

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Melbourne – Friday 16 June 2023

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Jeff Bourman

Katherine Copsey

Bev McArthur

Evan Mulholland

Georgie Purcell

Sheena Watt

WITNESSES

Mr Huseyin Alpozgen, President, and

Mr Fikret Alpozgen, Secretary, Australian Cypriot Sport Shooting Association.

The CHAIR: Welcome to this hearing into Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements. I will read out a short statement, and then we will get on with proceedings.

All evidence today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and 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. 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.

For the Hansard record, can you please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Good afternoon. My name is Fikret Alpozgen, and I am the Secretary of the ACSSA, or Australian Cypriot Sport Shooting Association.

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: My name is Huseyin Alpozgen, and I am President of the Australian Cypriot Sport Shooting Association.

The CHAIR: I invite you to make some opening comments, then we will introduce ourselves and ask you a series of questions – about 5 minutes, if you would like.

Visual presentation.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Thank you, Ryan. No problem. Good afternoon, and thank you for having us. As mentioned, my name is Fikret Alpozgen, and I am the Secretary for the Australian Cypriot Sport Shooting Association. We are a small, not-for-profit organisation established in 2009 by like-minded individuals. The whole establishment, our club, is actually made up of community members – volunteers – and has been so since 2009. My father and I are founding members. We currently have over 300 active members, and when I say 'active' – active hunters within our organisation. We are an inclusive organisation made up of many cultures and religions and varying socio-economic individuals. We are proud of our culture, and together we have a common interest: hunting. Our club is an enabler. We are immigrants who reach out for social connection and a means to integrate into society. Club hunts provide members the opportunity to visit all areas of our beautiful state, and in return hunters help support our rural economy.

Today I am here before you to not only represent ACSSA but hunters in general to shed some light on a few of the issues that often go unnoticed. Victoria is blessed with an extraordinary array of wetlands, rivers and lakes that serve as critical habitat for numerous species of waterfowl, including ducks. These habitats not only enrich biodiversity but also provide essential ecological services such as water filtration, flood control and nutrient cycling. Hunting provided me and our community the opportunity to explore this vast land and enjoy what nature has to offer.

There have been debates and discussions surrounding the ethical and environmental aspects of hunting. While it is essential to address such concerns, it is equally crucial to recognise the responsible practices and regulations that underpin sustainable hunting in Victoria. Victoria is a shining light of how hunting can coexist harmoniously with conservation efforts. First and foremost, let us acknowledge the intricate balance maintained by the Victorian government between conservation and preservation of our hunting heritage. Through meticulous research, monitoring and strict regulations our state has established a sustainable hunting season that aligns with waterfowl populations, reproductive cycles and migration patterns. These measures are designed to ensure the long-term health and sustainability of duck populations.

There are many reports which state that hunting has little to no effect, and I am not going to go into detail. I think you have heard all the facts. Even though year on year hunters have faced scrutiny and reduced bag limits and seasons, we take the time out of our busy schedules to embark on our tradition we love and enjoy and hunt with our mates. Duck hunters are not merely participants but are active stewards of the very environment they enjoy, actively contributing to sustainability and prosperity.

Another vital aspect of sustainable hunting is the importance of responsible harvesting. Licensed hunters adhere to strict bag limits – I know I do – species restrictions and ethical hunting practices. These guidelines are in place to prevent overexploitation, safeguard species diversity and maintain a thriving ecosystem. Our members are encouraged to respect nature and even participate in education programs run by our club and other clubs.

Let us also consider the significant cultural and historical significance duck hunting holds in our community. It is deeply ingrained in our rural heritage, bringing families and friends together, fostering bonds and passing down traditional knowledge through generations. I was never bullied into hunting. It is something I grew up to love and do. This shared connection with the land strengthens sense of identity, instilling a love and appreciation for the natural world. Duck hunting in Victoria is not an oxymoron but a testament to the delicate balance achieved through thoughtful regulation, conservation efforts and responsible hunting practices. It showcases how we can enjoy and utilise our natural resources without compromising the future of our environment.

Before I conclude, here are a few key points I would like to just highlight. Duck hunting is a longstanding tradition in Victoria, deeply rooted in the state's rural and cultural heritage. It is a way we connect with our ancestors and preserve our traditional hunting practices, passing down skills and knowledge from one generation to the next. Hunting, including duck hunting, offers a unique and immersive outdoor experience. It allows us to engage with nature and test our skills, and it challenges us physically and mentally. Hunters appreciate the serenity of the wetlands and the camaraderie that comes from sharing the experience with fellow hunters and friends.

The revenue generated from duck-hunting licences and associated fees is reinvested into conservation efforts. These funds support various initiatives, including wetland conservation. Finally, and to my point, for many hunters, including me, duck hunting provides the opportunity to procure sustainable, organic and locally sourced food. By harvesting ducks in a responsible manner, hunters can ensure that they consume wild meat that is free from hormones, antibiotics and other additives. This aligns with the growing interest in sustainable food practices and the desire to connect with nature through the food we eat. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will just ask committee members to introduce themselves, starting at that end of the table.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

Jeff BOURMAN: Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Michael GALEA: Michael Galea, South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey, Southern Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: I am Ryan Batchelor from the Southern Metropolitan Region and Chair of the committee. Welcome. Thank you for your opening statement. I was going to ask the size of your organisation, but you have helpfully told us that. I do want to go to the hunting activities that the members of your organisation predominantly undertake. Is it predominantly duck, quail, rabbit –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: It is all of the above.

The CHAIR: I am interested – particularly because, unlike some of the larger organisations we have had here today, you are a smaller organisation and probably more connected with the majority of your membership – in your reflections on hunter behaviour and hunter activity, particularly with respect to some of the issues we have heard about with wounding and dispatch, and how you as hunters approach the question of how you are going to do those types of activities.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sure. I might answer that, if that is okay?

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: Yes.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: I suppose hunters get a lot of scrutiny. Owning a firearm in itself comes with some heavy regulations – police checks and whatnot, licensing, WIT testing. I do not see any of our members going out there and inadvertently trying to do the wrong thing. They always try to do the right thing when they go out, and that is really the point: every hunter is there to do the right thing and to hunt for their food for the table.

The CHAIR: In your hunting experience, how often are non-game and threatened species of birds caught up in hunting crossfire, so to speak?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: I would not know, Ryan. I would not know that number, I am sorry.

The CHAIR: Have you ever been involved in an incident with non-game or a threatened species?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No, I have not. I have been shooting since I was 12. My father –

Bev McARTHUR: And you are only about 14 now.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Thank you. It is the beard that gave it away. But no. I remember when I sat for my WIT test. If you get one answer wrong, you get it wrong, you do not get your licence and, you know, you do not get the opportunity to hunt ducks. We teach and we educate on 'If you're not sure, don't shoot'. It is as simple as that. The people in our circle and the people that we hunt with, we do the right thing all the time.

The CHAIR: In terms of the dispatching of birds, there was a discussion earlier today about methodologies used for bird dispatching. After you have shot the bird – can you talk the committee through what then happens and what practices you undertake?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: There are two scenarios. One is that the bird is completely dead. The other one I am guessing is the wounding one that you are trying to explore. Cervical dislocation is the key. In the past we used to windmill, and it is very effective. It is not illegal. The other education programs that have come out now are obviously about pinning and holding the bird and dislocating, which are also very effective means. The other option is obviously shooting a wounded bird on the water to dispatch it as quickly and as humanely as possible.

The CHAIR: How do you learn the new methods of dispatching?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: GMA – GMA releases websites. Education – we run a pre duck season education class on any changes in regulations. It is something I am quite up there with in terms of legislation. It is all about the education of hunters.

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: I want to say something about wounding as well. Hunters these days are very skilful. They have been going clay target shooting. They have been educating people, and they are putting decoys out in the normal range to shoot ducks. We have been hearing since this morning 'wounding birds, wounding birds'. What's the reason behind it? I think the main reason behind this is these protesters – they come within 20 metres in front of the shooters with the flags. They scare the birds away from the shooter, and then the shooter is forced to shoot beyond their limit. This is why you are getting wounded birds on the water.

The CHAIR: You have been, as your submission states, hunting for a long time.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes.

The CHAIR: I am interested in your perception of participation in the hunting activities over time – from your group, but also more broadly – any reflections on sort of trends in hunter participation over time?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Well, just to give you a bit of insight, when we started we had about 35 members – in 2009 – and we are close to 400 now. Out of those 400 members, there are 300 that are active hunters. So we are seeing an increase in hunting, not only duck but quail and other hunting opportunities throughout our state. We do not see a decline. There might be a decline overall, but what we are seeing in our club is an actual increase in the people that actually take on the activity of hunting.

The CHAIR: Where do you hunt, broadly speaking? Do you go back to the same places or do you travel around?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: All over the state. There is a lot of involvement when you are going to go and hunt ducks – pre-season scouting through Gippsland, all the way down to Horsham up north. We do a lot of scouting, a lot of time and effort, just for the four birds a day and for that short period of the season. So all throughout the state.

The CHAIR: How do you make your decision about where you want to go?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Really the first thing we do is: we do not want to put ourselves into conflict. If we do know that a certain party is going to be in a certain area, we will try and avoid it. We are there to socialise, we are there to enjoy our time – not only for hunting our food but also for the camaraderie. We try and pick a location that is distant but also has an area that we can enjoy.

The CHAIR: In your experience, what has been the level of engagement from a compliance point of view by the GMA in your hunts?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Just on the closing weekend, GMA attended our camp, looked at all our licences, tested all the birds and looked at all the shot. They have been proactive, in our opinion. Do we agree with all of their decisions? Absolutely not. But what we do like is for organisations to be open and honest when a decision is being made. As long as that is reflected, hunters adapt.

The CHAIR: Any infractions?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No.

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: On that point, I like the GMA a lot because they come and they police the shooters' activities. They control our licences and bag limit. They are doing a great job. I also hate them because I have just understood today: Mr Laurie Levy calls Ms Purcell and they say, 'On this lake we have got birds.' She calls some of the politicians, and the politicians call them back and say, 'Close this lake.' We had members calling us from the lake where they camp. They just told all of us that they got a message, 'We have closed this lake.' All this effort that they put in – they go there and they put the camp up and they bring their families there and then they cannot hunt that lake. I have been in that situation in the past. I did not hunt; I did not move from that lake. We just had a picnic day and came back home. We really like to have notice in advance which lakes are closed and when and why, not just a wildcat action decision.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. It is a unique position that you hold because, in terms of the Cypriot community, you are saying that you are stewards of hunting for your community.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Absolutely.

Melina BATH: And you speak about ethical and responsible hunting. I am a regional MP, and you spoke initially around rural economy and supporting rural economy. Is there a way that you could quantify, whether it be in your own family, what you might spend on average on buying equipment, travelling, petrol? Just in an anecdotal, could you provide that to the committee?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sure. Do you want to add to that?

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: Well, at this stage we are a member of Field and Game, SSAA – the sporting shooters association – and the Cypriot club. Membership alone only costs us \$500 a year. You buy a boat, you

buy a gun, you buy shot shells, you buy camping equipment – it does not matter which end you are looking at, it costs you \$2000, \$3000 a year minimum to go hunting.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: One of the things we like to do is try and spend our money in regional areas. So, shopping, when we are at that location, for food or for fuel, buying from the locals – we really advocate that because it supports the community. We know that, and some of them are even regulars. We go back every year in, year out. Buloke was a prime example, when you could hunt at Lake Buloke. We knew the pub owner. He would open the keys for us and open the pub late at night, when we would come back, and serve us a meal. We try and get familiar with the locals, understand the locals and respect the locals.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you for your answer. We have heard that hunters just kill for sport et cetera, but you have told us that it is a food source for you. Could you explain a little bit about what you do with ducks after you have harvested them? How do you cook them?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Absolutely. Look, I personally love duck. We do things like sausages, or we cook them in the oven, so fried duck. Last weekend we had rotisserie duck. It was delicious. It is that free-range, organic meat that you cannot buy from Coles or Safeway. We really enjoy the harvest that we take home.

Melina BATH: So you reject the premise that you just go to –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Absolutely I do. Absolutely.

Melina BATH: Thank you. You mentioned the education programs at the start of each duck season. I think that is an interesting follow-up. Could you explain a little bit more about what you do? How do you educate your members?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sure. We run what we call a ‘duck fever night’. We do it annually. It is generally a month or two before the announcement. We get au fait and we learn about all the rules and regulations, any closures, any restrictions, any birds which are put on the protected list, and we educate our members. We will collate at our club, and then we will highlight and show up on the screen a presentation and speak to our members about, ‘These are the rules and regulations for this year,’ opening times, start times in different localities throughout the state and also any new changes in regulation with the birds, the numbers and everything else.

Melina BATH: Thank you. And in your actual submission that you made, you speak about your frustration there about the minister for outdoor activities actually deviating from the recommendations put through by the GMA; it was quite a different season compared to what the GMA indicated as appropriate. Do you want to speak to that a bit more? What is your frustration there?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Absolutely. It is about transparency. We are all eager at the start of the year to understand what the season is going to be for, generally, the third week of March. And our frustration lies in the release of data, the release of duck counts, the legislation changes in the last minute, on the 12th hour when we are preparing or on the road to a certain location. It is really about GMA being transparent with us as hunters. We feel like we pay a fee, we do all the right things, we go through all the legislation and all the licensing regulation, just so GMA can make a decision last minute. So we are really frustrated at the fact that there is no transparency in the system.

Melina BATH: The GMA provide that information to the minister, but then the minister makes her own determination –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Changes the decision.

Melina BATH: or the three ministers in actual fact that need to sign off on that. We have had allegations or comments today that there is a level of inappropriate behaviour that happens on duck hunting with hunters and women. Do you have women in your club?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Absolutely.

Melina BATH: Could you speak to that for us, please?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We have not personally seen it. We have not seen it. Our members come on our regular shoots, so once a month we have a clay target shooting event to make sure that they are proficient. We educate them on the right use of firearms, the distance to shoot and also pre-identification of birds, which the GMA does anyway with their WIT testing. But we have not seen it at all.

Melina BATH: Thank you. And how do women shoot?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Great. My partner is a shooter. She would not like me saying that here, because she is a bad shot, she tells me. But she is great. She loves the sport, and she comes out with me on the range all the time.

Melina BATH: Okay. And she is a responsible shooter.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Absolutely.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Thanks for coming along, gentlemen. Being a narrowly focused club, being Cypriot, can you tell me the importance of duck hunting to your community? Tell the committee how the club comes together to hunt and what role that plays in the cohesiveness of your community and keeping your culture and heritage alive.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sure. Do you want to start?

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: Well, hunting brings our community together. We have meetings every month to talk about hunting and talk about clay target shooting. We have got a little club on Ballarat Road, where all of our members get together and talk about hunting because they all share the same passion. Hunting put us together. I remember when I came to Australia 40 years ago. I had no friends in Australia until one day at my workplace I saw all these four-wheel drives coming up with their trailers and boats and all their camping gear. I did not know what was going on. I said to one of my friends, 'What's going on here?', and they said to me, 'They're going duck shooting.' I said, 'Duck shooting?' I was a keen duck hunter, but when I came to this country I had no-one to go duck hunting with. Then when they came back, the same friend that told me they were going duck shooting, I asked how I could get my licence and go duck hunting with him. Since then I have been hunting with this same friend for the last 40 years, and I made a lot of friends through duck hunting. That is what brings community together and makes us get into the Australian general community as well.

Jeff BOURMAN: Yes. And Fikret?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Look, the other side of that is we are immigrants. A lot of people migrate to the country, and they are looking for a social gathering; they are looking to belong. What our club offers is a unique opportunity to be able to be inclusive in an activity that they enjoy. So they will become members. They will join us on our clay target range, and they are actively seeking to go out and hunt as a community. That is what we provide, Jeff.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay. Obviously a lot of young people make their way through their communities into hunting and things like that. Do you see it as being important, keeping the young people within your Cypriot community connected to their heritage? Because obviously, as we discussed, it is not all about hunting. It is about camping; it is about sitting around the camp fire; and it is about, well, preparing Cypriot dishes, I guess, of the animals you have hunted. How do you see hunting as a method to at least allow your kids to keep in touch with their heritage?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sure. It is about, as you mentioned, that tradition, but it is also allowing them to have a choice. Whether or not they are going to hunt or not, it should be up to them; it is not for us to take that away from them. Hunting for me was just part of our lifestyle, something that we did to put food on the table to feed our family. My father did it for years. I learned the skill off my father, and I would love to really educate my son in that one day.

Jeff BOURMAN: No worries. Someone texted me a question and said, 'What's your favourite place?' But no-one will tell me; I know that. So just for the record, I did get my licence recently, and –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Some sewerage treatment plant, I am sure.

Jeff BOURMAN: Yes, good on you! I guess I know what it will taste like.

Look, that is really all I have got. You guys have been very good. I am just really pleased that you came to make the presentation and that you are sticking up for your heritage. Thank you.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Thank you, Jeff.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: G'day, Michael.

Michael GALEA: Can I ask first a little bit more about your association. So I understand it is relatively new, 14 years old. Are you Victorian only or are you nationwide?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Only in Victoria.

Michael GALEA: Victorian only. And your membership, are they from across the state, across Melbourne, from particular parts in particular?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Predominantly in Victoria.

Michael GALEA: And any particular part of Melbourne or Victoria?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No, no, it is all across Melbourne.

Michael GALEA: In a typical season how many times would you go out to shoot on a wetland?

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: Well, this year was only four weeks, so we ended up going out two times with the club. Most of our members, including me – we were nine people – had to go to Argentina for hunting, and we spent a lot of money overseas. Nine thousand dollars each we paid just to go there and shoot ducks because we did not have enough of a season here. This money would have been spent in country Victoria.

Michael GALEA: So in a normal season then, if it was full-length, how many times roughly would you go out to the wetlands?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We will try and get out at least four to five times in a season. Four to five weekends.

Michael GALEA: You would see a lot of different people there. How often would you come across the GMA?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: So about 50 per cent of the time. Yes, 50 per cent of the time. Those bigger lakes that you go to which hold more birds and are a little bit more publicised, the GMA has got a lot of presence. Sometimes the smaller lakes tend to dry up towards the end of the season, so those bigger lakes are the ones that we actually try to attend, and, yes, GMA has always got a presence.

Michael GALEA: You spoke a bit earlier about when wetlands have been closed, sometimes without much notice, in relation to, say, a threatened species being found. Have you ever reported seeing a threatened species yourself?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Absolutely. We have told GMA that we have seen such things. In actual fact I think we should educate hunters that if they do see things like that, they should be reporting. I think it is a positive result. I think hunters will adapt and they will accept it. But we definitely do not want a species to be extinct. We love the environment. We love the birds. So this notion that we are just out there to shoot and kill is

absolutely something that should be thrown out the door. There have been many times when I have helped animals.

The risk is we just do not know what the legislation will do. If I find a wounded bird and I take it out to GMA, it is not very clear. So hunters would then I suppose leave it there as opposed to picking it up and taking it to the GMA. But if the legislation was clear on that and there are other birds that are injured, absolutely they would take them out there.

Michael GALEA: In relation to wounded birds that you note, I would like to come back to that, actually. When you have reported that there is a threatened species, that you think that wetland should be closed down, has that wetland then been closed down?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Not that I am aware, no.

Michael GALEA: Okay. How many times roughly have you reported it to the GMA?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Twice.

Michael GALEA: And were they in the last few years or were they a long time ago?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No, recently, in the last couple of years. They will say, 'Have you seen any freckled ducks around?' and we will be like, 'Yes, we have seen a mob.'

Michael GALEA: Was that them asking you or was that you saying, 'This is an issue, we should let them know'?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: It was generally them asking us.

Michael GALEA: Them asking you. Okay. In terms of wounding, generally speaking are you concerned about birds being wounded?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: So wounding is an interesting topic, and I think it has been flogged to death today. I think that we always aim to hit every bird and kill it instantly, and we make every effort, in contradiction to what you have heard, to collect our game. So there is not a lot of opportunity to shoot the birds and kill the birds, and if we do, we are constantly after them, either walking after them or sending a gun dog after them – a trained gun dog. We are doing every effort we can to get that bird and retrieve it.

Michael GALEA: So you say 'every effort'. What proportion of birds do you actually then get to collect?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: It is hard to say. I could not tell you. This year I did not lose a single bird.

Michael GALEA: This year – it is good to hear you have not. Other years –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes, it was four birds.

Michael GALEA: What is the primary reason why you could not get a bird?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: So it was either because, I will be honest, somebody else has taken it, someone illegally has run after it, or it was picked up by another hunter – they have seen it and picked it up – or for some reason or another it has been a situation where we just could not find it.

Michael GALEA: You mentioned earlier occasions where you have found a wounded bird that you had not shot and that you did not take it to the –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: It does not necessarily have to be shot. I have seen instances where scared or frightened birds from the protesters have actually flown into trees – those types of birds. So they have taken off as a flock and they have crashed into trees.

Michael GALEA: Would it also be scared from gunfire? Would that be fair to say?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes, that could be fair, but it was before the season started.

Michael GALEA: And would you take action to stop the bird suffering? You would not take it to the GMA or report it; you would leave it.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We do not know what that legislation is on that, so we would not do anything with that wounded bird.

Michael GALEA: You would leave it there.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes.

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: If you have got your four-per-bag limit and you find another wounded bird, you are scared to touch it because you will go over your bag limit if they catch you. There should be legislation saying to you, 'If you find an extra bird wounded, do this,' so you can follow the rules and regulations there.

Michael GALEA: So your priority would be not impacting the other birds that you could shoot by avoiding touching that bird. Is that correct?

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: Well, your bag limit is four, so you are not allowed to carry more than four birds outside the lake.

Michael GALEA: You would ignore that so you could continue.

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: That is time. Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, gentlemen. I also want to say thank you for being so honest and factual.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: You are welcome.

Bev McARTHUR: We have had a lot of extravagant language recently and exaggeration, so it is good that you factually and honestly answered the question. I want to go to this whole business that we heard before about the sort of toxic masculinity that pervades the duck shooting industry. We heard about sexual innuendo that pervades the industry. Can you talk to how the women in your community respond to your interest in duck shooting?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: They are fully supportive. And just the notion of that sexual misconduct or whatever it is meant to be – there have been numerous occasions where I have actually helped out some protesters who were sent to a lake, freezing cold in the morning, standing on a tree stump, with leeches crawling up their legs, with no waders at all, and helped them out, giving up my activity, my hunt, to actually save those protesters.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, that is extremely generous of you, and thank you very much for doing that. We do need to look after the welfare of these protesters. I want to also go to the fact that, as I understand it, in the Aboriginal culture hunting is important. But in your Cypriot culture, how important is it? How important historically has it been – when you came from Cyprus to this country?

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: I came from Cyprus. In my childhood days my father used to hunt for the table. That was the only meat we ate at the time. The only meat that we ate was what my father was shooting and bringing home. So I survived from the game meat. So before I came here the first question I asked was: can I hunt in Australia? And they said to me, 'Yes.' That helped me to make a decision to come to this country.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, we are very grateful that you did come. You have obviously made a great contribution to this country, and may many more of you come to this country.

I was interested also in this idea that we have experts deciding where duck shooting can occur and what the numbers of ducks are in any wetlands area, but we heard before that somebody like the Coalition Against Duck Shooting could ring up a politician – I think it might have been Georgie; I am not sure whether it was now since she has been one or before – and voila, that wetland shooting area will be closed down. We were always taught,

I thought, that we had to listen to the expert advice. That was certainly the case during the COVID lock-ups. We were absolutely told that experts are telling us all of this stuff. Experts make these decisions, but their decisions seem not to be taken into account in this situation. What do you think of that?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: It is frustrating, to be honest. It really is frustrating that you see the numbers. We are out there, we can see the numbers, we can see the wetlands, and then we see the data come out from GMA, because we all read it and we are all looking out for it, and then the minister makes a different decision – a different call – and does not even listen to their experts. So we get very frustrated. It is disappointing that the system has failed us.

Bev McARTHUR: You mentioned that a recommendation we could take up might be that if you find a wounded bird – that is if duck shooting can continue in this state of dictatorship – you could report it without it affecting your bag limit or any other sort of protocols that might exist for the purposes of GMA knowing what is going on. Would that be a recommendation we should take up, do you think?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Absolutely. It would encourage GMA to encourage hunters to update them via an app or via some means or methods if they do see birds injured or endangered.

Bev McARTHUR: We also heard before that young children – young boys – are bullied into hunting and shooting. I mean, we could be left with the impression that you are really a bunch of cowboys out there for thrills and spills at the expense of birds but even your children. Have you ever seen evidence of children being bullied into this activity?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Absolutely not. I am 45 this year – on the record now, so I cannot hide that. But my father is my best friend. I have been hunting with my father since I could walk. There is no way I would classify my father as a bully. In actual fact he has educated me in the ethics of hunting, going out and enjoying our vast land and enjoying what is around you. If there is the option of being in the city and doing whatever you need to do in the city – playing on computers or iPads or phones – I will take the alternative, thank you.

Bev McARTHUR: Now, like Ms Bath, I am a country regional MP, so I am thrilled to hear that when you go out to the country you do not take everything from Fitzroy or wherever, you go and buy it in those local areas so you help support the economy. We know that duck shooting is for very few weeks of the year and the businesses in those areas depend on that economic activity and your spending. When you are talking to these local businesses, how do they react to potentially never having you there again?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: They hate the notion. They really hate the notion of us not being available. They look forward to us early in the morning getting a hot roll or having a pie. You know, they really look forward to hunters for their income.

Bev McARTHUR: You would be keeping some of these areas alive.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Thank you.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Chair. Thank you for appearing today. I just want to go back to the dispatching methods that you spoke about before. Does your organisation have a position on recommended forms of dispatching or were the methods you listed just your own personal preferences?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We do not. We follow the GMA advice.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes.

Bev McARTHUR: They follow the expert advice. Hallelujah!

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Chair. The GMA advice actually does not advise two of the methods that you listed. Windmilling and also shooting on the water are not recommended. Can you explain why there is continued use of these methods by many duck shooters, obviously including yourselves, despite them not being recommended by the GMA?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sorry. Repeat the question if you could.

Georgie PURCELL: Can you explain why you believe many shooters continue to use methods that are not recommended by the GMA to dispatch birds?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: I could not answer that personally, I am sorry, because I would just not know if those shooters do or do not use those methods.

Georgie PURCELL: Do you use windmilling?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: I do not anymore, no. That is not the recommendation from GMA.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. But shooting on the water?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No longer as well. It is not recommended by GMA.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes. Correct. In your submission you state that hunters provide key conservation, including the reduction of pest animals, and that the alternative to shooting ducks is poisoning them. Can you explain that in a bit more detail?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sure. We also do mitigation of ducks on rice fields in New South Wales. We have got R-licences. One of the alternative methods is 1080 poison on the rice. What we see and what we have witnessed is that it is not only ducks and waterfowl that get killed; it is every other bird that lands.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes, 1080 is awful. I agree. Ducks are not a pest species; they are a native species, so poisoning them in Victoria is –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We were talking about New South Wales.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. So you have not seen instances of poisoning in Victoria?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. The National Firearms Agreement requires the licensing to not allow licensing of guns to children under the age of 18. An exemption is made for duck shooting, and in Victoria children as young as 12 can legally operate a gun. And in 2011, we heard earlier, actually, that a wildlife rescuer was shot by a 14-year-old boy at Lake Buloke and shotgun fragments ricocheted into her face. Does your organisation acknowledge the risk in dismissing the standards set by the gun safety laws?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Do we what, sorry?

Georgie PURCELL: Do you acknowledge the risk in dismissing these recommendations by –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: So my understanding –

Georgie PURCELL: I am just aware that you encourage and promote hunting in young people and the use of guns.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: So my understanding is that from the age of 12 you have to be supervised till you have got your full licence, so you are actually with a fully licensed – someone who is educated is to be next to you. You are not out there by yourself.

Georgie PURCELL: I guess my question is: why do you believe it is appropriate for your organisation to go against the recommendations –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: I do not have a belief in that.

Georgie PURCELL: On your website it promotes getting young people under 18 out and shooting.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No, I do not believe it does. On my website? No, I do not think so.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. On page 1 of your submission you reference duck shooting as the main source of income for rural communities, and the figures of economic benefit that shooters claim have been widely criticised, including through this committee process. Can you provide the evidence to back up this claim that it is the main source of income for rural communities, because that is shocking to me.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We could not, no.

Georgie PURCELL: No evidence?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We could not provide the evidence, no.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We would not have that data, but what we can do is give you evidence that we spend a lot of our income in those rural economies.

Georgie PURCELL: But would you retract that claim that it is the main income source for rural communities?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: For rural?

Georgie PURCELL: In your submission.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes. I suppose so, yes.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. Thank you. In your submission you mentioned the WIT test, which has been spoken about a lot today. Visitors from overseas or interstate do not have to pass the WIT test, despite more than a tenth of game hunters living interstate, and children also do not have to pass the WIT test. Do you believe that this has an association with the high wounding rate across Victoria?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: I could not answer that. I would not know, Georgie.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. No problem. And just going on wounding, I just wanted to understand some of your comments before. Do you believe that shooters will not assist a wounded bird, so that they can preserve their own bag limit? Is that –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No, I do not think that was – I think that was taken out of context. The theory is that if you have more than four birds on you, it could be seen that you have shot more, or you could be accused of shooting more than four birds.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. But do you believe that shooters should render assistance to wounded birds if they have not filled their bag limit?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: I think there should be a method, that shooters should have the capability to be able to notify the right authorities in terms of if they see wounded birds.

Georgie PURCELL: Could you explain to me the conservation work that you do mention in your submission?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sure. We are all active members also of Field and Game.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay, so it is through Field and Game?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: It is through Field and Game.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. Thank you.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you. Thank you both for being here. I had some questions firstly about your organisation before I go into your particular practices. One was, it is really interesting to hear that you are a culturally specific sport shooting association. Are you aware of any other culturally specific sport shooting associations that you might want to draw our attention to?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Of our size? Probably not.

Sheena WATT: Any smaller, bigger?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No.

Sheena WATT: No?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No. There are a lot of target clubs, clay pigeon, but not hunting organisations like us. I am not aware of any more.

Sheena WATT: Okay. The membership number that you mentioned in your – I did not actually catch that. I know that that was –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: It is 400.

Sheena WATT: Four hundred – and is that Australia wide, or that is Victorian?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Victoria. And 300 of them are active, so they are the ones who regularly tell us that they hunt.

Sheena WATT: Okay. And that includes under-18s, or how does that membership kind of work?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: There is a mixture.

Sheena WATT: There is a mixture there?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes. So we have three types of memberships – concession, full and junior.

Sheena WATT: Okay. Great. I want to ask you now some other questions about your practices. You mentioned you do travel a lot around to different sites; so you are not an association that goes to the same place year in, year out. You are a crew that likes to – I do not know – see what the state has to offer. That is a true reflection of your operations. What about your interactions with members of the wildlife rescue community? Can you talk to us about that? And how would you categorise your relationship with wildlife rescuers?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sure. Someone like Mr Laurie Levy, is that what you are talking about?

Sheena WATT: It could be general rescuers that you see over the years. Rather than a specific rescuer themselves, I am more thinking about the broader rescuer community.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sure. It is a love-hate relationship. As I mentioned earlier, there is a lot of time, a lot of effort, that goes into heading out to a swamp or a location. You set up camp, get it all ready, obey the law, enter the water at a certain time, be prepared to start opening at a certain time, buy your steel shot, all being prepared, for some conservationists to come and stand within 20 metres of your decoys or 10 metres within your decoys. So it does get frustrating, although I have had some lovely conversations with a lot of the wildlife people out there when they do turn up. My experience has been that there are a lot of uni students that just get brought in.

Sheena WATT: Uni students in the rescuer –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes. As rescuers. They do not really understand why they are there. For them it was seen as just a tour. They paid a small fee.

Sheena WATT: Was that because you have engagement with them around –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: I have had engagement with them, conversations with them, and they tell me this. But this was my personal experience.

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: Just on that, Laurie Levy – if he was here, he would remember – we made him a lot of Turkish coffee in our camp in the past.

Sheena WATT: Is he still here? I am not sure if he is still here.

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: He loves his Turkish coffee. He used to come just before the hunt and visit us, and we had a good talk about duck shooting. And we believe that he has got a right to protest, and I think he believes that we have got a right to hunt. So we have a great relationship until the shooting day starts, and then he starts picking up our shot birds.

Sheena WATT: Okay. And do you have any recommendations as an association about the practices of rescuers and how that might be changed or any reform suggestions around the practices of rescuers?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: I think the concern around protesting is not an issue for us. It is about the risk to safety, as Ms Purcell said earlier, around someone getting shot. You really want to avoid that at all costs. Safety is not –

Sheena WATT: So you do not have any concerns for the impact on your own members?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We do indeed. We worry that this could cause confrontation. So I think as long as they follow the rules and regulations brought out by GMA about the time that they enter the water, the things that they are legislated to do, then we are okay with it as hunters.

Sheena WATT: As an association do you talk to your members about engaging with wildlife rescuers and have recommendations with respect to your engagement with them?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We do. We follow the advice from Field and Game and SSAA around ‘Don’t get into conflict, take as many photos as you can and provide evidence.’

Sheena WATT: Okay. Anything, sorry, that you wanted to add to that?

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: Yes. And definitely when the protesters come into the range where they are not supposed to come, that affects our members, and we try to make them understand to be cool and not cause any problems with them. So that was our advice to our members.

Sheena WATT: I have still got a moment to go, but outside of the hunting season, what are the sorts of activities that the association participates in beyond those preparatory activities that you discussed earlier around education and whatnot? What else do you do?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes, sure. Every second week of the month we do clay target events.

Sheena WATT: Okay.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We run backgammon competitions. Most of the Europeans love playing backgammon. It is a really good pastime. We have a big competition on.

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: We have picnic days.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Picnic days, barbecues.

Sheena WATT: Anything to really strengthen your relationship to Cypriot culture and cultural practices as part of what you do?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes. So all these events have got the cultural halloumi cheese and the baklava and everything else. So all our food and all our entertainment is basically part of our Cypriot culture.

Sheena WATT: Anything you want to add to that? No, you are happy with that one. Okay. I am certainly very, very happy with that, and I really thank you for your time.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Thank you.

Sheena WATT: And it is good to see the cultural experiences of your organisation being shared with us today. Thank you very much. And that is my time.

Bev McARTHUR: And we are all going to come out for baklava and Turkish coffee.

Sheena WATT: That is right. You should have brought some.

The CHAIR: I will go to Ms Copsey, but you are making me very hungry for afternoon tea.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Apologies if I go over any old turf – it is hard to be at the end of the line. I just wanted to understand – amongst your membership it is not exclusively those who hunt birds. People hunt other animals throughout your membership. Do you hunt other animals as well as ducks?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes.

Katherine COPSEY: I am interested to understand – you said you do not collect statistics on it. Do you have an understanding of how many of your members would engage in duck shooting, roughly, as well as other animals?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: No, I would not know.

Katherine COPSEY: But you would not guess it is 100 per cent that are engaging in duck shooting?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: That is true. I already stated that in our actual submission: 400 people in memberships and 300 active that tell us that they hunt. We do not specifically ask what they hunt.

Katherine COPSEY: Yes, and of the 300 it would not be 100 per cent that are hunting ducks.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes.

Katherine COPSEY: You mentioned the picnic days and so on. Do you run those sorts of activities independent of hunting activities?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes, we do.

Katherine COPSEY: I am interested to know if you conduct those activities around a range of different locations in the state as well, or do you just go back to the same areas?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We have a club that we obviously lease. We try and utilise that as much as possible. But there is a hunting ground or a club –

Huseyin ALPOZGEN: Shooting ground.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes, a shooting ground in Little River, so we also do activities at that location.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Just to return to the point that Ms Purcell was asking about around juniors and their participation: I think in relation to the promotion of junior activity, there is a junior membership available through your website.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes.

Katherine COPSEY: I was just having a look. I think it was it was in relation to:

ACSSA will promote public awareness, understanding and acceptance of ... its members and ... activities
Later in the paragraph it says, 'be it senior or junior'.

Fikret ALPOZGEN: That is correct. We encourage juniors to spend some more time outdoors – to actively participate in club activities, whether it be barbecues, whether it be backgammon or whether it be clay target, as long as they are appropriately licensed.

Katherine COPSEY: Yes. I just wanted to clear that up. I was interested in that on your website it is possible – I have not gone through the membership registration process, obviously –

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Please join while you are there.

Katherine COPSEY: It does look to me that it is possible to just submit an application for a junior membership without any sign-off from any other independent guardian. What is your process at the back end if you receive a junior membership application?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Sure. A junior membership application allows you to become a registered member of our organisation, and that is it. If you do choose to hunt or to obtain a firearm, you would have to obtain your licences from the appropriate licensing divisions.

Katherine COPSEY: Do you do any checking at the back end, if you receive a junior membership application, to ensure that that young person is engaging through a guardian or other as appropriate?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Through the website obviously you can nominate and pay for your membership. But activities on a day need to be accompanied by an adult or a licensed shooter.

Katherine COPSEY: With membership, does the member, regardless of whether they are senior or junior, get access to different resources than a member of the public might? Do they join a mailing list or get resources sent out by your organisation?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: We do. We have got numerous ways to keep in contact with their members. One is an SMS. Once you are an active member, we take your mobile number and will explain or send out messaging by SMS or by emails.

Katherine COPSEY: I just want to confirm: there is not a checking process when you receive a junior membership that is going to say that that has been overseen by a guardian or a caregiver?

Fikret ALPOZGEN: Yes. There is no requirement for it. It is just purely a membership of the organisation. It could also be that they are a financial member and that is it.

Katherine COPSEY: Yes. Thank you. No further questions. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Any further questions from anyone on the committee?

Melina BATH: Very good. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time today. We will get a transcript of your hearing today for you to review in due course before it gets published on the website. The committee will take a short break to go and get some baklava until 4 o'clock.

Witnesses withdrew.