

Division 42: Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions — Services 1 and 3 to 10, Environment —

Mr P. Lilburne, Chair.

Mr R.R. Whitby, Minister for Environment.

Mr S. Smith, Director General.

Mr P. Dans, Deputy Director General, Parks and Wildlife.

Ms M. Marsh, Acting Deputy Director General, Strategy and Governance.

Dr M. Byrne, Executive Director, Biodiversity and Conservation Science.

Dr F. Stanley, Executive Director, Conservation and Ecosystem Management.

Mr J. Foster, Executive Director, Regional and Fire Management Services.

Mr L. Bentley, Executive Director, Parks and Visitor Services.

Ms A. Klenke, Chief Finance Officer.

Mr J. Quick, Principal Policy Adviser.

Ms E. Meagher, Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard and the daily proof will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with these details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by noon on Friday, 31 May 2024. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system to submit their questions.

The Leader of the Opposition has the call.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I thank the minister and welcome the cast of hundreds. Page 707 of budget paper No 2 includes the heading “Plan for Our Parks” with an estimated total cost of \$77.627 million and a budget in the coming year of nearly \$42 million. Minister, can I ask what is the Plan for Our Parks?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes, the member can. Plan for Our Parks is the biggest addition to the conservation estate in this state’s history. It is something to be proud of. There are five million hectares of new national marine parks, A-class reserves and other conservation areas. We are very proud of this and, of course, when we create a new park for Western Australia, it is through engagement with traditional owners, who jointly design and then manage the park. It involves capacity building for those traditional owners. This is a fantastic opportunity for them because they innately care for the country. They are motivated. They are incredibly knowledgeable about their own country and they want to see it preserved. They also want to share it with visitors.

[8.30 pm]

The money is involved in the planning and delivery. Often there needs to be infrastructure, whether it is ranger accommodation, vehicles or other equipment. There is capacity building for the traditional owners so that they can have the ability to play their role as joint managers, and that regularly leads to employment of Aboriginal rangers. It creates employment in communities, increases their sense of wellbeing, self-respect and pride and provides economic opportunities. It also often leads to Aboriginal enterprises off the back of those national parks, creating tourism companies and other companies.

It is a wonderful program. It is something we can all be proud of as a state. It is supporting 264 jobs in the regions, so employment and business opportunities are being provided in very remote parts of Western Australia, where it is often hard to find employment and new opportunities. It is a wonderful thing for Western Australia. It obviously requires an investment by the state, and it is something that will provide an even bigger dividend in many ways.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The member for Roe has on his doorstep the national park for the south coast. Is that part of this plan, or are the marine parks separate from the Plan for Our Parks?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The proposed south coast marine park is a marine park that we are hoping to develop as part of Plan for Our Parks. I have to say, we have a list of aspirations in terms of new national parks and marine parks, so it is one of those. It is a very unique and biodiverse part of the world. There are species of marine life that you will not find anywhere else. It has amazing biodiversity values, so it is very worthy, I believe, of being created as

a marine park. The member will know the story from the member for Roe that we are working very well with the local community down there.

Mr R.S. LOVE: That is not the story from the member for Roe.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Well, I have actually been there and spoken to people like abalone company owners and family businesses and there is an agreement to move forward. Obviously, we are taking advice; this is in the process of development. There is an opportunity for public comment and still an opportunity to get the final outcome, but the more time goes on, the more confidence I have that this is a good process.

There are some minor, noisy sounds coming out of certain areas, but I think if you take a measured approach and talk to most people, there is an understanding of the amazing asset and opportunities that exist there. We have gone through this journey before—20 years ago up at Exmouth—with the creation of Ningaloo Marine Park. There were all sorts of even more extreme comments and actions; there were threats and people were ramming buildings with cars and threatening the lives of DBCA officers. It got pretty ugly. But if you go to Exmouth today, you would be very hard-pressed to find anyone who thinks Ningaloo Marine Park was not a great idea. Independent financial modelling has been done to show that it has returned millions and millions of dollars to the local economy and creates opportunities for local businesses. Exmouth is booming, as the member knows, and the fishers up there believe it is good because it protects the environment and nurseries and ensures that biodiversity areas are retained for the benefit of everyone.

I have no doubt that in years to come, when all the hullabaloo has been forgotten, we will look at the south coast in the same way as we look at Ningaloo. Indeed, I actually think it will be regarded as more of a premium product and everyone will be in a position of not wanting to go back and undo that.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The ambition outlined in the first part of the minister’s response was five million hectares. Where did that figure come from? Is it part of some sort of target around establishing, for instance, an agreement with the commonwealth government? Where did this magic figure of five million hectares come from?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: It was an election commitment. It was not a commitment made in tandem with anyone else. It was a commitment of our government, under our previous Premier. We looked at what was out there and what potential there was. There were areas that obviously needed to become national parks and on which work had not yet been done, so we knew there was a certain quantity of hectares out there that we needed to move on. But it is good to have a target and an aspiration, so that was the intent and we are working very well on it. It can often be areas where native title has been determined, so it is a next step for a lot of remote communities in the Kimberley and the remote interior. This has been incredibly well received by entire communities because of the opportunities it affords them to turn that into employment and entrepreneurship amongst remote communities and others in the community. I think it will be one of the great legacies of this government; it will be seen as a wonderful legacy for the future of Western Australia. We have been seen universally to have achieved that outcome, particularly by traditional owners in situations in which Indigenous land use agreements have been signed; it has been very welcomed. In fact, we have traditional owners saying, “What about us? Can we become a national park too?” It has been worked out over many years, and we have this aspiration for five million hectares, which we think is appropriate.

As a very separate issue—this is not part of that—I know that the member will be aware of the 30 by 30 initiative aspiration of the federal government. That does not determine our course; we have our own target and our own aspirations.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am aware of the ambitions of the federal government. Is the minister saying that this is unrelated to any target that the federal government has?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Correct.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am wondering whether it is related to other ambitions of the government. We listened to Treasury officials talking about issuing green bonds and the importance of environmental, social and governance credentials for the government in securing lines of credit. Is it something that was ever considered as part of the target of five million hectares?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: No.

Mr R.S. LOVE: No, okay. I have a specific question on future parks. There is unallocated crown land south of Peron Peninsula, and I am told by local people in Shark Bay that there is a plan to incorporate that into the national park that exists north of Monkey Mia Road, the Francois Peron National Park. The community’s fear is that that would leave them nowhere to walk their dogs, because they cannot take animals into national parks. That would mean that for 50 kilometres either side of the town, there would be nowhere for people to go to the beach, take their dog for a walk or go and pick up a rifle and shoot a few tin cans, or whatever. That is something of concern given that there is a world heritage area around there. Can the minister explain the plan for that area of land, the remainder of Peron Peninsula?

[8.40 pm]

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Certainly. I will refer to Mr Bentley, who has more detailed knowledge of that area. As a general comment, I hear all sorts of things that people claim they will not be able to do if a marine park or national park is created.

Mr R.S. LOVE: People cannot take a dog into a national park.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The member mentioned going to the beach and things like that. I refer to Mr Bentley.

Mr L. Bentley: The area we are talking about forms part of the Plan for Our Parks program and working with the Malgana traditional owners to look at the creation of a new national park to the south of the existing national park. As part of that process, we will look to develop a joint managed plan for that area. As part of that, there will be a conversation with the community about community aspirations for things like walking dogs. They are the things that we can work through with the community to facilitate. We are incredibly mindful of the activities that people have been able to undertake. Certainly, working through that planning process and with our joint management partners, there will be a conversation with the community about those aspirations and how they can be accommodated in the creation of a new park.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Earlier we had the Forest Products Commission division. One of the matters I raised during that division was the issue of required thinning in forests in the Manjimup area. I have spent significant time meeting people and travelling around that area over the last few years. In particular, out along Graphite Road —

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Is there a line item or a page number?

Dr D.J. HONEY: There sure is. I refer to page 705, “Implementation of the Forest Management Plan”. I apologise, minister. Replanted areas will no longer be harvested if they have been planted at densities of up to 3 000 stems per hectare. Those areas of karri have not been thinned and people cannot walk through them because the trees are so close together. The watertable in the particular area that I am talking about has dropped more than 20 metres and the creeks in that area do not flow. No thinning has been carried out for the duration of this government. What focus does the government have on that? I do not think what we are experiencing is unusual in the history of the state; it is in the longer history of the state in terms of European settlement. We are having an extremely dry year, and it looks like it will continue like that. In the extremely densely forested areas in which all the forest is the same age, there could be mass extinction of a large area of timber. What focus does the government have on ensuring that we have proper environmental thinning, particularly in the replanted forested areas in which the stem densities are unimarginably high?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: That is a very good question. The member is right; what we are going through is not the first time it has happened, but it is certainly a rare event. Climate change does not necessarily bring unheard of events; rather, it brings extreme events more frequently. We are all seeing it. When people drive down south or anywhere, they will see browned crowns and dying trees. It is an extreme event. The member is very right in saying that we have very thick vegetation and karris, and often they are replanted areas that have been done in the past and it does not make sense because there is too much competition for resources and water and, as a result, everything struggles. Ecological thinning, which is very much part of the new forest management plan, is absolutely designed to deal with this important question. It is about protecting and conserving our native forests. To do that, we go into areas that are thickly planted to thin them out. There is an environmental reason for doing that, but there is also the ability to use those resources economically. We would not just throw them away. Perhaps Fran Stanley can elaborate because this is definitely her area of expertise.

Dr F. Stanley: As the minister said, ecological thinning is a response to climate change and moisture stress in forests. It is designed to improve the health of forests and climate resilience. It involves, as the member may be aware, the selective removal of individual trees from areas. It targets those dense regrowth areas in both karri and jarrah forests. Over time, we aim to improve those forests to a more natural structure away from the even-age structure that the member is talking about, whereby all the trees are much the same age, to more a mixed-age structure, which will take some time. Part of the reason for introducing ecological thinning is to deal with the change in moisture in forests, which is happening in response to climate change. The member is correct; we are seeing groundwater decrease across south west forests. Karri forests are unfortunately not immune to that. Ecological thinning will occur across the south west forest over the 10-year life of the Forest Management Plan. That plan came into effect on 1 January this year, so it is new activity and we have just started working on it. We have published an indicative ecological thinning plan for 2024 that includes a number of sites across south west forests. The areas that the member talked about—the dense karri regrowth—will certainly be targeted using ecological thinning.

Dr D.J. HONEY: My concern is mass extinction of an area in a short period of time. Is there front-end loading in that plan? It appears—I am relying on anecdotes from people who live in the area, but I think they are being truthful—that there has been a hiatus in thinning for some reason. I am not making any allegation as to why. There are very large areas that clearly have a massively unsustainable density of trees. The problem is that when the watertable gets to a critical point, the whole forest in an area could die and, as the minister knows, if it is karri, it will not come back. Is there front-end loading to deal with what I think is a backlog?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thinning is currently happening now. As the member would be aware, it began this year; it is a new practice. Contractors are developing their approach. They require new machinery to do the job. They are going as quickly as they can. Anecdotally, the initial reports I have received is that they are being more effective and productive than we initially thought. I think that is fair to say. Although the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions is the agency that plans and determines the areas that will be thinned, the Forest Products Commission does the work. The detail of what it is doing on the ground, its program of works —

[8.50 pm]

Dr D.J. HONEY: They are blaming you, minister.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: That would be a question for the FPC, which would know about that.

I take the member's point that there is a crisis and the quicker we can get to work, the more relief it can bring to those areas.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I refer to the same page, 705, "Prescribed Burning and Fire Management". The minister has been a bit busy over the last little while. The minister and I have definitely had a discussion in this chamber. I have been a fan of the government's focus of ensuring that we maintain our level of prescribed burning. We are obviously approaching what I think could be a historic exceptional fire season across the entire south west of the state this year. Three years ago, I think, we had the second wettest year on record and all of a sudden we are going into this massive drought and a lot of trees are dying everywhere.

I am just wondering about the prescribed burning this year. I recollect hearing a comment from the minister, either on the radio or somewhere else—I was not concentrating on it, so I cannot guarantee it—that there may be a reduction in prescribed burning perhaps because of the shortened burning season. Can the minister please explain the targets for the controlled burning this year and whether there will be any reductions?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The ambition is always around that 200 000 hectares mark, but every year it is determined by the weather conditions, wind et cetera. We obviously need to put safety first and make sure it can be done. This year, as we have both been saying, we have had an extraordinarily long hot dry period. The idea is to wait for moisture levels to rise, the dryness to reduce and for an appropriate time to start burning. That period was shortened at the beginning of the season. I understand that mitigation burns have now started in a very careful way. As the member said, the big dry has created a very dangerous position. It is a very difficult one. We want to do the mitigation burns to reduce the risks but we do not have the conditions to do them. If we do not do them, we will have a very volatile situation. It has to be managed carefully. The DBCA has been doing this for a long time. I might defer to Mr Foster for more detail.

Mr J. Foster: At the moment, as the minister mentioned, it has been a long and particularly dry summer, so we have entered the prescribed burning season in a very measured fashion according to the soil dryness conditions, which is a key indicator for when we undertake the burns under the right conditions. From about 14 May, the member would remember we had the first rain event in a sporadic way across the metropolitan area and also across the south west, where in some places we received around 50 millimetres, which put us in a good position to commence some of that burning in a very measured way. In a testing way, we started off with smaller burns to make sure that the conditions were true to what we were seeing in terms of the data we were collecting. For instance, we had 10 burns across the south west. Some of those burns included one 16 kilometres out of Margaret River, for community protection; another burn eight kilometres out of Dwellingup; and further burns across the south west. We will continue to look at those opportunities.

As we said, since 14 May, we have achieved burns over around 15 000 hectares, so we are using that window of opportunity, even though it has been later. We will see a significantly reduced hectare figure this season because of the conditions that are presented. We will continue to use whatever opportunity there is when they are right to do so.

Dr D.J. HONEY: As much as we would dearly love to ask a lot more questions, we need to move on to the other sections.

The appropriation was recommended.