



Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Hearing Date: 26 June 2023

Question[s] taken on notice

Directed to: BirdLife Australia

Received Date: 17 July 2023

1. THE CHAIR Page no. 18

Question asked to Sean DOOLEY:

At the back of the report on social and economic impacts, there are some references to some studies about the economic contribution that other forms of activity around birds – birdwatching in particular – make. Would you be able to furnish a copy of the report to the committee that you cited?

Response: The citation is Steven, R. (2022) Bird and Nature Tourism in Australia. KBAs in Danger Case Study Report. Report prepared for BirdLife Australia. Carlton, Australia and can be found on the website www.actforbirds.org and the direct link can be found here: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a68facad7bdce5b6d9410a2/t/627af29b83f6d742c365df0f/1652224680733/BLA+Bird+and+Nature+Tourism+in+Australia+Report+2022-compressed.pdf>

2. THE CHAIR Page no. 18-19

Question asked to Sean DOOLEY:

The CHAIR: I think there are two reports that are cited here, one on bird and nature tourism in Australia and the other on birdwatching and avitourism – there you go, a word I did not know existed. It would be useful if you could provide a copy of those to the committee on notice.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes, certainly... A lot of previous studies in terms of the benefits of duck shooting included costs of shooters' vehicles, to inflate the actual process. So that is a genuine figure. I will provide that to the committee.

Response: They are one and the same report. See answer to question 1 for link.

3. Melina BATH Page no. 19

Question asked to Sean DOOLEY:

Could you please provide a list of the different lands that you own, the size of each one and any information around the updates of how you have transformed it or not? Just those, thank you, just because we are short on time on this one.

Response: BirdLife Australia owns or leases several conservation properties.

Our largest is Gluepot Reserve in South Australia, purchased through donations in 1997. It is 54,320 hectares in size (37kmx14km) and was purchased to protect what was then thought to be the last remaining habitat of the Black-eared Miner as well as home to at least six other threatened mallee woodland birds. Gluepot is run by a volunteer committee and management for conservation includes removal of feral foxes, cats and goats (including via an arrangement with shooters from the South Australian Sporting Shooters Association). Several dams have been closed to reduce grazing pressure from herbivores such as kangaroos and goats. Weeding and prescribed burning are undertaken regularly as are a series of monitoring and conservation research projects.

Our oldest reserve is Clarkesdale Reserve at Linton near Ballarat. Established from a donation of 31 hectares in 1975, the reserve now protects 535 hectares of woodland. Large sections of the reserve have been revegetated and it now operates as a hub of woodland bird and conservation research, overseen by a voluntary committee.

BirdLife Australia also runs two bird observatories in Western Australia. The Broome Bird Observatory was established in 1988 and has become an international research hub of migratory shorebird conservation. The observatory is self-funded through accommodation and education course fees as well as donations from BirdLife Australia supporters. Activities include conservation restoration of the woodland on the observatory is built and mitigation of intertidal habitats, (including rubbish removal) of the adjacent Roebuck Bay, recognised as a wetland of international significance.

Our second observatory is at the old Eyre Telegraph Station on the edge of the Nullarbor. BirdLife Australia have been managing the site since 1977. Activities here include bird and conservation research, litter removal from beaches and restoration of sand dunes with revegetation of mallee woodland.

BirdLife Australia also has a Discovery Centre on grounds of Sydney Olympic Park, where we run community education courses, and advise the Sydney

Olympic Parks Authority on the management of remnant woodlands and wetlands of the of the 304 hectares of the site reserved for conservation.

4. Bev McARTHUR Page no. 20

Question asked to Sean DOOLEY:

Sean DOOLEY: BirdLife Australia looks at the national scale, and we do that by taking surveys right around the country. Each survey is a pixel that creates a better picture. So we certainly do have records from Heart Morass. If I was connected to the internet, I could go and tell you how many.

Bev McARTHUR: You can provide them on notice.

Response: I was incorrect in my initial answer as we have actually done more than the “very few” surveys in our Birddata database for Heart Morass (both the Field and Game section and the State Game Reserve) than I indicated with 142 surveys since 1999 currently in the database. This is a lower number than for some similar sized wetlands in the region such as Sale Common, MacLeod Morass and Lakes Guthridge and Guyatt in Sale itself, which may be explained by access issues and the fact that in the past, few of our volunteers have felt welcome at Heart Morass. This situation appears to have been improving in recent years, and Heart Morass has for the last four years been one of the sites regularly surveyed by the Gippsland Lakes Co-ordinating Committee wetland surveys that our volunteers conduct.

A number of more recent surveys are currently being uploaded into our system so in a few weeks we will have more comprehensive data to analyse from Heart Morass. Perhaps of interest, emphasising the point I made in my testimony that each individual wetland is part of a larger network of wetlands that waterbirds move between, is a comparison of the reporting rates of waterfowl between the four comparable sites in the region.

Heart Morass actually has the lowest native waterfowl diversity of the four with 10 species. (MacLeod Morass has 12 species, Sale Common 13, and Lake Guthridge coming in highest with 16 species). Species diversity is only metric and might be influenced by the type of habitat present, as well as rare visitors dropping in (such as happens at Lake Guthridge.)

Often a better indication of the health and value of a habitat is the reporting rates of species. On this front, MacLeod Morass has higher reporting rates than Heart Morass for all waterfowl species, and Sale Common has higher reporting rates for 9 waterfowl species than Heart Morass does, though Heart has higher rates of Pink-eared Ducks (1.25% to 0.89%), Australian Shelduck

(8.13% to 4.47%), Australasian Shoveler (3.13% to 2.68%), and Musk Duck (15% to 9.84%).

Reporting rates for Lakes Guthridge and Guyatt are generally lower than for the three natural wetlands, though they are higher than Heart Morass for Magpie Goose (rare to the district), Cape Barren Goose (rare), Plumed and Wandering Whistling Ducks (vagrants), Pink-eared Duck, Hardhead, Pacific Black Duck, Chestnut Teal, Freckled Duck and Australian Wood Duck.

This data doesn't show numbers, only frequency of sightings so I am unable to comment further on the relative abundance of waterfowl on each wetland.

5. Melinda BATH Page no. 20

Question asked to Sean DOOLEY:

Melina BATH: In areas where there is no recreational duck hunting, have you recorded scientific analysis that there have been population increases?

Sean DOOLEY: I would say yes.

Melina BATH: How can you prove that to this committee? Can you please provide some quantifiable evidence to this committee that would back up your comments, because there are a lot of comments made and unless you are able to provide that evidence –

Response: I believe I slightly misinterpreted this question. I thought it was asking whether I had knowledge of non-hunting wetlands having higher numbers of waterfowl, which is clearly the case for the Western Treatment Plant which can have waterfowl numbers exceeding 200,000 in some years.

In terms of overall population increases, I cannot say. It is likely that for all but newly established wetlands (which would previously have held no waterbirds) that duck numbers will have fallen, as per the data previously presented because there is an overall decline across eastern Australia. As waterbirds are by their nature extremely mobile, (especially most duck species), moving to take advantage of wet conditions across the landscape, the declines in population is evident in all wetlands.

6. Georgie PURCELL Page no. 21

Question asked to Sean DOOLEY:

Georgie PURCELL: BirdLife is obviously involved in a bit of citizen science, with all the birdos that you have out doing surveys. Could you tell us a little bit

more about that process, how many people participate in it and also how you provide that advice to the authorities in terms of getting a wetland closed and maybe the success you have had in the past doing that.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes. It would be very difficult to quantify the numbers overall, but we have several projects. Our main data collection project is the bird data monitoring system. I would have to give you on notice how many people are currently involved, but that has essentially a couple of thousand people registered who do regular surveys in areas around the country.

Response: The process has varied over the years. In the past we would organise dedicated teams of volunteers, but we were worried about observer fatigue as often these surveys were additional to the ones our volunteers were already conducting. Our current practice is that in the lead up to duck season, our wetland birds team, guided by the GMA's November aerial survey, and the records submitted by hundreds of volunteers to Birddata (observer numbers vary between years) to prioritise where it would be most important to search for threatened species at risk. We also make sure we include wetlands that have previously held threatened species in previous years.

The November GMA surveys, which used to be conducted by the Department, only count waterfowl numbers, not the presence of any other threatened species, so we have to rely on our own information to try and send staff or volunteers out to check up on sites where we suspect threatened species (Eg. Australasian Bitterns, Brolgas, Curlew Sandpipers) may be present. It would not be an onerous task for GMA to include threatened non-waterfowl species in the initial surveys as the observers are out over the wetlands anyway, but our requests for this have met with refusal.

We only see the summary of the November counts and often have to rely on our own intel to look at wetlands that may contain significant numbers of threatened or non-game species. We then notify GMA if we have reports of threatened birds.

We have had more success in getting wetlands closed in recent seasons due to the presence of threatened species. In many cases it falls to BirdLife to do the legwork to identify vulnerable populations, right up until the day before season opening. Once the season has started we do not send staff out to survey on wetlands for safety reasons and discourage our volunteers from doing so as well. And there is a chance we could be arrested for not having a duck shooting licence! Once the season is underway it seems that most wetland closures are prompted by information gathered by observers from the duck rescue groups.

For the 2023 season we had reasonable success with our recommended closures, with 5 of the 8 requests we had leading to closures. The process, however, is not ideal, as usually the considerations meetings see our wetlands manager lined up against the shooters' groups who are constantly disparaging any sightings as flimsy and not independent.

7. Evan MULHOLLAND Page no. 27

Question asked to Sean DOOLEY:

You made a statement to this committee before that so many wetlands are not assessed by regulators. Do you have any quantifiable evidence to back up that claim – or could you take that on notice?

Response: I believe that there would have been other evidence before this inquiry that may answer the question more precisely, however I can point you to the fact that the Vic Govt has published that there are 25,000 naturally occurring wetlands in Victoria. Naturally not all of these will be suitable for waterbirds every season but the GMA itself publishes that even with its most extensive monitoring method, the pre-season aerial survey held in November (five months before this year's duck season) states that "In total, 800 wetlands and 60 sections of waterways are surveyed. (<https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/research/duck-research>)

As we understand it, the Summer Waterfowl Counts that used to be conducted in February are now much reduced in number and BirdLife has been told that GMA rarely uses data from the Summer Waterfowl Counts in their assessments.

The comment made by Ms Purcell that GMA have published the figure of 1 per cent tallies with our understanding of the coverage.

One of BirdLife's concerns is the lack of monitoring and compliance officers during duck season. I don't have access to data on this but logically, and given the amount of testimony of duck rescuers, the vast majority of wetlands open to shooting, including those on private property, are not adequately monitored for breaches. This is particularly concerning where occurrences of threatened and protected species occur.