

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

Ms Fiona Bell, Vice-President, Protectors of Public Lands Victoria (*via videoconference*).

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

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

At this point in time I will take the opportunity to introduce you to committee members. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Also with us via Zoom we have Mr Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair; Dr Samantha Ratnam; Mr Andy Meddick; and Mr Cesar Melhem, and other committee members will be joining us at some point through the proceedings as well.

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.

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

Ms BELL: I am Fiona Bell. I am the Vice-President of Protectors of Public Lands Vic Inc., and I am also representing Marine Care Ricketts Point Inc.

The CHAIR: Fabulous. All right. With that, I welcome you to make your opening remarks. If I could ask you to please keep it to a maximum of 10 minutes, that way that will allow plenty of time for committee members to then ask you questions, and I will give you a bit of a warning just as we get closer to the 10 minutes. Also just joining us now online is Dr Catherine Cumming as well. So over to you, Fiona.

Ms BELL: Okay, thank you. Ours is an umbrella organisation, with many other organisations that work with us. I will start off there. As I am sure you all know, ecosystems are biological communities of interacting organisms, and all things are connected and overlapping in ecological terms. Destroy and change one, and there is a knock-on effect to numerous others.

Firstly, we must be mindful of global climate change and how it affects all ecosystems in Victoria. We are seeing more extreme weather events in Victoria, with droughts, bushfires, flooding rains and destructive storms adversely affecting all ecosystems in rivers, on land and in the sea. This submission acknowledges the catastrophic damage caused by climate change to many habitats and ecosystems. Bushfires recently killed millions of birds and animals and destroyed unique habitats and old-growth forest in Victoria. They also disconnected different populations of animals and plants from each other. Sea levels are rising, and coastal ecosystems suffer from more extreme weather events and erosion. The air is more polluted. Rapid population growth in Victoria has placed more pressure on all ecosystems, accelerated the destruction of some natural habitats and changed the way of life of people in Victoria.

Pre COVID-19 Victoria had been receiving a higher proportion of overseas migration than other states, and it has relied on this growing population to drive much of its economic growth and housing construction. However, more people means more land is needed, more natural resources used and more waste and rubbish produced, which causes more pollution. All of these adversely affect many ecosystems. Victoria needs economic growth but not necessarily that dependent on large population growth.

The urban sprawl has covered a very wide area around Melbourne and in places eaten into the valuable green wedges that are designed to protect the environment, biodiversity, agriculture and rural landscapes and open space. I think green wedges certainly need more protection.

More and bigger roads are being built because of the increase in population and inadequate public transport. People need to be encouraged to drive less. I also consider that penalising drivers of electric cars with a road user tax is not at all encouraging for the purpose of these expensive zero-emission vehicles. I would suggest that an every-car road user tax is more appropriate for road management and upkeep. Safe cycle paths and the encouragement of the use of bicycles are an excellent move to encourage lower emissions and less air pollution. We are in support of the Victorian National Parks Association on planning, funding and managing parks to preserve and expand the natural habitat. Threatened species legislation also needs to mandate critical habitat management.

There are real needs to address climate change through reducing greenhouse gases and encouraging renewable energy use rather than coal, and also to manage waste, especially plastic waste, by more recycling of things. I would suggest that the Victorian government subsidising and developing more plastic recycling industries would have longstanding beneficial environmental effects and greatly reduce landfill.

Insecticides, herbicides and other chemical use needs to be closely regulated and controlled, as do industrial spills and factory fires, which have had a devastating effect on natural ecosystems and indeed the Melbourne metropolitan area.

Natural environments, including parks, are very beneficial for the mental health of people as well as wildlife. They need to be protected from overdevelopment and overuse. They also need to be restored when damaged. The foreshore and many parks in Melbourne are actually Crown land, but in some ways they are treated more like free land and have infrastructure, roads and freeways put through them or near them. I mention the North East Link, Mordialloc bypass through the Ramsar site of the Edithvale wetlands and the new, large electric substation to be built inside Royal Park in Parkville.

The Ricketts Point teahouse is now renovated and basically a licensed club and entertainment venue on Crown land, open until late every night. This foreshore is fragile and a refuge for native birds and animals, and it is likely the light and sound pollution could affect them. Apparently also there was no tender for this development. Such structures damage and reduce the size of parks and the local ecosystem. Other Ricketts Point problems include the removal of an ancient tree so a sports pavilion could be expanded. There is also much concern about the virtual plague of sea urchins in the bay that kills grass and kelp, and seagrasses and kelp are vital to the health of the bay and fish.

We suggest greater protection of urban trees with an urban tree strategy such as that of the City of Melbourne. Open space lighting in the metropolitan area also needs to be managed carefully due to the considerable ill effects of some artificial lighting, especially that in the blue end of the spectrum, which has very adverse effects on local vegetation as well as birds and animals—and insects, of course, which are part of the food chain.

More funding, we think, is needed for Parks Victoria and other organisations to educate the public. We also need a lot more rangers for regulating the environment and prosecuting offenders. Higher penalties and more prosecutions for breaking various environmental laws, such as illegally removing protected and significant trees and other vegetation, is needed—also for the illegal killing of native wildlife and illegal fishing.

Every year hundreds of protected and endangered species of duck are shot, but there are very few prosecutions. The recent killing of hundreds of wedge-tailed eagles and koalas was appalling, and they were caught but they were very small penalties, although I believe there is new legislation coming up to address that. Unfortunately huge numbers of wildlife are also killed by people with permits from DELWP. Are there better and more humane ways to manage native wildlife? We know that wombats have now, thankfully, been protected, but they have lost habitat and they have got a lot of disease with the sarcoptic mange, which is reducing their numbers.

We suggest that the careful and humane removal of imported pest and feral animals is more important, including foxes, rabbits, pigs, deer and goats, because they are causing huge damage to Victorian ecosystems and native wildlife, so I think more action is needed here. New technologies, such as drones and aerial photography, could help to track and prosecute vegetation loss and some other offenders. Damaged

environments need to be assisted to regenerate quickly, with replanting of appropriate vegetation. Farmers could be compensated and subsidised for planting trees and assisting to revegetate and restore their land. Captive breeding programs of endangered birds and animals that get released later into regenerated environments need to be encouraged and probably given more funding. Logging of old-growth forests is completely unsustainable and should cease. They are irreplaceable, unique habitats that impact threatened species. Timber workers need to be diverted to other, sustainable, occupations, some possibly in timber plantations and others in renewable energy production. There are a lot more things I could say, but I think I have just about run out of my 10 minutes, so thank you for listening.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Fiona, for your presentation. I will now hand over to committee members for questions. Mr Hayes, we will start with you.

Mr HAYES: Thanks, Chair, and thanks very much, Fiona. That was a great presentation. I just want to say I really thank Protectors of Public Lands for the work they have been doing over many years now and the issues that they have raised. I am going to try a question on you that I put to Friends of the Earth in last session. It is basically around that we have seen our native species falling off a cliff—their numbers have been going down rapidly over the last 50 years—and since the 1970s we have seen our population grow exponentially, especially in the last 20 years or so. We have got luminaries in the environmental movement, like David Attenborough and Bob Brown, coming out and saying that rapid population growth is something we have got to turn our attention to in protecting the environment. Then we have got in Victoria unfortunately the Premier saying that the construction industry is the backbone of the Victorian economy and also the planning minister saying that Victoria is unambiguously in favour of population growth. There are planning documents talking about it doubling over the next 30 years. I am just wondering, is this a responsible position to take in your point of view? I do have to say the Friends of the Earth thought it could be addressed by increasing density rather than restricting numbers, but have you got any light you could throw on those suggestions or that sort of prediction for us?

Ms BELL: Well, I mean the population of the world has gone up enormously since I was born. But I do not think that actively encouraging too many people here is necessarily the right way to go. But also having the construction industry as a backbone of it, it is building more things for the more people you bring in. It is kind of chasing your tail. I think we could be putting more money into developing other sorts of industries and things and perhaps being more careful as to how many people do come in from overseas, because we know it is migration that is causing the population rise, not people in Victoria having terribly many babies. We know that because of the ageing population, of which I am one, there is a need for younger people who are working even to help look after the older people when we are unable to look after ourselves.

But I think it probably needs to be a bit more of a gentle rise and a sustainable sort of rise. I am not talking about stopping any migration at all but being careful about the types of people who are coming in and that they are needed, because after all we have the rather peculiar situation where although we have got so many people we have got nobody to harvest our crops in lots of areas unless we import people from overseas. Perhaps decentralisation out of the cities is another way that we could help address that, because if people are living more in country areas they might not mind being involved with agriculture. That could be promoted as something, because bringing in temporary people to harvest things does not sound all that sustainable in the long run, because they usually stay for less than a year. So yes, it certainly is a difficult sort of situation. There are lots of people wanting to come here, obviously, because it is clean and green compared to lots of other parts of the world, but of course it is getting less clean and green as time goes on, as we get a lot more people here.

Mr HAYES: It is true. I am speaking as someone who has been a city councillor and who has seen the demands on public open space just go through the roof by various sporting bodies and groups wanting to use public land. I mean, it should be available to them, but there is only a limited amount of it, as you know, within the city limits. I just wanted to say, just in regard to the marine national park at Ricketts Point—I know you are representing them too—the damage that has been done around the marine area and the impacts of development around the bay. Do you want to say anything more about that in particular in regard to our precious marine national parks?

Ms BELL: Yes. Well, the marine national parks are being impinged upon, and they are being affected of course by various run-off like for the whole bay, including toxic run-off, and of course the overall temperature rise. Now, we have got this situation of the sea urchins just growing out of control in parts of the bay and destroying both the kelp and the seagrass. They are all very important for fish growth and for fisheries and everything, and apparently there are laws restricting how many sea urchins can be taken even when they are in

really plague proportions and basically they are eating all this natural resource. So there seems to be a need for careful revision of some of those rules perhaps about pest control even though they are a natural organism, the sea urchins. But if they are destroying other things, then it needs to be carefully looked into in a scientific way and for that to be remediated. I know there have been a number of scientists who have written about what could be done, including controlled fishing, because apparently it is restricted to very small numbers of the sea urchins being able to be taken and only in very deep water. But they are causing the problems in slightly more shallow water apparently.

Mr HAYES: Thanks, Fiona.

The CHAIR: Dr Cumming.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Fiona, for your wonderful presentation as well as obviously your very detailed submission and all you have done. The Protectors of Public Lands Victoria are a wonderful organisation. For myself, I am just wondering—I represent Western Metropolitan Region—would you actually recommend that local governments be required to develop urban forest strategies across a lot of the local government areas, especially the metro areas? That is my question, Fiona.

Ms BELL: Well, I think so. I am familiar especially with the Melbourne one where every tree is documented and when various trees get to a certain age, when they are on the decline, then other ones are put in. So they are there in readiness for when the other one topples over, which unfortunately is happening a fair bit in the City of Melbourne with the ancient elms and things. So it maintains the number of trees but it is also maintaining the different ages of the trees so we do not get a sudden loss in things. There is also what species are going to work best in what areas, because some will survive better in certain environments than others. In the west you have got the basalt plains, which have different soil structures to some of the ones out east, and they will need to carefully look at what type of trees could be planted and then maybe encourage that—and planting more in the streets as well, because the urban heat island effect is very serious and, well, in the west sometimes there is more pollution because of the industry there, so—

Dr CUMMING: It all blows over to the east, Fiona. It might be created this way, but it all blows over to the east.

Ms BELL: All of it, does it?

Dr CUMMING: It does.

Ms BELL: Certainly having more trees is going to be good for the environment in general, and I think perhaps more parklands if there is an availability of land that can be made into parklands for people, because there is such a lot of growth out in the far west—I am thinking sort of Tarneit way—and I do not know how many parks there are compared to some other areas. But certainly a tree growth strategy is good.

Dr CUMMING: Future planning, isn't it, Fiona?

Ms BELL: Yes.

Dr CUMMING: Making sure that those parks are laid out as well as making sure that those urban forest strategies are in place across all the local government areas, I am guessing.

Ms BELL: Yes.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Fiona.

Ms BELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: No questions at this stage, Chair. Thanks.

The CHAIR: I do not have any questions either. Mr Hayes, do you have any other questions?

Mr HAYES: Not at this stage, thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: All right. I have just been asking committee members if anyone else has any other questions. Dr Cumming, do you have anything else?

Dr CUMMING: No. I think that was a wonderful presentation, Chair, because obviously it was an extremely detailed submission being that it was a combination of eight different groups.

Mr HAYES: I might ask something then, Sonja. Just something else that caught my ear while Fiona was talking was about waste and recycling and the circular economy and also the damage that plastics are doing. Maybe she might want to make some recommendations there.

Ms BELL: Yes. We used to send all our rubbish over to China, and that was not a very good strategy, was it? And now they will not take it anyway—

Dr CUMMING: Not sustainable.

Ms BELL: So I think there is potential for a huge industry here which could create more employment for people as well as get rid of all the waste if there was some more plastic recycling, because it can be used for everything from construction to park benches and things in the garden instead of having to import everything. If we made our own, we would kind of both get rid of the rubbish and have a homegrown industry, which sounds good, and be less reliant on imports in some of these things. But I do not know who has got the will or the money to develop such a thing. I hear that in other parts of the world they can even break down the plastic to oil. So there is this reliance on oil from other resources, and of course we are desperately worried about the amount of plastic that is in the environment and in the bay and being absorbed by all the creatures in the bay and the deaths of lots of sea creatures of course by ingesting plastic bags and things—you know, whales and turtles. So yes, waste recycling would be a way to go, and even in some places if people could be paid per kilo for the amount of plastic they have got. I am in City of Yarra, and we have a lot of plastic recycling. They can take some bottles that are certain plastics, but they cannot take them if they are a tray, so those things are all going to landfill. I think there must be a more efficient way to do it at a state level.

The CHAIR: All right. Fiona, thanks so much for your presentation today. I will just say to you just on the recycling side of it, this committee did a very detailed inquiry into recycling, and you may want to read the report. It may actually address some of the questions that you were talking about to us. There was a very detailed inquiry done with quite a number of sizeable recommendations.

Mr HAYES: A very good report.

The CHAIR: But in any event, thank you so much for your presentation today. It has been fantastic.

Witness withdrew.