

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

INQUIRY INTO THE POTENTIAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONTRIBUTION OF RECREATIONAL HUNTING SYSTEMS

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 20 AUGUST 2014**

SESSION FIVE

Members

Hon Liz Behjat (Chairman)
Hon Darren West (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Nigel Hallett
Hon Jacqui Boydell
Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson
Hon Rick Mazza (Co-opted member)

Hearing commenced at 10.35 am**Mr PIERS VERSTEGEN****Director, Conservation Council of WA, sworn and examined:****Mr PETER ROBERTSON****Senior Campaigner, Wilderness Society (WA) Inc, sworn and examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: Hello, welcome to the Standing Committee on Public Administration. We have met on a number of occasions, but this is the first time you have appeared in front of us as the public administration committee in this form. I will just quickly introduce myself: I am Liz Behjat, member for North Metropolitan Region. To my left is Hon Rick Mazza from the Agricultural Region; Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson from the East Metropolitan Region; my deputy chair, Hon Darren West, also from the Agricultural Region; Dr Julia Lawrinson, our advisory officer; and Hon Nigel Hallett from the South West Region. Absent from our hearings today is Hon Jacqui Boydell from the Mining and Pastoral Region. Firstly, we will do the formalities and I know that you are both familiar with this. We will start by asking you to take the oath or affirmation.

[Witnesses took the affirmation.]

The CHAIRMAN: You will have both signed a document entitled “Information for Witnesses”. Have you read and understood that document?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: These proceedings are being recorded by Hansard, and a transcript of your evidence will be provided to you. To assist the committee and Hansard, please quote the full title of any document you refer to during the course of this hearing for the record. Please be aware of the microphones and try to talk into them; ensure that you do not cover them with papers or make noise near them. I remind you that your transcript will become a matter for the public record. If for some reason you wish to make a confidential statement during today’s proceedings, you should request that the evidence be taken in closed session. If the committee grants your request, any public and media in attendance will be excluded from the hearing. Please note that until such time as the transcript of your public evidence is finalised, it should not be made public. I advise you that publication or disclosure of the uncorrected transcript of evidence may constitute a contempt of Parliament and may mean that the material published or disclosed is not subject to parliamentary privilege.

Piers, we did not receive a written submission from the Conservation Council, so I invite you now to perhaps make a statement to the committee on your thoughts in relation to our terms of reference.

Mr Verstegen: Thank you, and thanks for the opportunity to provide evidence to this committee. As you may know, the Conservation Council is the peak body for nearly 100 community-based conservation, environment and sustainability organisations throughout Western Australia, one of which is of course the Wilderness Society. We also represent tens of thousands of individual supporters with an interest in conservation and nature issues. The Conservation Council does not support the introduction of unregulated recreational shooting in national parks or in other conservation estate areas, including conservation parks and state forests. I will just provide a brief statement introducing some of the issues relating to that policy position, and why we have that position.

The first is that we do not believe that there is any scientific evidence to suggest that these methods are effective in reducing the populations of any pest species we have here in Western Australia. In the absence of that kind of scientific evidence, I think a precautionary approach needs to be taken in relation to these kinds of proposals.

Second is that we believe that this type of activity would be in conflict with other uses for which the parks have been established. We submit to the committee that the vast majority of people visiting these parks and areas are not visiting them for the purposes of recreational hunting; they are visiting them for other purposes such as enjoyment of the natural environment, and scientific research and the like. These types of activities are likely to come into conflict with unregulated recreational hunting in those areas, and indeed that recreational hunting would place those other park users at very significant risk. Indeed, as we have heard from previous evidence, just the presence of recreational hunting would severely diminish the experience that other people have of those natural environments.

Thirdly—this is an important point—we believe that there is a lot of evidence that the introduction of recreational hunting into these areas would create a perverse incentive for the release and maintenance of populations of feral animals in these areas. That has been seen elsewhere, and I think we can give you some examples of that.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have the examples with you today, or will you provide those on notice?
[10.40 am]

Mr Verstegen: I think there have been various different investigations into this particular issue in other states, and I can refer to those, but what we have seen here in Western Australia is that there has already been DNA testing of feral animals, particularly feral pigs that have been taken in the south west. That has confirmed that those pigs have been released and emanate from a very small breeding stock; that evidence is already there and has been collected by the department previous to the Department of Parks and Wildlife. We see evidence that that is already occurring. I draw the committee's attention to a 2010 New South Wales parliamentary discussion paper that found that recreational hunters have a vested interest in retaining a sustainable population of feral animals to facilitate future hunting, and feral animal populations were, in some instances, established by hunters to facilitate hunting. Previous to that, in 2007, there was a report commissioned by the Howard government that found that the sport and business of hunting is contributing significantly to Australia's feral animal problems. For example, 127 new feral deer populations are reported to have been created by hunters across Australia; buffalo deer and black buck have been freed on Cape York Peninsula. Because hunting access to private lands has become more difficult, deer have been released into national park–state forest catchment lands and other selected secluded places for future sport, and pigs are also being released into national parks and other lands to create hunting opportunities. They can often be recognised by their torn ears from having been held down by dogs. These previous inquiries have found significant evidence to this effect. It is a serious concern that if this was allowed in Western Australia we would actually see a significant increase in feral animals in our conservation estate.

The final introductory point I want to make is that the feral animal issue in Western Australia is a very serious one and requires serious attention and serious resourcing. The feral animals are, in many cases, imperilling our native animals, particularly highly threatened species, to the point where they are being driven closer towards extinction by predation by cats and foxes, and by the impact of other feral animals such as pigs on the natural environment. This is a very serious issue that needs to be taken seriously, and we believe that the government agency with primary responsibility for managing our parks and protected areas is chronically under-resourced in relation to dealing with this issue. This is an issue that we would recommend the committee make some recommendations on, because certainly the issue, aside from hunting, of impacts of feral animals does need to be taken seriously. There is a range of ways we can resource proper programs that can

be put in place to control feral animals and mitigate their impacts on natural wildlife. That is not to say that the programs we do have in place are always well managed, and part of that relates to the resourcing question as well; I think Mr Robertson has some evidence of some of the existing programs having problematic impacts on the natural environment. I think a full review into the effectiveness of control measures is absolutely in order.

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Robertson, did you want to add something to that?

Mr Robertson: Yes, just very briefly. The research that Piers was referring to has recently been published by research scientists at Murdoch University, and it has found that 99 per cent of the fox baits put out by DPaW to supposedly control foxes are actually taken by non-target species, and 95 per cent are taken by native wildlife species. That has just been published in the last month or so by Murdoch. I can send you the reference.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you able to get that?

Mr Robertson: Yes; I meant to bring it with me, but I left it on the printer.

The CHAIRMAN: If you would provide that to us as a supplementary, it will be very helpful to us.

[Supplementary Information No C1.]

Mr Robertson: Yes. I think it just demonstrates very clearly the point Piers was making, that these are very problematic issues, dealing with feral animals and pest species generally. It is extremely complex, and needs to be done in an extremely well-resourced and carefully considered way, and by no means handed over to people who want to go and have a bit of fun shooting animals.

I will just make a quick couple of other points. The current government is investing tens of millions of dollars at the moment in the Parks for People program across WA. The obvious purpose of that program, which is as I say being supported to the tune of at least \$21 million, is to encourage more people to visit our beautiful natural landscapes and protected areas. It would be absolutely absurd to think that that was happening on the one hand, and then on the other hand shooters were being encouraged to go out into these same areas, or anywhere in the vicinity of them, to carry out recreational shooting. It would have a completely chilling effect on public use of those areas and lead to a complete misallocation of \$21 million of public funds.

Secondly, we were also promised a biodiversity act in WA; we have been promised that for a few decades now. In the absence of some kind of proper, modern, overarching legislation like that that addresses all the issues to do with biodiversity conservation of our native wildlife, to come up with a program like this in the absence of that kind of legislative framework would be very wrong and misplaced.

Thirdly, I very much echo the comments of the previous submitters in terms of dieback. I would have no confidence whatsoever that recreational shooters would take the time and effort required to wash down their vehicles and their footwear prior to and after going on hunting expeditions in our natural environment. Therefore, it is almost guaranteed that they will spread dieback. Of course, once dieback is introduced into an area, there is nothing that can be done to get rid of it, and it kills hundreds of different native species.

Finally, I just want to say that I was peripherally involved in the campaign in the 80s and 90s against recreational duck shooting in WA. It was a blight on WA's reputation to have people going out into our wetlands and shooting water birds, protected species, polluting waterways with lead shot and engaging in all kinds of destructive activities and cruel activities. It would be extremely retrograde if we were now to open up protected areas and other public lands for recreational hunting.

Hon AMBER-JADE SANDERSON: I have a question relating to something that Piers mentioned in his opening statement and I asked the previous witnesses. You said that recreational hunters are finding it harder to access private lands: if pest species are such an issue, why is that the case?

Mr Verstegen: I think it is because private landholders have a range of concerns about the impact of recreational hunting on their lands, whether it relates to the safety of themselves or whether it relates to biosecurity risks such as the spread of dieback or whether it relates to impacts through four-wheel drive use and that sort of thing. I think there is a growing reluctance by private landholders to allow this kind of activity on their lands. As a consequence, I think recreational hunters are trying to access other lands in the conservation estate because of that trend that is occurring.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Is that your thoughts, or is there evidence that private property owners are actually restricting that access to people?

Mr Verstegen: That is my thoughts and —

Hon RICK MAZZA: That is your thoughts; so it is not in evidence?

Mr Verstegen: — my experience, because I come from a rural area myself. I have family that are in farming areas and have some experience with this, and we are in touch with a number of regional member groups at the Conservation Council that are concerned about feral animals not just on a conservation estate, but also on privately managed bushland like the evidence that Eddy Wajon gave. I think that is the feedback we are getting.

Hon RICK MAZZA: You mentioned earlier, too, the very big impact feral animals have on the environment, and the concerns about feral animals. Are you aware that Parks and Wildlife actually use volunteer shooters regularly to assist them with their feral animal control programs?

Mr Verstegen: I think the use of volunteer shooters under a program that is very carefully managed and very carefully maintained with a risk-assessment framework and very carefully targeted is one particular thing. I am not aware of, for example, the evidence as to whether that program is effective or not. I think that is one thing; it is very different to allowing recreational hunting in a relatively uncontrolled way in the natural environment that is not targeted, and it is very unlikely to be effective because of the issues that Eddy mentioned in his evidence. The hunting of feral species in these environments is actually very, very difficult. The species dynamics—the population dynamics—are such that you might take some foxes or some cats out of an area, but unless there is a regional systematic and strategic approach to managing that, they are just going to be repopulated very quickly.

[10.50 am]

Hon RICK MAZZA: Of course, professional shooters to try to control those populations are very, very expensive for the state and it cannot really afford to do that. Would you not consider then that the programs that Parks and Wildlife are currently using with volunteers, if there was a regulated hunting system that would just be an extension of that, to assist with their control of feral animals?

Mr Verstegen: I think that, as I said before, we are talking about a very different thing. We are talking about significantly escalating the risks of conflict with other users of those natural environments. We are talking about significantly escalating the types of impacts they would have, and you are talking about a system in which I do not believe it would be possible to manage those kinds of risks. So I think the net impact would be very much a negative one.

Hon RICK MAZZA: It is actually being managed in other states. The last question I have is that you mentioned earlier about the translocation of feral animals for future hunting. Do you have any reports or hard evidence on that rather than just anecdotal evidence?

Mr Verstegen: Only the ones I have provided by means of other parliamentary inquiries and the like that have occurred in other states, and also the evidence I have provided in terms of the DEC, at the time, doing some studies into the DNA testing of pigs in the south west and confirming that they were released.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Could we have that on notice?

The CHAIRMAN: We have that information already in our packs.

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: Peter, just a couple of points. How much study have you done into other jurisdictions where you have your hunting, you have your multiple-user parks that everyone can enjoy for their own likes? You touched on the duck hunting; in Victoria it is very popular.

Mr Robertson: It is very controversial, yes.

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: That is right. Is it an opinion of yours as the intelligent man you are, or how much study have you put into how the other jurisdictions are able to make it work?

Mr Robertson: I do not pretend to be an expert in this particular subject, but we have all followed quite closely this experience in New South Wales recently. Where they attempted to introduce recreational hunting into various areas it has turned out to be a political nightmare and very strongly opposed by large sections of the community, including business groups and industry lobbies. It is one thing to talk about multiple use of these areas, but there are some uses that simply are incompatible with protected areas, for example, and should not be allowed.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you; I think that brings us to the end of our questions for you.

For the benefit of those who have given evidence to us today and the members of the public gallery, I advise you that this committee is not the body that will be making a decision. Piers and Peter, I know you are very familiar with the process of parliamentary committees, but perhaps some of the public here today may not be. It is not this committee that will make a decision as to whether or not a recreational hunting scheme is introduced into Western Australia; we have been merely charged by the Legislative Council to inquire into those proposals in regard to our terms of reference. It will be for any government of the day, once this report is finalised, to make that decision. These are decisions made by governments, not by parliamentary committees; we can only recommend.

We thank you today for coming and giving us the evidence. We have certainly had some wideranging evidence given to us on both sides of this argument, and we will take all those into consideration during our deliberations. That concludes the hearings for today.

Hearing concluded at 10.54 am
