

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Thursday, 17 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

WITNESS

Mr Cam Walker, Campaigns Coordinator, Friends of the Earth (Melbourne).

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 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. My name is Sonja Terpstra; I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. With us via Zoom is Mr Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair. Also joining us via Zoom are Dr Catherine Cumming, Mr Stuart Grimley, Dr Samantha Ratnam, Dr Matthew Bach and Mr Cesar Melhem. And Ms Melina Bath will be joining us again momentarily.

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 this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

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

Mr WALKER: Yes, sure. My name is Campbell Walker, and I am the Campaigns Coordinator with Friends of the Earth, Melbourne.

The CHAIR: Great. Fantastic. So with that, Cam, I will hand over to you and ask if you could keep your presentation to a maximum of 10 minutes if possible. I will give you a nod just to let you know that we are coming towards the end of time, and then that way that will allow committee members plenty of time to ask you questions. And I am not sure whether I might have missed out Stuart Grimley, who is also online with us as well. So, look, I will hand over to you, and I will give you a bit of a wind-up as we approach the 10 minutes. So over to you. Thanks, Cam.

Mr WALKER: Great. Thank you very much. Thanks for the opportunity to present today. Obviously Victoria is undergoing an extinction crisis, and we feel that this inquiry is a really significant moment. I have not watched all the proceedings, but I have watched enough to see that you are really giving this time and you are really speaking to a lot of people and organisations, and I understand the amount of work that you as committee members are putting in, and also the staff behind the scenes, on this. So I just wanted to say thank you. I feel like it has been given a really good hearing and a really complex hearing. Our submission was a little bit light. We put our submission in at a time when there was so much going on, so there are a few other issues that I would like to raise if that is okay. You cannot get to all the inquiries all the time, I am afraid.

Just to introduce, I think there are three things that we are thinking about in terms of our framing, and then I want to mention three areas where I would really welcome questioning. I am happy to deal with any parts of our submission, but the three areas I will raise are where I feel I have a bit more depth.

The first thing is if we are going to halt ecosystem decline, there are three obvious things we need to do. The first one is we need to deal with the legacy issues. So here in Victoria we have inherited a really remarkable reserve system that protects a lot of our most iconic landscape, and we have that because of the work of the community over many, many decades, particularly from the 1960s onwards. There has been underfunding

historically of the reserve system, and that has led to many issues. It is great that funding is now starting to go back up, but we need to get on top of the legacy issues that exist, particularly around invasive species and fire impacts in our reserve system.

The second thing we need to do is to prepare for the future, and what that means is completing the reserve system—and I know all these issues have been aired very widely—so getting on with VEAC recommendations regarding the 20 reserves in the centre west, protecting the volcanic grasslands and ensuring that the protection of old-growth forests in the wet forest to the east of Melbourne occurs as a matter of urgency, as per the November 2019 commitment from the state government. We need to be making sure that conservation on private land is sufficiently robust and is well supported. We need to make sure that there is money for private land conservation. We need to ensure that we stop land clearing.

Finally, the third thing we need to do, in very broad terms, is to accept the reality of climate change, accept that climate change is causing or leading to what is potentially an existential threat for all the ecosystems that we are seeking to protect, to understand that with that fire in particular is going to have to be dealt with in a way that is profoundly different to how we have done it previously and also to understand that we need to do our bit globally as global citizens to reduce our emissions. So we need to take really meaningful mitigation activities. All the states and territories are stepping up, given we have got a lack of leadership from the federal government, and Victoria has done some very good work on this, but we obviously cannot rest for a minute. We need to keep going. We need to keep pushing.

Those are, I guess, some introductory remarks. What I did want to do was talk about three areas in the alpine zone. If you feel that these have been covered previously, feel free to kind of move me on. I would like to also briefly talk about fire capacity—our capacity to fight fires and how we fight fires in the conservation estate, and then I am happy to talk fuel reduction if we have time.

The three alpine issues that I think possibly are not getting the coverage that is really required are, firstly, the alpine ash. So to think about the alpine zone, I am referring to that area between the wet forests of the Central Highlands to the east of Melbourne, so that Noojee-Healesville area, and the Snowy River in the east. So the Great Dividing Range—it is framed between the true alpine zones, so the High Country, the alpine country above the tree line, and the mixed-species foothill forests. And the two dominant species, vegetation communities in those zones are the alpine ash, which is the second-tallest flowering plant on the planet after the mountain ash, and the snow gum. And I think that the more data becomes apparent, the more we realise that these species are actually at risk of becoming extinct.

So alpine ash first. Anyone that has driven up, say, from Mount Beauty to Falls Creek or from Bright and Harrietville up to Mount Hotham has seen those acres of dead trees. The alpine ash, which is that iconic mid-level tree, is basically, unless we act, on the way out. They have had fires. Eighty-four per cent of their range has been burned since 2002. They have had fires in 2002, 2006 and 2019–20. They are fire-adapted trees, like most eucalypts are, but they are obligate seeders, so they do not regrow from epicormic shoots or lignotubers. They need at least 20 years between fires for the young seedlings to grow to be able to throw seed.

What we are finding is that the fires are becoming so much more frequent that we are starting to lose those trees as a species. After the fires in 2013 in the Harrietville area DSE—what is now DELWP—instituted a rapid forest recovery program, which has been incredibly successful and which I think is a template for the sort of work we need to do. It originally started in the Upper Ovens area and it involves the collection of seed and aerial seeding, and since subsequent fires that now includes basically right across the alps. There is no area within the alps where the alpine ash exists where they are not at risk.

I do not know if there is a point where we need to trigger some kind of threatening process and we need to acknowledge publicly that this vegetation community is at grave risk of ecological collapse. After the 2019–20 fires people in the industry who I spoke to said that they were worried that tens of thousands of hectares of alpine ash communities in the east of the state—so the Cobberas Range up to the Snowy range—were at a point of ecological collapse. So that is the first thing. I think we really need to have that one out on the table and need to be dealing with it.

The second one is the snow gum. At this point, as I understand it, there is no aerial seeding for the snow gum. They are quite robust. They will resprout from the root or from the branches and they will throw seed, but they are used to a fire perhaps every 50 years and they have had the same thing—more than 90 per cent of their habitat has been burnt in Victoria in the last 20 years but some areas have been burnt multiple times—and we

are now starting to witness the collapse of these ecosystems. This, to my mind, is terrifying. There is very little coverage about it and it is very localised at this point. I can easily explain the areas. There is one in particular that stands out for me, which is the north-west end of the Dargo High Plains south of the Great Alpine Road. They have had multiple fires. There has been regrowth. The regrowth has been killed. The parent trees have stopped resprouting, and now it is just basically a wasteland—there are some shrubs and some grass and nothing else. So we are witnessing this transition of this species and the community and of course all the animals that rely on it. It is an iconic part of our state, and we run the risk of losing it. So I feel it is really essential that the state government investigate whether this species requires direct intervention to be protected.

Finally, the third bit in the alpine zone is the snow gum dieback. Now, this comes from the longhorn beetle. It is a native beetle, but climate change is leading to greater droughts, which is leading to greater water stress on the trees, which is leading to these trees dying—and really old trees can die as well as young trees. This was an issue in the Snowy Mountains, but now it is becoming very apparent in Victoria in the High Country. The fire risk and the dieback are leading us to the death knells of the snow gum. They would be the three alpine issues I would really like to raise with you and kind of underscore the importance of that. I am happy to talk in more detail if needed.

Then very quickly, on fire. What we do know, everyone accepts that climate change is driving fire seasons, making them longer and making them more intense—the CFA, the FFMV, all the experts. It is just what it is now. That brings a whole bunch of implications for us. As you will be aware, in Victoria, like the other states, we support our neighbours; we send our crews, our career firefighters and our volunteers, away on strike teams to Queensland, to South Australia, and we send them overseas, but as the seasons get longer the demands on career and volunteer firefighters get worse, so we need more resourcing. I do acknowledge the Victorian government has done a fantastic job of increasing funding for firefighting. I think on average we have about a thousand FFMV firefighters that are put on during the summer, including the year-round firefighters, and that went up over last summer. There have been some fantastic budget allocations in the May budget for firefighting, but I think we need to keep pushing this. In particular we need more remote area firefighters who will be tasked with protecting the remoter areas in our conservation estate, so from the Grampians—from Gariwerd—through to the eastern border.

We also need a volunteer remote area firefighting team. New South Wales has one, the ACT has one and Tasmania started one this summer. As I understand it, this concept is supported by the CFA, it is supported by DELWP and it is supported by the CFA VFBV, the volunteers union for the CFA. So we just need to fund it, and we need to get on with training these people. I think this is actually really important as well because at this point volunteers can only join the CFA. They can only be involved in firefighting if they live in the catchment of a CFA brigade, and that means that most Victorians cannot help as volunteers in firefighting. Longer fire seasons and more-intense fire seasons really are our future, and we need to get more people that are willing to be out there. And I think that many urban people and many younger people and many outdoors people would love to be involved, but there is no pathway for them to come in at present. If we set up a volunteer firefighting team based in the CFA but targeted also towards younger urban people, that could really bring some extra capacity to our firefighting.

Two other things I would say before I finish: one is aerial capacity. That is obviously essential, and a dilemma we have at present is that most of our planes and helicopters are leased, particularly at the larger end—so the VLATs and the LATs, the large air tankers and very large air tankers. The RFS in New South Wales owns one, and I think we hire the rest of our fleet. The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements made a very clear recommendation to the federal government that we establish a publicly owned air fleet so we are not having to lease these planes each summer from overseas. Victoria cannot do that on its own, but I think we should be really taking up a strong advocacy role to the federal government to make sure that within the next year or so we start to see federal government commitments to create a publicly owned fleet.

Then finally, you will be aware that with the way that we manage public lands there are a number of zones for how we manage fuel reduction, and there is a zone which is around excluding zones from prescribed burning. They are the fire-sensitive communities which include the alpine ash, the snow gum, peatlands, cool temperate rainforests and warm temperate rainforests. So on paper we have protection for these zones which are going to be impacted by fuel reduction and which can become more fire prone if we burn them. Our job, at least in the interim, is to keep fire, be it human fire or be it wildfire, out of these ecosystems. And I feel that we really need to make that very explicit in our fuel reduction strategies which have been built for each region. So that would

be the bulk of what I was hoping to say. Happy to talk about fuel reduction if people have questions as well. Thank you very much for listening.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks, Cam. All right, we will throw over to questions from committee members. Dr Cumming, we will start with you.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you for your presentation, Cam. It was very detailed, so I do appreciate that. You did mention a lot around the bushfires, but obviously we have all different kinds of storm events. Currently we have had obviously a very windy and wet storm event. Would you like to expand upon that at all, seeing that obviously there is a lot of damage currently done due to the wet weather and flooding, because we are a land of—

Mr WALKER: Droughts and flooding rains—we are. I remember after the 2019–20 fires how devastating the rains were. Those good, decent rains, those soakings we got in January and February, brought the fire season to an end. I think we all thought it was going to burn through until the end of March, and it brought an early close, which was absolutely a godsend. And yet the flooding and just the devastation that happened where you get heavy-rain events in fire-affected catchments—it was heartbreaking to see what happened. We are witnessing the same thing now. We are in an era of change. Climate change has profoundly shifted climatic systems. These sorts of extreme events, these cyclonic events, are what we need to expect to see more of in the future. We need to keep planning for them and we need to keep resourcing for them. I am always in awe of the SES. But, as I understand it, there are only about 5000 active frontline SES volunteers. In contrast, I understand the CFA probably has about 30 000 active firefighters. So the SES is a much smaller unit. They do such incredible work and they really are the heroes of our community. I think we need to keep facilitating and resourcing them.

Dr CUMMING: Yes. Because, Cam, I represent Western Metro, and we have been waiting for our 100-year flood of the Maribyrnong River for a few years, so we are aware. But the other aspect, I guess, is—I do not know if you have heard just the latest news; you have been talking about the SES—the importance of using the defence force and the reservists.

Mr WALKER: Yes.

Dr CUMMING: Probably cutting a bit of red tape there would actually help a lot when we have these disastrous events.

Mr WALKER: Yes, and of course with—

Dr CUMMING: You know, because they do go overseas, but they are not being used to their potential here in our own country.

Mr WALKER: I would support them being deployed. And of course I would also understand it is essential we do not put people in harm's way. So CFA and SES are obviously trained in particular skills, so as long as we are deploying ADF people in the right place, yes.

Dr CUMMING: And the army is too.

Mr WALKER: Yes.

Dr CUMMING: They have got a much bigger lot of equipment, and they do it overseas. They have done it for so many years. So thank you.

Mr WALKER: Yes. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you so much, Cam, for being here today, and also for your really comprehensive submission. I would argue it is a template for some of the solutions, the areas that the inquiry could base its report on. It is very comprehensive, so we really appreciate it. The matters you mentioned today have not been canvassed a lot, particularly the alpine area, so thank you for bringing the committee's attention to those issues—certainly ones I think that we need to follow up on. Just in terms of your written submission, I have got a question regarding that. In your written submission you talked about the need to fund our conservation estate.

I wonder if you could expand for the benefit of the committee on what this means and what more the government should be doing in this regard.

Mr WALKER: Sure. Obviously what we need to do is make sure our parks are fit for purpose, and that means money. We know, if lockdown has taught us anything, we love our public spaces; we love our green spaces. The minute people can get out, they are out in the parks, but what that does is put pressure on the parks. So we need to increase core funding. We need to fund when we rebuild the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* and we need to adequately fund the biodiversity strategy. We need a revolving fund for private land conservation. We just need a lot more money in the system.

My experience is I know the park system reasonably well, with the exception of the north-west probably. I spend a lot of time in the alpine zones and I am just aware of how stretched the rangers are, and other Parks Vic workers. What they do is absolutely astonishing, but they do not have the resources they need. So I think a priority needs to be an annual commitment in state budgets to adequately fund revolving funds for private land conservation, plus Parks Vic and other land managers to manage the impacts of invasives, to manage the impacts of climate change and to manage the impacts of increased visitation.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you, Cam. I was just wondering, as a follow-up question—we have heard throughout this inquiry about the gaps in funding. What is challenging is to put a good picture—if we have not, for example, worked on the ground for years—to really get a sense of what has changed. We have had some reference to levels of funding actually dropping. They are not keeping up with the demand, plus there is increased demand—so, one, it dropped, but then also we have got increased demand, so you have got this growing gap emerging. I am not sure that is an accurate picture. I was wondering, from your experience of working in the field and on the ground for quite a long time, if you could give us a sense, so the committee has a sense of what is happening with funding—and you talked about revolving funding as well—so what is happening now versus what is needed in terms of revolving funding.

Mr WALKER: Probably I would refer you to the Victorian National Parks Association, whom we would defer to as the people that will know the exact figure that we would need.

Dr RATNAM: Yes, that is fine.

Mr WALKER: I would also be going to and listening to the union that represents Parks Vic and other public servants. They are very clear on what they need in terms of dollars. There is no doubt that we need more money across those three areas, but I do not want to give a hard figure. I am sorry about that.

Dr RATNAM: No, that is totally fine. Thank you. I am happy to come back later if there is time for more questions.

Mr WALKER: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. Thanks, Dr Ratnam. Mr Grimley.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair, and thanks for the submission, Cam. I have got no questions. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Ms Bath, if you are with us. I know Ms Bath has been dealing with some of the emergency situation down in Gippsland, so she might be just on screen, but may not be in the room, so I will come back to her. Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thanks very much, Cam, for your submission and also your additional comments, particularly on the alpine degradation issues. I very much appreciate your call, as has been made by many others, for increased funding and resourcing of our environmental efforts. I just want to take you to, maybe, a couple of the bigger picture issues. We have seen since the 1970s our species decline accelerating to where some are saying it has fallen off a cliff, and a lot of that is to do with human impacts on our native species. Over that period of time we have doubled our population from the 1970s to where it is today. It took 200 years to do that previously, so the rate has increased, and the government is talking about it in planning documents as doubling again in the next 30 years. You have got such environmental luminaries as David Attenborough and Bob Brown coming out and saying that rapid population growth is a serious threat to the environment. I am just

wondering whether you would like to comment on that, with the Premier saying, ‘Construction is the backbone of the Victorian economy’ and the planning minister saying Victoria is unambiguously in favour of population growth, and whether it is wise for our economy to be so dependent on population growth. Would your organisation or you yourself like to make any comment on that?

Mr WALKER: That is not an area where we have a really strong policy position. Our approach globally certainly is we look at the IPAT formula—impact is a function of population by affluence by technology. We tend to be very aware that here in Australia we are a very high-consuming nation on a per capita basis, and we are very aware that if you look at, say, the physical footprint of Melbourne and then the physical footprint of London, which has many more people than us, we have opted for a very destructive, very low density, very sprawling model for how we develop our urban areas. We have chosen to be car dependent; we could have chosen to do something else. So we have chosen a whole series of options that bring very high environmental impacts. We tend to focus on that side of things rather than sheer volumes of people. I hope that answers your question.

Mr HAYES: Very much so. Thank you.

Mr WALKER: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Dr Bach.

Dr BACH: Thank you, Chair. It was a fascinating presentation. I do not have any questions at this point.

The CHAIR: Okay. I do not have any questions either, so I might come back to Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: As you mentioned, Cam, in your presentation, climate change is one of the big drivers of ecological decline across the whole state. Obviously we know it is largely driven by the burning of coal and gas for energy but also increasingly transport emissions. What comments do you have about the fact that the ban on onshore gas drilling will lift in a few short weeks, in the first week of July, and what kind of impact do you think this could have on one of the biggest drivers of ecosystem decline, which is climate change?

Mr WALKER: In the 1990s there was a conversation about whether gas was a transition fuel, and that is a conversation that belongs back in that decade. Gas does not have a role in transition. We know that renewable storage and efficiency works; we know that it is commercially viable. We know that we can electrify industry and manufacturing. So it is disappointing to see us endlessly go in circles on this. Really the time for new fossil fuels is well over. Even the International Energy Agency has said that just in recent weeks. It is no longer a conversation we should be having, and it is bitterly and utterly disappointing and frustrating that we keep having the conversation and to see the announcements just in the last few days of offshore gas—huge parcels in commonwealth waters. It is very disappointing that the moratorium on conventional gas is about to be lifted. Even the Victorian government’s own report says it is not going to impact on shortfall and it is not going to impact on prices, and yet it will bring costs to the climate and it will bring costs to farming communities. So we would ask: why would we do it? It seems out of odds with our commitments as a state for net zero emissions by 2050. What we need to be doing is ramping down our emissions. Now we have targets, now that the 2025 and 2030 emissions reduction targets have been announced. We know we have got to keep ramping them down, so there is really no room in the mix for new fossil fuels.

Dr RATNAM: Great. Thanks very much, Cam. Can I ask one more follow-up question, Chair, if that is okay, just on another topic, just in terms of areas that the inquiry has canvassed in terms of getting a sense of the big drivers of ecological decline—habitat loss, climate change and invasive species being some of the top in that range. We are getting a sense of the strengthening of the environmental laws that are needed, the gaps that are emerging there. Also the monitoring and enforcement has come through as quite a dominant theme. We are yet, in our last stage of the inquiry, to look at private land conservation. We are going to be doing a site visit—we are going to be hearing from a few more witnesses. I wondered whether you had any comments about that in terms of what are the main things you think the committee needs to be aware of in terms of private land conservation and its potential for mitigating ecological decline. You talked about revolving funding for private land conservation. So do you have any further comments that could just kind of focus the committee’s attention in that area? Because that is the next area we are going to be exploring in this final stage of the inquiry.

Mr WALKER: Okay. As we know, I think two-thirds of the state is private land, so obviously it is an essential component of arresting ecosystem decline. I think historically we have some fantastic programs, like Landcare. We have a number of community-driven programs, such as biolink programs—so where I live in

central Victoria we have a really fantastic biolink program that seeks to link across private land the hotspots of biodiversity that are on public land. I feel like we know what we need to do in Victoria, but on public land it is kind of easier because the government has a clear lever that allows it to act, whereas what we need to do is to bring the landowners with us if we want really robust conservation to occur and restoration to occur on private land, and I feel that that is now happening. I feel that attitudes have really changed in the last 20 years. I feel that people can see the writing on the wall. They can see what is going on: they can see less water in the landscape, they can see less vegetation in the landscape, and they want to be supported to do the right thing. That means sustaining funding for Landcare but also doing innovative things and new things. One of those is of course this revolving fund, where you in effect loan money, people do good restoration work, it goes back into the fund and it supports other people. So we just need to keep thinking of innovation and thinking of new ways to bring people with us.

Dr RATNAM: Is that the kind of Trust for Nature model? Or are you saying something on top of—

Mr WALKER: Yes, the Trust for Nature model.

Dr RATNAM: The Trust for Nature model. We have heard some evidence to date that the funding is not enough. There are areas of land, for example, private landowners want to put a covenant on their land, but Trust for Nature just do not have the resources to actually complete the covenant work. So you have got the willing landowners, but there is just the missing gap of funding and capacity for Trust for Nature to be able to do that work.

Mr WALKER: Absolutely. We need more. We absolutely need more money right across the board—public land and private land. I guess we need to put it in perspective. I do not know what percentage of the state budget goes to conservation—on-ground conservation—but it is going to be a tiny figure. So if you look at it in the grand scheme of things, investment in conservation is investment in healthy ecosystems, which is investment in healthy futures, healthy people, healthy economy. So we need to bring that from the zero-point-something per cent of income in the state budget into something that is getting into double figures at least on a year-by-year basis, because what we do understand is there is no point putting some trees in or helping people put a covenant on their place if then you have got to walk away because you do not have money in the next year. The key thing to successful on-land, both public and private, conservation efforts is consistency and funding over years, if not decades. So it is not about a short-term fix. It is about changing our commitment to where we allocate state budget money.

Dr RATNAM: Great. Thanks, Cam. I have got one more on notice if we have got time for it.

The CHAIR: Yes. I will just go to Dr Cumming, because I know she indicated she has another question. This session will go to 12.30, so if we have got time, we will come back, Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: That is fine. No worries. Great.

The CHAIR: Dr Cumming.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Chair. Cam, just a quick question. Do you support native hunting, so native hunting of ducks or native hunting of kangaroos or just fishing? And do you support the removal of introduced pests?

Mr WALKER: We certainly support the removal of introduced pests. We do not support duck hunting. We understand that people want to go fishing. That is their right, and they do that. We do not have a position on that. And we would support hunting of invasive species, such as deer.

Dr CUMMING: So not native hunting, like what normally Indigenous people would do, which is hunt kangaroos or ducks?

Mr WALKER: No, we do not. We do not have a definite position—well, I will not say definite. It is not a position that we have campaigned on. We tend to defer to a whole range of interests, of organisations that have very strong opinions around the harvesting or protection of native animals. We consider ourselves an environmental organisation. It is not how it works—our organisation.

Dr CUMMING: Sorry, Cam. Because just with your submission you talk about unsustainable hunting, so I was not quite sure if you actually supported sustainable hunting such as native hunting—you know, Indigenous groups and what they would normally do. So, yes, I am just clearing that up. Thanks.

Mr WALKER: Yes. Okay.

The CHAIR: Okay. Great. Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Sure. One last question. Just regarding something you said in your presentation today, Cam, at the end about fuel reduction and the zones that are excluded from fire reduction burns, you said we need to kind of formalise those a bit more for greater protection. I wonder if you could expand on that a little bit more. I do not know a lot about that area.

Mr WALKER: Yes, for sure. So we have planned burn exclusion zones. So if you go to any of the strategies—we have fuel reduction strategies for each region. So the ones I am familiar with are the one for the Hume region, which is north of the divide, and the Gippsland one. So there are five zones that we use to determine how and where we do fuel reduction, so burning more intensively around assets. As we know, we moved away from a hectare target, which was a very good thing, and the Victorian government now has an asset protection approach to how it does hazard reduction. The planned burn exclusion zones note that fire-sensitive communities should not be treated with fuel reduction, but then when you look at the maps you realise that they do not actually match up, so that planned burn exclusion zones in the snow gums, you know, go like that; they are not actually fully contained. So we think there needs to be a fair bit more work in those fuel reduction strategies that I think were produced in 2020 to make sure that fire-sensitive communities are actually protected—that is, are put into those zones rather than one of the four zones in day-to-day fuel management planning.

Dr RATNAM: Okay. Great. Thank you. That is an area particularly to follow up on. I suspect it will be DELWP doing some of that work in terms of the coordination work.

Mr WALKER: Yes. [inaudible]

Dr RATNAM: Is your sense that this is on their agenda, that they know that this is an area they need to focus on, or it is something that we should try and—

Mr WALKER: They absolutely are. So if you go, say, to the Gippsland strategy, you can find the maps and they will all identify the planned burn exclusion zones. But our argument is they are not large enough and they do not match up with the at-risk vegetation communities.

Dr RATNAM: Okay. Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I just have a question if I might, Cam. I was just reflecting. I think it was a witness yesterday. I know you were talking about trees and those sorts of things. And I know a lot of people have a lot of interest in replanting trees, but I am also wondering whether we need to better direct our attention to what types of trees, where and even grasses. So, for example, one of our witnesses yesterday talked about native grasses seeming to carry a higher moisture content than some of the introduced species. If you are talking about fire—you were talking about, you know, if there is an exclusion zone—part of the problem is that if you slash and burn trees or shrubs or whatever then grass is going to pop up, or weeds or whatever. So do you have an opinion or a view, you know, if we are looking at planting trees or grasses, that we should be looking at things that are Indigenous to those particular areas as opposed to, like, European trees? I am just not wanting to put the wrong species in the wrong places, those sorts of things. And I am hearing a lot. A lot of the Landcare groups do fabulous work, but I am also wondering about how much of a connection we have to our Indigenous peoples and, if we look at what country would have looked like prior to European settlement, what was there rather than what we see now. So can you unpack some of that for me, particularly in regard to fire and your view about, say, native grasses? Could they be helpful in keeping weeds like invasive species down as well? Sorry, it is a big question.

Mr WALKER: Yes. How long do you have? So at the landscape level we are talking about Indigenous species; we should not be talking about introduced species. I feel that around settlements deciduous trees can be valuable because of their lower level of flammability, but in the landscape we are definitely talking about Indigenous species. And in terms of introducing fire to landscapes we have to understand that vegetation communities go through a cycle, where you get fire, colonisation, a mid-level stage and then a kind of end point where it is back in balance and it is less flammable. So if we are intervening at this end of the formula, we are

keeping those ecosystems more flammable because the colonisers are very prevalent. So our fear is that whenever we talk about fuel reduction politics trumps ecology, because you get this argument that we need to burn in order to keep ourselves safe, whereas what we live in is a landscape with multitudes of ecosystems that react in different ways to how fire is put into the system, and it is very risky that we start to think of fuel reduction as a blunt instrument.

It is a nuanced tool, and it needs to be applied very carefully and very locally and according to the ecosystem. And if we use it properly, a lot of cultural burners that I speak to say their job of reintroducing cultural fire into landscape is to make it well again because it has been mistreated for so long. I live in central Victoria. The Dja Dja Wurrung people often talk about, 'Our country is upside down' because the mining dug up all the soil and tipped it over. So what we have coming back is not what was here before, and the work to bring it back to a semblance of what it was is the work of generations. That is nothing we are going to achieve in the short term. So it is around long-term thinking and nuanced thinking around fire. I hope that helps answer the question.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thanks. I think you nailed that very big and unwieldy question very well. So thanks, Cam. Look, I will wrap it up at this point. I will just look across at the committee members. Does anyone want to wave at me with an urgent question they might have in the 4 minutes we have got? Cliff, you are waving your hand. You have got 4 minutes, so very quickly.

Mr HAYES: Thanks, Sonja. Just quickly, Cam, do you support increased Indigenous management of our land repair, particularly in the area of cultural burning but in a lot of other areas of managing our ecological landscape?

Mr WALKER: Absolutely—co-management of parks, cultural burning and really meaningful engagement in land management. It cannot be about box ticking and it cannot be about pretending that cultural burning is fuel reduction burning, because they are very different things. So it needs to be deeply respectful and deeply considered engagement, but it needs to be engagement that is funded. So again, living in central Victoria, I see the fantastic work that Dja Dja Wurrung are doing around reintroducing cultural fire into the landscape. So it needs to be really controlled by the First Nations communities and not subservient to what we want to see in terms of policy outcomes.

The CHAIR: Great. Well, thank you so much, Cam, for your excellent presentation and your responses to our questions today. I apologise again for us holding you up this morning, but hopefully we will be back on track after lunch. But I would just like to thank you again very much for your presentation and evidence today.

Mr WALKER: Thank you, and thanks everyone for your attention. You have got a big job, so good luck.

Witness withdrew.