

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 16 June 2021

(via videoconference)

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

Ms Erin Rose, Budj Bim World Heritage Executive Officer, and

Ms Jodie Honan, Ecologist, Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners 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. So if you could all please just mute your microphones for this point in time, that will help to minimise background noise.

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 I pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I would also like to welcome any members of the public who may be watching via the live broadcast.

So I will just take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you who are on this hook-up. I am Sonja Terpstra, I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Joining us also via Zoom is Mr Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair. Also we have Dr Samantha Ratnam joining us via Zoom, Mr Cesar Melhem, Mr Andy Meddick and Mrs Bev McArthur.

Now, 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 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.

Now, just for the Hansard record, please, if you could please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Ms ROSE: Yes. Erin Rose, Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you.

Ms HONAN: And Jodie Honan, Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thanks so much. So at this juncture I would welcome your opening statements, but if I could just ask you to keep it to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes, and that will ensure that committee members will have plenty of time to ask you questions.

And if you experience technical difficulties, just hang up and dial back in. And I just remind everybody on the call, if you could all mute your microphones when not speaking that would be very much appreciated. Okay. Over to you, Jodie and Erin.

Ms ROSE: Thank you. So I will start off. I am Erin Rose, the Budj Bim World Heritage Executive Officer and also a Gunditjmarara woman. I will start off with the opening today on behalf of Gunditj Mirring. Gunditj Mirring was established in 2005 by Gunditjmarara traditional owners to progress our rights and interests in native title, cultural heritage and caring for country. Our organisation is governed by its members, Gunditjmarara traditional owners and native title holders.

We are a registered Aboriginal party appointed under the *Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Act*, and in 2007 the Federal Court delivered a consent to determination for over almost 140 hectares across the south-west of Victoria, recognising Gunditjmarara native title rights for most of that area.

We manage several Indigenous protected areas for biodiversity conservation. We are also a world heritage site, so we have got the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, which was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List for

its outstanding universal value in 2019. The landscape includes the Budj Bim volcano and Lake Condah as well as the central and southern component, which is characterised by wetland swamps, rocky ridges and large marshes. The Budj Bim lava flow has enabled Gunditjmara people to develop one of the largest and oldest aquaculture systems in the world, which dates back to 6600 years. The landscape has a high level of conservation and has been enhanced through restoration of Lake Condah's hydrology by reinstating its water flow. Additionally, we have several management plans that demonstrate how we protect the important cultural and natural values across Gunditjmara country, so it is quite a large area.

I will move on to what we have observed around decline to the ecosystem on Gunditjmara country. So we have got land clearing, forestry practices, grazing, introduction of alien plants and animals, drainage, changes in land use, change in fire regimes and the developments have all contributed to a decline across Gunditjmara country. Gunditjmara have not been able to continue their cultural practices, including burning, water management and harvest, which has also contributed to a decline. Connectivity across Gunditjmara has been altered through the construction of fences and roads as well as clearing and changes in land use. Loss of connectivity and changes in land use mean species will have trouble adapting to climate change.

Victoria's volcanic plains and native grasslands are important to all Victorians for many reasons, including cultural purposes. These grasslands are almost gone, along with those lily orchards. There has been a big focus on threatened species, but in many areas in the more common species there is also a decline. We must ensure that the existing populations are protected and numbers are increased.

The long-term drainage of wetlands and changes to water management also affect our waterways and have a profound impact on our cultural uses of water. These changes in water flows make it difficult for many fish species, including our culturally important kooyang, our short-finned eel. Climate change projections also indicate there will be an impact on water quality and quantity in years to come. We have seen introduced pest plants and animals that have had a dramatic effect on ecosystems. Recent work has been conducted on feral animals, including pigs, deer and foxes. On the Budj Bim landscape, we have seen really a higher number than expected. We recently completed a 10-day aerial shooting program, with the following feral animals treated during this period: 1066 fallow deer, two red deer, 38 pigs, 60 goats and 10 foxes, which are record numbers throughout Victoria, throughout any type of shooting program.

Was there anything more you wanted to add, Jodie, to that?

Ms HONAN: No. Just go to the questions.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you so much for that opening presentation. So we will move to questions. I might throw to Dr Ratnam first.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you, Chair. And thank you so much for your presentation and for your really great submission as well. We really welcomed it, and it really helped inform our inquiry. In your submission you talk about a huge amount of work to be done for Mirring to be healthy, and you say:

For this to happen we need to be properly resourced so we can respond to requests for collaboration, and do the work on the ground.

Are you able to share with us what activities you would like to do more of but cannot because of the lack of resourcing, and what resources are needed to restore country?

Ms ROSE: Oh, where do you start?

Dr RATNAM: I know it is a big question.

Ms ROSE: I probably should have mentioned too, we are quite resourced, but we can always do better or we can always do with more, I think. There is a lot to be done out on country to bring it back to its most natural form or to create a better or healthier ecosystem. I think it is more about sometimes the challenges that we are facing in terms of land use, and the surrounding uses of land can be somewhat more difficult. But I think in terms of resourcing, more management by Gunditj Mirring, increasing our capacity to be able to use our own techniques—cultural burning, for example, is a great practice for regeneration and protection of the cultural values but also to create a healthier ecosystem, so you are not having the really large-scale burns. I think some other things around land acquisition also really complement the work that we already may do on our IPAs,

around Indigenous protected areas. I think being able to look after country more holistically would be a great way to move forward. But we have got some really good and some really strong partnerships that we already manage, and we are getting enough funding to be able to do the work that we need to do. But to improve the ecosystem I think there definitely needs to be more work done, and that is I think sometimes even us—do you want to add anything, Jodie?

Ms HONAN: I will just add a little bit. A lot of the work that has been done to date has been focused on the IPAs and building capacity in the organisation through that. So we have in the last year got a land management team. We have had Budj Bim rangers through Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation doing a lot of work on country. We have now got our own land management team, who are also moving out into the wider countryside, into more of Gunditjmarra country, and more partnership work. So they are doing work for the CMAs, for DELWP and starting to work with plantation companies. So that is fantastic, but—ongoing funding for that team so we build up that knowledge and skills and relationships. But when that funding stops, that stops, so having a guarantee of ongoing funding so that those things can continue—because it is a lot of work to get everybody up to speed and get relationships going well. So to be able to continue is really important. And there is a big appetite out there for that kind of partnership work.

Ms ROSE: And it even comes back to sort of that burst of funding that we do receive; it does not promote job security often, so you really want to invest in the staff or the people out there caring for country and doing some good work. And we do that and we provide training opportunities, but if you cannot provide that longer term employment or that security around employment, it can make it somewhat challenging to keep people around. They attract themselves to other positions, which is still great. Through our range of programs, we do employ a lot of Gunditjmarra people, and particularly young people, which sort of supports that work into the future too. But lots of our programs are funded on that shorter term, which is still good, but it is not ideal for that longer-term contingency, that sustainability around the ongoing work that we need to do.

Dr RATNAM: Do you mind if I ask how long generally the funding periods are for? For a few years or—

Ms ROSE: Yes, I think around three years probably is very common. Two to three years is probably a very common funding period. Sometimes you might be lucky. Five is a really good funding term. One year is, you know—

Ms HONAN: Quite common.

Ms ROSE: Yes, it is very common. It turns out to be a startup cost. So it does help, because you are able to do that, but then you have got to go and source more funding and that sort of takes away—again, it creates insecurity sometimes, but also it does not help with planning for the future.

Dr RATNAM: Great. Thank you. I have other questions, but, Chair, if you want to go firstly to everyone now, I can come back if you would like.

The CHAIR: Sure, because we will be able to go back around today, I am sure. Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and, look, thank you both for your submission and your presentation today. It is fantastic. I just wanted to touch on something that you spoke about just before when you were talking about common species. It is an area of some concern for me because we do have a department that is charged with looking after our wildlife and yet they are the same department that issues permits to kill a lot of these common species, and it seems to me there is a bit of a conflict of interest that occurs there. What I am curious about, then, is what your thoughts are—and for the corporation—on species such as the dingo and the kangaroo. What are your thoughts on how they are being treated, from your perspective?

Ms ROSE: I think I could probably only talk to kangaroo, because we do not have dingo here. Jodie may be able to add value to this. But kangaroo—we want to do more work in that and explore it further, but we have got fairly healthy numbers, and our kangaroos seem quite healthy in this region. It does not present as an issue often. We have got an abundance of kangaroos quite often, it seems, particularly out on our IPAs and on our properties—very healthy country for them. But dingoes, I could not talk to that. Jodie?

Ms HONAN: We have not been looking at dingoes for reintroduction. We have been considering some other animals for potential reintroduction and considering fenced enclosures and things like that with the IPAs, but there are a lot of restrictions because the country is so stony. When we were talking about common species, some of the things of concern are things like the banksias. Banksias—formerly we had huge forests that would

support things like yellow-tailed black cockatoos, which are an important totem species, and we have very few banksias, almost none of the tree banksias, left. So that species does not get picked up by any threatened species regulations, but it is a really important one to look at restoring on country. And also looking at things like bush food species, which were formerly the basis of everyday life. We were going out doing seed collecting for a reveg program, and there is one particular species where we found half a dozen places where it still survives. A lot of the palatable species, so the things that cattle and sheep would chew on, are now pretty well restricted to roadsides. So those species do not get picked up by any legislation at the moment, but they are something that we are working on restoring back onto country.

Mr MEDDICK: Thanks for that. And just one other very quick question then. Congratulations I think are in order about Budj Bim. I think that is an extraordinary thing that has happened there. Are there any other sites that you could identify for us now that are deserving of the same recognition and should be World Heritage listed and therefore protected?

Ms ROSE: Yes. I think so. I think Gunditjmarra country is a very culturally rich place, I think as most other places are across this country. In terms of significance and that recognition I think we need to protect it. I think we do have a level of protection being a RAP area. We have had different levels of recognition over the years. I think it is about, though, what we pursue and when we can pursue it. We have to have that ownership, and that is sort of something that we lack. We do not have enough ownership often, and there is a fair bit of private land surrounding Gunditjmarra country here. So I do not know if that has probably really answered that question. It is difficult. We would love more recognition. We have got a lot of culturally significant places around here. We have got lots of stories to tell and share. It is just a lot of work I think to be able to achieve that recognition, and it takes a lot of time and effort from Gunditjmarra people. But any recognition that we do aim for is always led by Gunditjmarra people, and I think that is really important. That in itself, though, comes with its challenges, because it is all based around evidence, and you have to prove, and you have got to do a lot of research and a lot of study. It takes a lot of convincing sometimes. It is a great thing to have, but it does come at a price, and it is difficult, because some of our properties or culturally significant sites and stuff like that may be on private land, and it is not always easy to work with. Do you want to add something, Jodie?

Ms HONAN: Yes. So there has been a lot of work on the stone country, Tungatt Mirring, through the World Heritage focus. At the moment we are working on Nyamat Mirring, which is sea country. So we are doing a planning process for that. We have recently completed Woorrowarook Mirring, looking at forest management, as part of the regional forest agreement. So every place we look at is special. Every place we look at has things that are worthy of greater protection. We have not had a chance to look at river country yet—Bocara Mirring—but there is a lot of work that needs to be done, as Erin says, and there are a lot of values there that need more protection.

Mr MEDDICK: Great. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Meddick. I might just have a question if I can. In your submission I note you talk about the legislative framework and ways that that could be improved—or that it could be improved, sorry. What in your view should be enhanced in our legislative framework to strengthen the way that we can protect country?

Ms ROSE: I think, Jodie, you probably could talk to this better than me.

Ms HONAN: Yes, I think it is a work in progress. The things that have been coming up in the forest work and the sea country work that we have been doing, a lot of them are around access, involvement of Gunditjmarra in those processes and involvement in enforcement. A sea ranger comes up as something—a good sea ranger program working in with fisheries. The same for forest country—to be involved in that compliance area. That is all I would add at the moment.

The CHAIR: So better compliance and enforcement, would that be it?

Ms ROSE: Yes.

The CHAIR: Okay. I think you were just talking about sea country, and I note that you were saying there is a lot more work to be done, but the same thing could be said for local waterways as well, like rivers, or do you feel it needs greater enforcement in those areas as well?

Ms ROSE: Yes.

Ms HONAN: Yes.

Ms ROSE: I suppose for the protection of our species but particularly our short-finned eels. It is great to have that protection on our own property, say world heritage, for example, but at the end if you have got people fishing for a large number of short-finned eel at the end of our waterways, it does not help that life span that we have relied on for so many years. So it sort of interferes, I guess, with that and it is the mass consumption, sometimes, that is not useful to support the life span of our species, particularly the ones that link back to the aquaculture system. There are many other species too, I think, that there can be interference with. And I think even just for example, sometimes even hunting and stuff like that on properties and people accessing properties when they should not be, but I guess there is a range of things in terms of enforcement. Sometimes the efforts are not put in as well as they could be, I think, and that is something that needs to be sorted out.

Ms HONAN: And the whole framework.

The CHAIR: And do you think that goes to resourcing as well? As you were saying, through the partnerships you create stronger resourcing of your organisations, for example, to assist—

Ms ROSE: Yes, and having the resources available, you know? We may need people to do that weekend work but we currently only have enough to employ people from Monday to Friday, 9 till 5, so you do not want to stretch your resources so far that you are burning them out, either. So it is about creating a good balance between having that workforce that can support varying hours. The issues do not stop on weekends; they continue. More of a presence, I think, out on country would be good.

Ms HONAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thanks very much. That is great. Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thanks, Chair, and thanks very much, Erin and Jodie, for your submission. I did not know there was mass consumption of eels, but it is interesting. I like the eels down that way.

I just wanted to ask you: you talk about in the submission working with DELWP and Parks Victoria to identify opportunities to implement traditional land management techniques. I just want to ask you how that really works for you in getting what you would like to achieve on country through organisations like DELWP and Parks. Can you describe the process a bit and tell us if it is working for you or not?

Ms ROSE: Yes, sure. We do actually have a really good example. We have got what we call Weeyn Yarkeen, which is a fire strategy plan for our IPAs. That is a partnership between DELWP, Glenelg Hopkins CMA and Parks Victoria—CFA, sorry. That allows us to conduct cultural burns out on our properties—so using different techniques of fire, usually mosaic burning, to better manage—and it helps a lot of things. It helps build a healthier and stronger habitat for our species, but it also helps with that fuel reduction, that longer term fire management. It mitigates that risk around, you know, big bushfires and stuff like that that we do not want to rip through our property, but it also helps with regeneration. It is a great technique for us to be able to use out on country to support a healthier ecosystem.

I cannot remember what I was getting to—so sorry. Back to the partnership, it is great because we have developed up a strategy that allows us, Gunditjmarra, to be able to lead the work through that and the planning. Do you want to add anything more, Jodie?

Ms HONAN: Yes. I think that partnership has taken a long time to develop, and a part of it is there are Gunditjmarra people working in the local DELWP office, so there is that constant relationship. We had the big bushfires on Budj Bim country over summer, and that good relationship meant that the suppression was done in a very culturally sensitive way as well as being sensitive to the plants and animals as well. So those kinds of relationships—you know, 10–20 years of work—are so that when something happens, it happens as well as it possibly can.

Ms ROSE: And it also allows the opportunity to create that two-way learning—you know, sort of again building the confidence within each organisation to do practice a little bit differently. I think it has also been a great benefit through our partnership and through Weeyn Yarkeen. As I said, it builds, I think, confidence on

both sides of the fence—you know, for Gunditj Mirring plus also for your fire agencies that might do practice a little bit differently. So it is a great opportunity to work towards a better practice, I think, for both.

Ms HONAN: Yes. So our World Heritage rangers and the land management team also get invited out on DELWP burns, which are done to DELWP practices, but it gives them a chance to see how that works—and that continuing communication. So over time hopefully more of the cultural kind of burning—but it is small steps slowly at the moment.

Ms ROSE: It also helps our ranger programs to learn more about fire.

Ms HONAN: Yes.

Mr HAYES: Yes. Perfect. If I could just throw one more in there, how could you see that process being improved to, as you mentioned, get to the position of giving traditional owners the lead or a way of getting traditional owners to really sort of own the process and get things happening the way you would like to see the land being managed?

Ms ROSE: Yes, I think that would come back to us being able to manage our own fires, so increasing capacity and increasing resources to do that. Examples are having our own fire equipment and having our own fire station to be able to respond or conduct fires when required out on country. And when I say ‘fire’, I would probably say conduct our own cultural burning and techniques out there or use our own techniques out there at our own times—so, you know, at an appropriate time to burn that day. That might mean we would need our own permit scheme to be able to do that type of work. Eventually the longer term goal is to step away from even needing to have, I guess, the DELWP involvement or CFA involvement, where we can manage that ourselves. But we need to increase capacity within our own organisation, and also too we need resources to be able to manage that. We have got lots of surrounding assets and stuff like that too, so safety is the utmost important thing. You need insurances and all sorts of things.

Ms HONAN: And ongoing employment for that land management team. Like Erin said before about our team, some of them are very young—some are 16. You cannot throw a 16-year-old into a situation like that and expect them to know what to do when that has not been part of their upbringing. So over time we build that capacity in the wider community as well in the Gunditjmara mob so more mob get a chance to get out there and be part of cultural burning so those kids grow up with it as part of their world and when they come onto the team they have already seen what goes on, so extending that knowledge out into the wider Gunditjmara community. But also that recognition that cultural burning is not just the same as a cool burn or a mosaic burn; a cultural burn is culturally driven for cultural purposes by Gunditjmara, because there is a bit of sort of fuzzy language around what a cultural burn is and people who are not TOs saying, ‘Oh, I’m going to do a cultural burn’. It is like, ‘Well, I’m sorry, you can’t, because you’re not’.

Mr HAYES: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Hayes. Mr Melhem.

Mr MELHEM: No, I am good, thank you. I just want to say, Erin and Jodie, thank you very much for your contributions. It is really excellent. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Look, I first of all say: well done, and it is always a pleasure to go to Budj Bim. It is a very significant area. The work that has been done there is fantastic, and more people need to go and see it. I hope that you might even be able to ensure that you get an income from everybody going and visiting your area, because that would be helpful to be able to provide you with funds to do other things. I am just wondering, in the area of resources: how many people do you have employed in the corporation and how many volunteers do you have and how do you go about encouraging even non-Indigenous people—is that feasible—to be volunteers to support you? And educate me, please: what is a cultural burn? Are you able to tell us so we do not make the mistake of saying it in the wrong context?

Ms ROSE: Yes. We have had significant growth within our organisation. We have grown from about probably six to seven employees to now 30, and it is growing, and it is not going to stop growing for the time

being. We are getting some funds, but they are short-term agreements or not as long as we would like sometimes. But yes, we are definitely growing as an organisation. We have got some great formal and informal partnerships. We do a lot of work with people who are wanting to learn more about the Budj Bim cultural landscape or more about Gunditjmara country. Often though that might be through research partnerships and stuff like that. We do have some informal partnerships, but in terms of people coming to volunteer we have not set anything up as yet. It is probably an area for growth for us. I think we certainly get a lot of people who are interested and like to learn about the Budj Bim cultural landscape.

To the question about cultural burn: it is hard. It is also, we will acknowledge, something we are learning ourselves. It is a practice we have not been able to do for a period of time, so it is something that we are increasing capacity for and we are learning about ourselves. But cultural burn is that connection: so why are you conducting that burn and what reason does it connect to? We refer to it also as a bit of mosaic burning, but we will use a cultural burn to protect our cultural assets, for example. We have got the aquaculture system, so we might be a bit strategic around thinking and behind our planning as to why we need to conduct a cultural burn. But a great example is our puunyaart grass—that regeneration, making sure that we are using cultural burning so that we can continue to access our cultural resources so that we can continue to maintain our practices. So puunyaart grass is a great example—our basket weaving—to support harvesting the eels and other reasons. So I do not know if there is a really defined definition. Jodie, I do not know if there is anything you want to—

Ms HONAN: Cultural burning is driven by the traditional owners, is basically it.

Ms ROSE: Yes.

Ms HONAN: It is not about the technique on the ground entirely, it is about the motivation and the links, the connection.

Ms ROSE: The connection—I think it is that.

Mrs McARTHUR: So are there volunteers in your Indigenous community who work with you to protect the landscape, or is everybody a paid employee?

The CHAIR: Sorry, just before you answer that—Bev, just so you know, we have got about a minute left on this.

Mrs McARTHUR: Sorry.

The CHAIR: That is okay. Feel free to answer, and if you want to add anything, you can also put an answer on notice. But please continue.

Ms ROSE: Sure. I will probably just go first by saying we have got a lot of Gunditjmara people, so we have got members of the organisation that will participate in some of the practices that we do out on country. But usually for that sort of cultural connection making sure we are including their engagement is really highly important for us to continue to connect them to country but also to learn a little bit around what you might do as a paid employee out on country. I think it is a great way to be able to work together with our partners. I think that is, given that we do not have much time, probably the most important point.

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. So everybody is basically employed. I am getting that.

Ms ROSE: Yes.

Ms HONAN: But there are other organisations, like Winda-Mara and Dhauwurd Wurrung, who bring out groups. The men's group come out on country, potentially the women's group can come out and kids come out as part of their holiday programs, so there are all those connections back into other Aboriginal organisations.

Ms ROSE: Educational programs. We have got them, yes.

The CHAIR: Okay. Fantastic. Look, thank you so much, Jodie and Erin, for your presentation and your evidence today. It has been really excellent to hear everything that your organisation is doing, so I would like to thank you again.

Witnesses withdrew.