

FERAL ANIMALS AND BIRDS, CONTROL

Grievance

MR MASTERS (Vasse) [9.10 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage. Yesterday morning, the minister and I attended the Science and Technology Forum at which Dr Peter Ellyard presented a talk titled “The Challenge on the Journey to a Sustainable Future: Surviving or Thriving?” His message was simple. He asked what sort of future we in the community wanted as opposed to the sort of future we expected. He told the forum that if we wanted to achieve the future of our choice, instead of being given the sort of future we expect other people to give us, the first step is to think about and imagine the type of future we want, and to then decide what must be done to achieve that future.

Western Australia is one of the most unique and biodiverse regions on the face of the planet. However, we are all merely caretakers for future generations. We have been given the responsibility of protecting and enhancing those special environmental assets that we inherited from our parents. The future that I envisage for future generations includes protection of our special environment. This grievance focuses on one aspect of that protection; namely, the need to control and in time eradicate those species of birds that are alien to our State, and which pose serious environmental and economic threats to our preferred futures.

For the benefit of other members, I will outline some of the reasons that the control of feral animals and birds is desirable, essential and urgent. First, we have a moral and ethical responsibility to pass on to our children an environment in which the full range of options of how that environment can be used and enjoyed remains with them. The official term is intergenerational equity; however, the bottom line is that we have no valid reason to degrade, to damage or to not seek to improve the air, soil, water and biodiversity of this State.

Secondly, the exotic birds that must be controlled are changing our natural features, and some of the best examples of that change relate to feral animals. The fox almost ate to extinction native marsupials such as the numbat and the woylie. Feral cats almost removed from the planet the bilby or rabbit-eared bandicoot. If the sulphur-crested cockatoo spreads out widely from Perth, it will compete with our four species, or subspecies, of the black cockatoo. The rainbow lorikeet is likely to displace the western rosella from its only habitat in the world, the south west of WA.

Thirdly, feral animals and birds cause, or will cause, significant economic damage to the State. The fox is a major predator of new-born lambs, and the rainbow lorikeet has been proved to cause major damage to horticultural crops in Queensland. Looking several generations into the future, a lack of action may result in what has been called the “McDonaldisation,” or an ecological homogenisation of the environment, with the same species of plants, animals and birds slowly spreading across the face of the planet, eventually creating a sameness and a blandness in our environment that will diminish that special tourism experience that successive Western Australian Governments have worked so hard to sell on our behalf.

If the minister wants her children to inherit the kind of future that she wants for them, she must act now. On behalf of the Opposition, and I am certain on behalf of virtually all Western Australians, I offer the minister our strong support for taking the essential first steps that are critical for creating the future that we and the community want. We do not want the kind of future that inactivity, inertia or apathy will end up creating for us. The first step is to accept that a few key exotic birds, whose current population sizes range from just a few hundred to just a few thousand, must be controlled and, if possible, removed from the Western Australian environment. The control of the rainbow lorikeet, the sulphur-crested cockatoo, the little corella, the western long-billed corella and the eastern corella, all of which are feral birds, is possible. In case the minister needs convincing, I will outline a few examples of what has been done around the world to control exotic species.

In 1998, several hundred million zebra mussels were poisoned after they were found to be growing in a Darwin marina. This species was such a serious threat to boating and to the marine biodiversity that the Northern Territory Government quarantined a 1.5 kilometre area around the marina and killed every living organism in that marine environment with chlorine and copper. The cost was \$1.5 million and it was 100 per cent successful. At the Volcanoes National Park and surrounding land in Hawaii, a large feral pig population, and most of the 20 000 feral goat population, have been killed by hunters. At the same time, biologists on the islands of Hawaii and Maui have started a 10-year campaign to eradicate a particularly invasive tree by using a herbicide that is applied to the base of each tree. To date, 70 per cent of this invasive tree has been eradicated from Hawaii.

In 1983, the English Government started a campaign to eradicate the coypu, a South American rodent that weighs up to seven kilograms, which had escaped from fur farms in eastern England. Six years later, almost 35 000 coypu have been eliminated at a cost of \$4 million. When the program was first announced, the popular view was that it could not be done. However, it had to be done because inaction would have delivered a future that was unacceptable to the conservation authorities of the UK. For the same reason, the State of Maryland in

the north east of the USA has started a \$3.8 million campaign to eradicate some 50 000 coypu from national wildlife refuges.

Closer to home, the WA Government has recently committed \$6 million to a nationwide campaign to control the South American fire ant, which has been found in three places in Brisbane. In 1999, a campaign was started in the UK to eradicate the bullfrog. A large and important part of the future of our incredible, natural diversity is at risk of profound and permanent change. If the minister's preferred future for Western Australia does not include feral birds such as exotic cockatoos, corellas and lorikeets, I am willing to work with the minister to help her achieve that future. However, the decision must be made now. Not only can we do it, we have to do it!

DR EDWARDS (Maylands - Minister for the Environment and Heritage) [9.17 am]: I thank the member for Vasse for his grievance. Like the member, I have had comments from people who now say that when they travel around the world, and particularly when they stay in motel rooms, a motel room in one part of the world can be just like a motel room anywhere else.

Mr Masters: A great tourism experience!

Dr EDWARDS: Absolutely!

I think the member's point is that we do have a unique biodiversity, particularly in the south west corner of the State. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that in the south west corner of the State we have more knowledge about that unique biodiversity. It is a task for us all to ensure that we do preserve that biodiversity for future generations. As Peter Ellyard commented yesterday, it is a unique attribute of the State, and it is something about which we should be telling the rest of the world. It is an area in which we can develop skills, and then take those skills to the rest of the world in the way that the member suggested.

It appears that rainbow lorikeets were probably deliberately released from captivity in the Nedlands area in the mid to late 1960s. It is an example in which people have released a species, for one reason or another, and that species has then been able to breed, to build up and to become a pest. It is an offence to do this; however, the trick is to catch people as they release the animals from captivity. Rainbow lorikeets are a problem. We have isolated populations recorded in Kalgoorlie, Boyup Brook, Katanning and Margaret River. The Department of Conservation and Land Management has been able to eradicate populations from Kalgoorlie, Boyup Brook and Katanning. It is currently investigating the situation in Margaret River, and efforts will be made to eradicate the rainbow lorikeets from this site.

In other areas where populations have become established, it becomes exceedingly difficult to regulate and eradicate those populations. There is a great expense attached to this process, and there is also great emotion within the community. The community is not good at knowing those birds that are native to an area, those that are native to Australia but are out of their range, and those that are exotic. That is demonstrated when people save animals that have been injured in accidents. They do not merely attend to fauna that is native to our State; they attend to the fauna that is injured. The corella poses a different situation from that of the rainbow lorikeet, and CALM is preparing a management plan to examine options for controlling the numbers of corella species. I look forward to working with the member for Vasse when I have the details of that.

The member for Vasse was quite correct when he pointed out that we have done great things with Western Shield, and it is a credit to the member's Government that it continued what was started by the previous Labor Government. That is a great example of how people have developed science or used technology to eradicate foxes from many areas. In the areas in which access has been controlled, native species can be reintroduced. Indeed, work is now being done with cats, which presented quite a challenge.

Mrs Edwardes: Has that been finalised?

Dr EDWARDS: The member for Kingsley is stealing the member for Vasse's grievance. I will provide more information to the member for Kingsley about that matter.

The member for Vasse made the point that in the past we have tended to consider pests from an economic point of view. The rainbow lorikeet has been declared a pest under one of the agricultural Acts because it has been established that it has an impact on the economy; therefore, it can be taken. The rainbow lorikeet has been declared as acclimatised fauna under the Wildlife Conservation Act; therefore, again, it can be taken because there has been a proven economic impact.

The member for Vasse suggested that the populations of other species increase when we do not have the information about the economic impact they cause and, therefore, the population of the species may have reached a large number by the time we recognise the economic impact that it causes. I will discuss the member's point with the Department of Conservation and Land Management to make sure that biodiversity is taken into account early in its considerations when the population of a foreign species may be increasing.

Mr Masters: For the rainbow lorikeet in particular?

Dr EDWARDS: Yes. The member may not have heard what I said at the beginning of my response to the grievance. Isolated populations that have been recorded in Kalgoorlie, Boyup Brook and Katanning have been destroyed, and work is also being conducted at Margaret River. It becomes a huge issue when a large population of rainbow lorikeets exists in the metropolitan area. The cost of disposing of the birds and the methods of doing that must be taken into account. The feelings of people who do not like birds being disposed of must also be taken into account.

We must consider this issue seriously. We must deal with the problem earlier than we have in the past. I will ask CALM to include that in its considerations of the new biodiversity conservation Act.

Mr Masters: Would you also ask your professional officers to provide an assessment of the environmental impact of the rainbow lorikeet should it spread to the south west forests? Clearly, it is not doing a great deal of environmental damage in metropolitan Perth; the damage done in Perth is economic. However, unfortunately, the population of the lorikeets will increase in the forest. I would like that issue to be considered seriously.

Dr EDWARDS: I am happy to provide that information to the member. A member of CALM is studying a Master of Science degree and is considering the pest potential for the rainbow lorikeet. CALM is using computer technology to consider the climates in which the rainbow lorikeet lives and to evaluate the bird's diet. CALM has concentrated on the damage done to the fruit and grape-growing areas; however, it believes that the jarrah forest is not a suitable habitat for the long-term survival of the bird.

Mr Masters: I have other CALM data that shows that it is. I will give that to the member.

Dr EDWARDS: I will double-check the information that has been provided to me, but I received information on this issue only yesterday; therefore, I assume it is up to date. In conclusion, I thank the member for his grievance. We all share the member's concern about this issue. We all want to know more about our State's biodiversity and make sure that it is properly protected. The control of feral species is part of the armoury that can be used to tackle the problem.