing. Out of all of those six I am not sure which one I could choose. Would you have a top three?

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: We can each do it. Okay: conservation on private land and creating connectivity across the landscape—that is essential. Long-term projects that engage landholders and community groups to do it—that has got to happen and be coordinated. We talked about economics—there is an industry there, and it needs to be taken seriously. We need seed. We need plants. We need growers. We need traditional owners to be part of it. It is fledgling but it could be big, and it has got to be taken seriously. I think public land management and implementing the recommendations of the VEAC is essential, and so is increasing resources to Parks Victoria and DELWP to manage the public land properly. Lastly, I guess the connection to nature and engaging people in our environment—

The CHAIR: Education?

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: Yes. We are helping a field naturalists group start, and they are running some fungi rambles on Mount Macedon. They are booking out within a day. There is so much demand to learn.

The CHAIR: About fungi.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: About fungi. Well, anything environmental. You know, our six spotlight surveys that we are doing over the month of May are booked out. People want to get out there, but we are limited by our capacity to be able to support that.

The CHAIR: And that is a great example you provide about localised programs that you are doing on-ground which are proving really popular but educating people as well and getting them out there in amongst nature as well. So that is a great example.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: And I do not think you can overestimate that role council plays in that connection with community. I have worked at state government, I have worked at different parts of state government, but really people come to council. That scale of a shire is about as big as you can kind of comprehend for where you sit in a landscape. I think that is a really nice scale to think about how your property plays a part in the broader picture, you know? I like that.

The CHAIR: Okay, great. Fantastic. Dr Bach?

Dr BACH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you both for coming in and for your submission. I might return to threatened species if I may. I was surprised—shocked—to read in your submission that currently, I think I am right, you listed 18 species of just fauna in the shire that are threatened. We have heard really robust evidence about the current approach used by the government here in Victoria to seek to support threatened species. Staff at the Threatened Species Conservancy said that the current government's approach is devastating. Professor Brendan Wintle from the University of Melbourne called it pitiful. So I wonder: would you make some comments about the current approach to support threatened species? To give you context, in particular they were talking about what they described as a 'landscape approach' that is currently used. They spoke about approaches in other jurisdictions that focused specifically on individual species. Would you concur with their analysis?

Ms WYATT: I think you need both approaches. You need to think about the ecosystem that species exist within and the landscape scale of that ecosystem as well as the actual individual species. You need to be able to focus on species that are in severe decline and intervene in those circumstances. There has been a reduction in resources in state government for threatened species work in particular, and I think that has been a shame and that has meant that there is less funding flowing to programs to protect and expand threatened species work. The action statements for a lot of threatened species just were not prepared, which means that no work has been done on them, which means who knows where they are and how they are progressing. No doubt a lot of extinctions are on the horizon for those species if no-one is actually putting effort in. So I definitely think you need both approaches, because on the flip side you cannot just invest in a specific insect or frog without considering how the landscape around it is supporting the ongoing survival of that species.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: I reread our submission on the way here too, and I was shocked to rethink about the fact that 80 per cent of our ecosystems or our vegetation types are either critically or highly threatened. That is nearly all of them. This is stuff that needs to be taken really seriously. We are experiencing a biodiversity crisis. You cannot just look at the figures and go, 'Oh well'. This stuff is really important. There are a lot of great programs that already exist that just need support to continue that are working to help it, but yes, it is both. It is looking at threatened species but it is also looking at the habitat and the ecosystem that they are part of, and that landscape-scale approach is probably a very sensible one that came out of the *Biodiversity 2037* plan.

Dr BACH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. All right, I will just tell you we have got about 5 minutes left. Dr Ratnam, do you have any other questions?

Dr RATNAM: Certainly. Thanks again for your evidence today. It has been really, really insightful. I wanted to know a little bit more about the relationship and partnership between state government and local government. We are starting to hear from local governments a bit more now in the inquiry, understanding that there are different roles for different levels of government. As you talked about, you are the closest to the community, so you have a really important capacity to engage community. But I am interested to know how that relationship is working at the moment and how you think it can be improved. Is it communication, is it resources or is it all of the above?

Ms WYATT: It does differ across different parts of state government. I think local government is well placed to do the on-ground work and deliver programs, and with state government funding and support that is a good relationship, where state government can allocate resources across the state to areas where they are going to be effective and flow that funding through state government and communities. In other areas, state government plays a role for us in relationship to our planning provisions. I think there is an ongoing need for those planning teams at state government level to be well resourced. In some regions they might be under-resourced, which means that any increased protections that we are looking for through the planning system are

slow to evolve and slow to get considered and approved, so I feel that there could be some work to look at resourcing—and I can only speak for the regions—for some of the regional state government offices. But in other ways we have got quite a good relationship with state government. I find that, where possible, they give good advice. The biodiversity team in Melbourne are doing a lot to try and improve the native vegetation provisions, and I think that they are doing good work there. They are supportive as much as they can be within their own resources. It is a big question because the state government is a big entity, I guess.

Dr RATNAM: Yes, indeed, and we know there are lots of different parts that work across biodiversity and conservation. But I was interested to know, because we, for example, heard from one council that they only have a very small environmental team so their ability to maintain stakeholder relationships with all the different parts of state government is actually quite limited because their resources are limited as well. So I was interested to know whether that is endemic across all local governments or differs between different local governments.

The CHAIR: But would it be fair to say it may not be a common position across all councils, because you will all have different needs and different capacities to do things? So it may not be a one-size-fits-all-type thing. You will have different needs to someone else.

Ms WYATT: Yes, for sure—definitely. Our relationship to state government, particularly in the biodiversity space, is really with our regional office, and that would be different for Melbourne. They would have, I guess, a relationship to a different part of the state government. I think that, you know, it can be tricky to know who to contact in state government, but that is what it is, I guess, because it is a big entity. The more clarity you can have about who is responsible for what and who the best contact is, the better, but I do not think it is realistic to think that we would only be able to have one contact in state government. I think ultimately we are going to have to have relationships across the whole administrative part of the government as needed. It is just about knowing who to contact for what and where to go for resources. I think that is what is important.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: I was just thinking a bit about—it is not just state government. I am thinking about Melbourne Water and North Central Catchment Management Authority, because we have not really talked about the role of those catchment-based authorities. We sit on the divide, so we have got Melbourne Water on one half of our shire and North Central Catchment on the other half. Melbourne Water has an amazing on-ground program for working with private landholders—their stream frontage management program and their farm program as well. If you have bought land in that area, you are in luck. They will support you all the way to do anything you want to do on your waterways and fix up your farm and all this stuff—amazing. If you are on the other side of the divide, North Central CMA are so strapped. They are project based. There are particular areas where you will get that kind of support, but that kind of engagement with landholders—they just cannot facilitate that.

The CHAIR: They have not got the capacity.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: They do not have the capacity to do it. So you can just see the difference in two programs in one area is so profound. So we have landholders who call us up and say, ‘Well, how could I protect my waterway along here?’, and we will say, ‘Well, you’re in north central; you’ll have to apply for a Landcare grant—get in touch with your Landcare group’. Whereas with Melbourne Water, they will be out there the next day and assessing that waterway and helping those landholders to undertake that work. So that is an inequity thing, isn’t it, really? If you are based in the Melbourne catchment or if you are outside in more rural areas, it is a lot harder to get that level of support.

The CHAIR: Resourcing, yes.

Mr HAYES: Yes, good point.

The CHAIR: All right. Well, Michelle and Krista, thank you so much for coming in and providing us with your evidence today. It has been really fascinating.

Ms WYATT: Thank you.

Ms PATTERSON-MAJOOR: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.

