

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

Mr Shane Howard, Treasurer, and

Ms Teresa O'Brien, Secretary, Belfast Coastal Reserve Action Group.

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 are 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 who may be watching these 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. With us on Zoom we have Mr Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair; Mr Andy Meddick; Dr Samantha Ratnam; Mrs Bev McArthur; and Mr Cesar Melhem.

Now, all evidence that is taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to 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 website.

If I could get you, please, just for the Hansard record, to state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Mr HOWARD: My name is Shane Howard, and I represent today the Belfast Coastal Reserve Action Group.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you.

Ms O'BRIEN: My name is Teresa O'Brien, and I am the Secretary of the Belfast Coastal Reserve Action Group in Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you. So with that I welcome you to make your opening comments, but if you could please keep them to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes. And I will give you a bit of a tip when we are getting close to the 10-minute time, if you take that much time, and then that way that will allow the rest of the session for committee members to ask you lots of questions. So with that I will hand over to you. Thanks.

Mr HOWARD: Thank you, Sonja. We would also like to of course acknowledge that we live on Gunditjmara country, Peek Woorroong country, and to pay our respects to the people whose land we live and work on.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. Our submission draws on our local regional area of understanding, our accumulated scientific and community knowledge, the historical lessons learned and the data gathered for the Belfast Coastal Reserve and the Tower Hill area in south-west Victoria, ostensibly between Warrnambool and Port Fairy. But it serves to highlight issues across the state of Victoria and beyond, regionally, nationally and globally, regarding the ecological emergency that we now face as a planet.

In his book *The Social Conquest of Earth*, the eminent sociobiologist EO Wilson suggested that we have created a:

Star Wars civilisation with stone-age emotions, medieval institutions and god-like technology. We are ... a danger to ourselves and to the rest of life.

Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth* and Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* paint a historical portrait of Victoria as a highly fertile, well-managed Aboriginal landscape at the time of colonial imposition in the early 19th century. The destruction of the flora and fauna of Victoria, as elsewhere, was rapid. James Boyce's historical work, *1835*, describes the occupation of the Aboriginal lands of the Western District of Victoria in the 1830s as 'the largest land grab in world history'. An area the size of England was systematically occupied for sheep grazing by squatters, ostensibly financed from Tasmania, in the space of three to four years. To look at a map of this region is to gaze upon a carelessly colonised landscape transformed by European clearing. The only significant areas of bushland that survive are the Framlingham Forest; the Tower Hill nature reserve—a recovering landscape; and the Belfast Coastal Reserve, a recovering landscape also. In size they are postage stamp reserves in a sea of cleared farming land. They are a sad reflection of the former beauty of the south-west region and a sad reminder of our colonial history and the consequences of unregulated commercial activity.

Before colonisation our part of the world would have been the Kakadu of the south. Ecologically it is now one of the most altered landscapes in Australia. South-west Victoria has very few protected stands of native vegetation. Subsequently, there are also very low native fauna numbers—just look at a Google map of the area. Despite this, Belfast Coastal Reserve is still rich with endemic and migratory birds and an ecosystem that is recovering wildlife and plant life—echidnas, swamp wallabies, long-necked tortoises, blue-tongue lizards, snake species, blue whales, southern right whales, short-finned eels, all manner of sea creatures, rare kelp forests, weedy sea dragons, seal species and hundreds of species of birds. But they live on the edge of existence in an environment recovering from the ravages of colonialism.

Aboriginal people share the same fate and are also in recovery from an era of unspeakable colonial brutality. Environmental and cultural values are intertwined in this regard. South-west Victoria is also a region with the highest concentration of massacres of Aboriginal people that took place in Australia. One-hundred and eighty years ago this country was whole and intact environmentally and culturally. By the 1850s the local Peek Woorroong, Dhauwurd Wurrung, Keerray Woorroong and Djab Wurrung, and other Aboriginal tribes were decimated and herded onto missions. Within a matter of years so many people had died that the moieties system was irretrievably broken. A cultural land management system that had existed successfully for many tens of thousands of years was ruined in a matter of decades. These same eras of history echo nationally, and the truth hurts. We stole the land to run our sheep and cattle, and then we wholesale cleared it. We decimated the Aboriginal people of this country through murder, disease and theft. We drained the wetlands of their abundance and their diversity, and all for commercial gain. It was not right, and it was not fair.

Now, as a shadow of its former self, this country hangs by a thread in the slow and long process of recovery. The only people to blame for this destruction is us. We have to take responsibility. In the long run economics will not be an adequate defence for an unlivable planet. Today Victoria is now the most cleared state in Australia—66 per cent of our land has been cleared of native trees, shrubs and plants; over 700 native plants', animals' and insects' ecosystems are under threat; 120 Victorian animals, birds, plants, insects and fish are at the brink of extinction; and 70 threatened species make their homes in forests that are still being logged. The unprecedented scale of the summer bushfires has pushed critically endangered species close to the edge of extinction. Victoria was once a leader in the creation of national parks but is now at one of the lowest levels of new parks in a decade.

Just below Tower Hill, in our neck of the woods, lies the Belfast Coastal Reserve. A 1500-hectare reserve between Port Fairy and Warrnambool was gazetted in 1861 for the stabilisation of coastal dunes, because it had suffered a similar fate to Tower Hill through its colonial history and was quickly reduced to a denuded landscape. In 1980 it was gazetted as a coastal reserve for conservation, recreation, inspiration and preservation of Aboriginal cultural heritage. Since then the reserve has also been on the long, slow road to recovery.

An internationally recognised important bird area status has been given to BCR's coastline due to the presence of the wintering orange-bellied parrot, which is critically endangered, and the breeding populations of hooded plovers, vulnerable under federal law and threatened under Victorian law. The BCR provides habitat to many threatened migratory and resident bird species. The reserve is centrally important to the local Peek Woorroong people, rich with numerous ephemera Aboriginal sites of significance as well as middens, burials and skeletal remains. The middens at Armstrong Bay are dated at around 500 to 5500 years old.

In 1842 George Augustus Robinson, who was chief protector of Aborigines, witnessed one of the last great gatherings of the clans at their clan estate Tarerer below Tower Hill in the BCR, where upwards of 800 people

assembled for annual gatherings during the whale breeding season. The Peek Woorroong clans of the Moonwer Gunditj, Koroit Gunditj, Pyipgil Gunditj, Tarerer Gunditj and more are well documented. Scientists are now exploring the possibility that shell middens and evidence of human fireplaces at Point Ritchie at the mouth of the Hopkins River in Warrnambool could be older than 60 000 years, perhaps date to 80 000 years ago or more. The BCR and Tower Hill are inextricably linked in Aboriginal history, which continues on.

Belfast Coastal Reserve happens to be one of the best areas for the hooded plover in the world, but endangered species like the orange-bellied parrot and the hooded plover are staring down the barrel of extinction. We need you to stand up for their survival. There are more hooded plovers here per kilometre of beach than almost any other part of the coast you can visit. The Mornington Peninsula is another example of a high-value area for the species, and it was made a national park to protect them. Plus it has dedicated rangers as well. These migratory shorebirds and their habitat are also protected under various international agreements and conventions of which Australia is a signatory. The protection of their species and their habitat is also enforced under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act.

For the last five years our little volunteer group, with few resources, led an exhausting campaign against an assault by the powerful racing industry, supported by all the major political parties, to install almost 200 racehorses a day training on our wild coast beaches and in our culturally and environmentally sensitive dunes. It was environmental and cultural vandalism driven by greed and power and privilege. It fell to a small, dedicated community of volunteers to hold back the tide, a tsunami in fact, of vested interests, so much so that we had to ask if our elected representatives are in government for their citizens or for wealthy vested interests. Time and again we watched local, state and federal governments fail us. Technically the laws were all there to protect the country we were fighting to save from the ravages of unbridled commerce, but time and time again we saw these laws bent, manipulated, ignored and disregarded to the point that we lost faith in our parliamentary democracy. This was a small example of larger issues. We watched dumbfounded as senior ministers overrode junior ministers and overrode environment ministers, because environment is at the bottom of the list of important portfolios. Some days it felt a lot like an autocratic government ruled. This has to change.

Environment now must be more important than economy. As the old saying goes, there are no jobs on a dead planet. This is not the way forward to the future that our grandchildren require us to prepare them for, and we all know it. We are on the track to deliver our children and grandchildren a hell on earth. This is not about ideology; this is about future generations being able to live, not just survive. We have to be prepared to make sacrifices now so that they have a world and a future worth living in.

I want to talk about Tower Hill. In 1855 James Dawson, a settler in the area, commissioned Eugene von Guerard, a painter of truthful realism, to paint the natural wonder of Tower Hill. In 1892 Tower Hill became Australia's first gazetted national park and the third national park declared in the world. But from the early 1900s to the 1960s it was so degraded and diminished through the commercial activities of land clearing, grazing and quarrying that its native vegetation was completely gone, completely denuded and its waters polluted. In 1955 the Victorian National Parks Association and the Liberal Country Party acted to improve the administration of national parks. Because of its faithful detail, von Guerard's painting was studied in detail by botanists and an ambitious revegetation program was put into action. Up to 100 000 local schoolchildren went in busloads to take part in one of the largest single revegetation programs in Victoria's history at Tower Hill. This was in the 1960s. I was one of those schoolkids. We now walk under a forest of our own making in a restored landscape, not as it was originally or perfect, but significantly restored. It is a source of local pride for the many children, now adults, who planted trees there. It is an outstanding example of what can be achieved, in terms of environmental restoration, with a little vision and the appropriate financial resourcing.

What then shall we do? Our world can heal. We can fix the mess we have made, but it will take a massive commitment of human and financial resources. This generation is charged with the last chance to protect and expand our environment rather than consigning the few remaining parcels of recovering landscape, our public commons, to the scrap heap of history. Our little group and others right across the state are doing their best to revegetate and manage weeds. We need government and community to be working together. We need an end to habitat destruction, and strengthened nature laws. We need a tree planting workforce to restore habitat. We need to expand Landcare and Coastcare programs. We need to greatly increase funding for Parks Victoria. In Tower Hill in the 1980s there were eight rangers. There are now two rangers for the entire south-western region, such was the decimation of Parks Victoria by the Kennett government, and I know there had to be cost

cutting was done. This needs to be restored. We need a dedicated program for reviving species facing extinction and we need a huge program of weed and invasive species eradication. We cannot hope to stop extinction unless we stop the destructive activities that are driving it. We need to transition to a plantation-based timber industry. We need to phase out coal and gas burning. We need to change the laws that allow wildlife to be killed and grasslands and other habitat to be cleared with little to no ramifications.

What can we do on the ground in the community? Revegetation, as I said, is an extremely cost-effective mode of carbon capture. According to Professor Lachlan Farrington and Deakin University's Blue Carbon Lab, wetlands, particularly coastal wetlands, can play a significant role. Wetlands capture carbon 30 to 50 times faster than forests, which they lock away in the ground for millennial timescales. They trap CO₂, act as a natural carbon sink, and they help offset our emissions, contributing to fight climate change. Unfortunately we have lost 50 to 60 per cent of our wetlands already, and this figure is even higher in south-west Victoria. Yet wetlands are easy to recover if we are prepared to do it. It is almost as simple as damming the drains that we excavated in the first place to drain them, and the recovery begins to show results within one year. This is already happening and the results are quantifiable. We need to compensate landowners and farmers who revegetate or restore wetlands. We need to reward environmental stewardship. We need to make the environment portfolio one of the most important and one of the most bipartisan. The old adage was 'think global, act local'. It is still a good principle as we go forward.

Going back to the local, we really want to see the Belfast Coastal Reserve and Tower Hill brought together and created as a coastal cultural park with national park regulations and the revegetation principles that were applied to Tower Hill applied to the Belfast Coastal Reserve. We see it as a model for the state. We see it also as a model for the nation.

We also believe that Aboriginal people can go into partnership. EMAC, for example, down here, and Gunditj Mirring can go into partnership with Parks Victoria. It is just one example of one model of what could be achieved. Future possibilities for cultural tourism; Aboriginal ranger positions, practical jobs; opportunities for Parks Victoria and local Aboriginal organisations to grow productive partnerships in caring for country and creating meaningful employment; increased signage throughout that park to acknowledge Aboriginal culture, presence and history; the possibility of working with Budj Bim, as a World Heritage area; the renaming of the Belfast Coastal Reserve and Tower Hill back to their traditional Aboriginal names. These things are all productive and good outcomes.

The best way to protect against extinction of flora and fauna is to preserve and extend existing ecosystems. An important starting point is for environmental restoration plans to be non-partisan, as I said. This is not a greenie thing. With the rise of the Greens as a political party I think the two major parties have developed a kind of philosophical resentment to all things ecological. This thinking needs to be overturned. Historically there have been both Liberal and Labor premiers who have been environmental champions, most notably the Hamer-Thompson government, Liberal Party; and the Cain-Kirner government and the Bracks government, Labor. The current Andrews government record is very disappointing unfortunately in this regard. Their energy policies are progressive but their environmental policies are not. They need to do much more.

Again, going back, I would like to finish with another quote from Edward Wilson, who said:

It is an especially dangerous delusion if we see emigration into space as a solution to be taken when we have used up this planet ...

...

... Earth, by the twenty-second century, can be turned, if we so wish, into a permanent paradise for human beings.

Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much, Shane. Teresa, did you want to add anything briefly there?

Ms O'BRIEN: No. I was hoping to share some visuals of Tower Hill, the revegetation of Tower Hill, but we had some technical issues there with trying to share the screen. But we are just both hoping that if you do not have a clear sense of the difference of Tower Hill from here to now we could pass on that information.

The CHAIR: Yes, sure.

Mr HOWARD: It is powerful when you see those images.

The CHAIR: Yes. If we can get them provided to us, then we can have a look at them as part of this as well. I am sure the secretariat will be able to assist in making those images available. All right. We will go to questions with that. So Mr Hayes, if I can start with you.

Mr HAYES: Thanks, Chair. Yes. Thank you very much for a very interesting presentation, Shane. I am probably going to ask you a couple of bigger picture questions because you have tackled the bigger picture in what you have said, and I just hope you can comment on it. You say that—and I see this everywhere—people have lost faith in parliamentary democracy and particularly in the area of the environment, and I see it in the suburbs too with planning and conservation here, that people find that the major parties, while they promise a lot, end up not doing very much. And I think that always in a lot of decision-making economic interests are given the precedence over the environment. It is something I would like to see changed. I just wonder: could you talk about how the system is not working and how it could be changed? You say the laws are often there but they are not used and environment is at the bottom of the consideration. Is it that cabinet ministers intervene or people very much higher up the chain intervene in a negative way to protect commercial interests and not the environment? How do you see it failing and, where do you see things could be changed either in the laws or the administration of the environment?

Mr HOWARD: Well, there was an independent review recently of the EPBC Act by Graeme Samuel, and he found that the Act was ineffective and not fit to address current or future environmental challenges. You know, we do not have strong environmental standards. In fact we do not even place a value on environment or environmental issues—ask any of the prime ministers that lost their jobs by trying to put a price on carbon. You know, we have really failed in that regard. We fail to put an entropic value if you know what I mean. We do not say, ‘What is the real cost’, for example, ‘of a plastic bag?’. You know, we do not factor in getting rid of that, the problems that creates down the track or our energy costs. We get ridiculous, tiny sums of money for a tonne of woodchips, for example. We are still cutting down—in Tasmania, but even here in Victoria—old-growth forest to produce paper that could be done other ways or should be done by now only by plantation. We do not put a value on the loss.

Ms O’BRIEN: Can I speak a bit to what you suggest, Clifford, is the idea that people have lost faith in politicians per se? I think people have lost faith in the system. I think the system, being like Shane referred to, the EPBC Act and other similar laws that are there to protect wildlife and nature, seems to lack the ability to actually be enforced in any real sense. So one of the problems is it is a little bit like a policeman telling you not to speed but knowing that he cannot give you a speeding ticket. It is a bit difficult for you as politicians for us to hold great confidence in your ability to hold those truths when you talk about wanting to do the right thing by being able to protect environmentally significant areas like the Belfast Coastal Reserve.

One of the words that kept coming up for us from local government, state and federal governments was the idea that some areas of land, if they do not have economic value, then they do not have significance. So I think, like Shane is talking about, there is a scale of being able to identify the value of things. But one of the things that was said about the Belfast Coastal Reserve was that it was a wasteland because it does not do anything, and I do not know what land has to do in order to have value, but I think just the fact that it exists after everything that Shane discussed in his presentation about all of the issues that we have suffered here in regard to agricultural and other aspects, the impact that it has had on the land, the fact that Belfast Coastal Reserve still is home to significant amounts of important species in this area is incredible. So being a ‘wasteland’—it is around the language as well.

So I would suggest on what you are saying it is less about the politicians and even the parties themselves; it is more that without a serious look at the legislation that actually can be used to protect significant areas in Victoria and across the country, you are just policemen stopping cars and telling them you are going to fine them, but you cannot, you know.

Mr HOWARD: You have no capacity to prosecute.

Ms O’BRIEN: Yes. So I think that is a really important part of it.

Mr HOWARD: I think another important aspect of it is that the areas that we have left that we are trying to protect are actually the last remaining areas that had no farming capacity—they were not useful for farming. So what we are left with are the bits that could not be farmed; it is either sand or it is rock or mountains. We have

lost enormous amounts. We are hanging on by a thread here. I mean, we are protecting a thin sliver; it is a razor-wide thickness of land along the coast of 21 kilometres—the Framlingham Forest. They are postage stamps, and that is what we are fighting for here. I do not know of any other country in the world, even a place so continuously farmed and occupied as Europe—you know, Switzerland, a small country, they still protect their biodiversity. We have just failed in that regard I think. Like Teresa said, it is like a policeman not being able to prosecute. We have all these laws, like I said. Technically all the laws are there to protect the country, but they can be bent, they can be manipulated or at worst governments can also go, ‘You will raise the millions of dollars you’re going to need to take us to court to win’. That is not really a fair system unless we are talking about autocratic government.

Mr HAYES: I get what you are saying. We really have to change our attitude and what we value and make that public. It can be done; it has got to be done. I often worry about things like valuing on the basis of GDP. As you say, a forest that is standing has no GDP value; if you turn it into woodchips, suddenly you get a rise in your GDP. The more plastic bags you produce, the more GDP. We do not put any value on the right things. This is all seen as a good thing—‘Growth is good’.

Ms O’BRIEN: Shane talked about rewarding environmental stewardship. We live in the country. My family have lived alongside the Belfast Coastal Reserve since they arrived from Ireland 150 years ago. We are country people. My family have farmed here for generations. If people were rewarded for looking after country—and that can be an economic reward—

Mr HOWARD: Financial.

Ms O’BRIEN: or other forms of reward—people will feel connected to the places they live. It is hard to have an ideological war around this; it is pointless. But what I do know for a fact is that people feel connected to places where they live. When the Belfast Coastal Reserve was at risk, lots of people who did not have the same political views all deeply felt connected to the beach and this reserve area and so therefore took on board that it was their responsibility to help look after this area. I think that is a really important notion. Shane talked about community-driven localised environmental armies. The army is that you go out and you plant trees and you get rid of weeds and you look after the animals. That is basically as simple as that. It starts from grade prep or kindergarten and it goes right through into our aged-care homes. It is our local, personal responsibility to do that.

Mr HOWARD: To look after country, yes, and Teresa talked about rewarding environmental stewardship. That could be tax credits, for example. Farmers could be rewarded in ways other than having direct payment, for example. There could be carbon credits—whatever. There are creative ways to do that if we really apply ourselves to finding creative solutions.

The CHAIR: I am conscious of time, and I know other members will have questions for you as well. So we might go to Mr Meddick first.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Teresa and Shane. Can I first say thank you both and thank you, BCRA, for the work that you did in protecting Levys beach and taking on the might of the racing industry. It really was a David and Goliath struggle, and you are to be commended for that—and not just taking it on in terms of a group of, again, white people taking on an issue but working hand in glove and hand in hand with the local First Nations people as well, because this was an issue, as we all know, of utmost significance to them. I was down there, as you know, and I was shown gravesites in those dunes where horses were running over the top of them and it was just an absolute insult to the local people that this was occurring. Thank you very much for that advocacy. You should be commended for that.

Look, I just want to touch on a couple of things. I want to do a larger, broader thing and then go somewhat local. I wanted to just state as well, just to reinforce what you were saying there about the value of land and how we look at that, it is my view—and I think it is a lot of other people’s as well—that there needs to be a shift in how we value land and how we look at that, because land in and of itself, even though there is no perceived activity taking part on that, has an intrinsic value for the animals that actually live on it. To them it is home and therefore it has a value already, and that is what we are missing here. A tree that is standing there or a tree that has fallen over or with hollows is home to a vast number of native species and that is of real value to them rather than just being something that can be chopped up for firewood to go on someone’s barbecue or something like that.

You talked about taking matters to court and things like that, for instance, as a group, if it is BCRA and you have got an issue that you are trying to get done, but you are having to raise millions of dollars, and often in these scenarios you are up against big business et cetera. Do you think there should be a fundamental shift in the way that the Acts are viewed or the way that any Act is written in that the burden of proof must be on the transgressor to prove their innocence in these situations rather than groups like yourselves having to take them to court to say, 'Hey, this is wrong', and you having to prove that they have done something wrong? It seems to me that there needs to be a polar shift. Is that something that you agree with?

Mr HOWARD: Absolutely.

Mr MEDDICK: The last question, adding on to that then, with this local focus: I want to talk about Tower Hill for a moment. Do you feel when you look at Tower Hill now, for instance—and I know you talked about the regeneration and things like that—and the uses of Tower Hill, as it stands today, particularly at this particular time of year, and the management of Tower Hill, that there are changes that can be made for the better, particularly in the uses aspect, to better protect the wildlife that does exist there, that is coming back? And is there a possibility for that to be adapted across the entire state as 'Here's a beacon of what we can do—an example'. I know there is a lot in all of that—

Ms O'BRIEN: No, that is all right.

Mr MEDDICK: but if you can just unpack all of that for me.

Mr HOWARD: Okay. I will go to the first point you talked about, really about how we approach country, how we approach land. I have spent a lot of time, I suppose, and been deeply influenced by Aboriginal Australia and by Aboriginal philosophy, if you like, and cosmology. I was in Milingimbi and my dear friend Tony Batju was telling me about his father and his grandfather and how, because his grandfather had tree dreaming, that certain tree was his grandfather as well, that he would not even break a dead branch off there to use it for firewood; he would only use what had fallen on the ground, such was the depth of respect for country. This is not some kind of crazy greenie idea; this is actually about a deeply held cosmology and philosophy about how we walk on the country. The sand might be your relation. That plant—everything is interconnected in an Aboriginal cosmology. Everything has a moiety; everything is Dhuwa and Yirritja—everything has a relationship, and you have a relationship to it.

I dream of the aboriginalisation of Australia in our thinking. We need more of that, I think, to learn how to live in this country in the right way. There is a lovely saying, 'You're standing the wrong way'. We are kind of standing the wrong way; we are holding ourselves the wrong way. So we have got to learn to stand the right way and to be Australian. And what better place to learn than from the people who have been here for tens of thousands of years. I mean, that is a pretty good place to start. A little humility helps.

Ms O'BRIEN: And I would carry on just from that—I know you are going to go back to the legal stuff, Shane—Aboriginal thinking or aboriginalisation or having Aboriginal principles embedded not just into our thinking but also, like you talked about, the legal process. Aboriginal people have dealt with the native title, as a legal example, that requires Aboriginal people to prove that someone has actually decimated or will decimate their cultural, spiritual and philosophical—they have to prove connection in order to stop people from destroying it. In the same way I heard—I am sorry I cannot remember her name,—the woman from the Australian Koala Foundation on Radio National this week, talking about the same principle from an environmental law perspective. The person who wants to develop or do work within a certain area that may impact on a koala population must prove that their work will not impact significantly on the koala population, for example, rather than the Koala Foundation having to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to take these people to court to stop them from being able to do that stuff. She used the disgusting example of a road going through a koala habitat and then Josh Frydenberg rubberstamping that development and saying, 'No koala will die from this development'. The people on Radio National yesterday said the whole koala population imploded and there are no koalas left there now. They actually all died; they are all gone. And how do we, as everyday people, then turn around to someone who is the environment minister—when Josh Frydenberg was the environment minister—and go, 'That's actually your responsibility, and that happened on your watch, and you have to take responsibility for that'?

I think it is a similar thing if you can flip the coin and say, 'It's not our responsibility as Australian citizens to try and prove to people the significance of the value of wildlife or the value of ecosystems or the value of the Belfast Coastal Reserve'. It was the responsibility of the racing industry, when they came here, to prove to us why we should allow them to come into this area that is of significance to us, and that is about flipping our thinking, like Shane talked about. I just wanted to put that as a bookend to that; it does feed into the legal processes, and like you said, Andy, it also feeds into places like Tower Hill. We identified that Tower Hill is culturally significant to Aboriginal people. It is environmentally significant. We have worked for 60 years to recover Tower Hill to where it is now, and yet every winter people go in and actually shoot our native wildlife within that game reserve. That is not an appropriate use. It is about revisiting usages within those spaces. It is about identifying that something like Tower Hill is a whole ecosystem, and that then would be connected to Belfast Coastal Reserve.

Mr HOWARD: And why that happened is because back in the 1960s when it came to restore Tower Hill, which was a very visionary thing for its time, whatever Parks were, whatever name they were—the department of constant name changes—back then they had no resources to be able to take the project on. So it fell to Fisheries and Wildlife, I think, because they got shooters licences so they were financially resourced enough to be able to take on the project. So it became a state game reserve as a consequence. So you have this bizarre reality where the place has been restored and people are shooting the ducks as it is being restored. These are the kind of crazy little ironies that we have dealt with over time.

As I said before, in the 1980s there were eight rangers connected to Tower Hill when Gavin Cerini was there; there are now two Parks rangers for the entire south-west region. It is an impossible task. So everything now falls to volunteers. That is not adequate. You know, we have to resource Parks better than that. And at the moment Tower Hill is besieged with weeds, particularly hemlock. It is starting to fall into disrepair again. We can do better than that; we have to do better than that. It is where we apply our financial resources, and like I said, environment has to not be the very poor relation at the bottom of the ministerial portfolios, it has to be at the top. Like David Suzuki said 30 years ago, we actually need a global supreme order of the biosphere. We are saying, 'What value do we put on oxygen from the Amazon forest?', you know, because without it we are dead. They are pretty fundamental things, but because they are hard to measure they do not get valued.

Ms O'BRIEN: I know there may be other questions, but I just bookend that by saying that that does not mean that it is you. You know, when I look at your faces here on the screenshare it is not your responsibility. What is your responsibility as members of Parliament? On the ground—boots on the ground—people will get out there and look after their own country because they have a vested interest to do that, but they need to know that when vested interests, people who do not have the best interests of the community at heart, come on board you guys will defend us legally, politically, that there will be some sort of unity, so that we actually feel that we have voices in Melbourne in Spring Street, in Canberra, in those places. On the ground we can put the gumboots on and we know the difference between the different plants and we know where to plant them because our families have lived here and we understand all of those idiosyncrasies and complexities around being local and being regional, but we need to know that you are doing your job in Parliament to ensure that these places are protected and that we are not doing our work in vain and that Tower Hill will not return to become—

The CHAIR: I am sorry, I am going to have to interrupt you just for a second. We have got 2 minutes left for this session, and I know lots of other members have questions for you. So what I might do is just quickly remind members that we are going to run out of time. We can go for a little bit longer at the end because we have got a small break, but members are free to also provide questions on notice to you because we have run out of time. Then you can provide more fulsome answers as well if you like.

So perhaps, Teresa, if you just want to continue, then I will throw to Dr Ratnam for about 5 minutes, and then we are going to have to end there, I am sorry.

Mr HOWARD: I would just follow that up by saying the Parliament is where the people make laws. So make good laws.

The CHAIR: Yes. We got that. Thanks for that. Dr Ratnam, over to you.

Dr RATNAM: Thanks so much, Shane and Teresa, for your very powerful evidence today and your written submission but also most importantly all the incredible work you have been doing for our environment for years and years and years. You know, we cannot thank you enough. In your evidence today and in your

submission, in spite of the very bleak picture facing our environment you actually provide some really powerful examples of what we can do to improve the environment and what we can do to restore ecosystems. Can you tell us what is needed from the Victorian government to make the coastal cultural park a reality?

Mr HOWARD: Okay. I would just preface that by saying the Landcare Coastcare program came out Victoria. I believe that Joan Kirner, and who was the—they reached across the ideological divide, and then at a federal level that was taken up by Phillip Toyne and Rick Farley from the National Farmers Federation, another great example of bipartisanship and coming together, bringing farmers and environmentalists together to create incredibly good outcomes. It is one of the most successful, practical programs that we have in the country, and all power to it. Lets us keep funding that—overfund that. That is a really great program. You were saying, though, what can we do in terms of making the cultural coastal park a reality?

Dr RATNAM: Particularly what can government do—what are the hurdles to government action, do you think?

Mr HOWARD: Well, I think there is goodwill there from Parks Victoria. At a local level we have just met with the Friends of Tower Hill and the Belfast Coastal Reserve Action Group. They have been coming together, and we are preparing a submission to go to Parks but also to EMAC, the Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation. We believe that there is a chance here. We do not need to be involved in it other than being helper dudes. But we think there is the opportunity for Parks and EMAC, for example, to work together with good government support to not only have good environmental outcomes but have good social policy outcomes in terms of Aboriginal employment and good mental health outcomes. There are a lot of win-wins in this reality, and we believe that as Tower Hill was a model back in the 1960s, so too in the 21st century this can again be a really great model nationally as well as statewide. What can government do?

Ms O'BRIEN: What can government do? There are a couple of things that come around that. It is about legislation, it is about planning and it is about a budget to fund that initial phase. The community itself—as we said, the Tower Hill example is a perfect example. The community knows how to do this. We know how to look after country, and we have not always got it right, and sometimes we get it wrong, but we continue to work together with our schools and our community organisations and sporting organisations to make this work.

What we really require is easy access to government—to members of Parliament and to government agencies—that can allow for this vision to start to get legs. We think it is really important. It would require a biolink or a corridor between the two areas, so we would be really wanting to be able—if you could help us—to start those conversations. Sorry, I know I am terrible with names, but the guy who has run the whole biolinks system around the country around working with local communities to identify where wildlife goes and what is the best area. It is less than 1 kilometre between Tower Hill and the Belfast Coastal Reserve, so it would be about requiring any expertise that we could get from around the country so that we do not make a mistake and we do things properly.

Mr HOWARD: It crosses highway 1, so it would probably require an underpass, for example, and some revegetation. It might require acquisition of some farming land. There are farmers who would be willing to do that. It is well within the realms of possibility, but Parks Victoria needs its funding increased. That is one of the most centrally important things for the whole state, and these sorts of projects should be happening everywhere.

Ms O'BRIEN: Shane and I have often said—we have lived here together for 20 years on the edge of the Belfast Coastal Reserve—it is easy to blame people for not knowing, but it is hard to get knowledge when it is not easily available, so we are also offering you the opportunity. We did not realise how important the hooded plovers were up until about 15 years ago. We now understand. I walked on this beach as a child and did not understand how important it was to look after our shorebirds. I did not understand that this tiny little postage stamp that I call home is actually a very, very significant thing in my region. These things are not just about people being ignorant, they are about people just not having the knowledge and understanding. It is about education.

Those key points would be about legislation and about planning support so that we can get the requirements to change some of the planning in order to make sure that the zones actually correctly cover the area but also about education and about support. It is important. We know you have a really busy job. We understand how enormous your jobs are. We will do the work. We just need the help at that level, at that parliamentary level, to

help something like this happen. Let us be another success story just like Tower Hill. Let us make this something that we can all be proud of for our grandkids, yeah?

Dr RATNAM: Absolutely. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Look, with that, we have run out of time, unfortunately, so I apologise to committee members who did not get a go. That includes me. But I encourage all of you, the members who did not get a chance to ask questions today—we will arrange for the secretariat to forward you some additional questions on notice. Just before I end this session, Shane, if I could encourage you to have a look at our *Biodiversity 2037* plan—just to get a plug in for our government. You may not be aware of it, but it is a pretty visionary document. We have still got work to do, and we have also ended logging in old-growth forests. It will be a phase-out of that. There are a few things that you might want to give us some credit for there with the Andrews government.

Witnesses withdrew.