

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 Laurie Levy, Campaign Director, and

Ms Lynn Trakell, Assistant Director, Coalition Against Duck Shooting.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the Parliament's select committee into the recreational hunting of native birds. I will just read out a brief introductory statement about your evidence.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* and the 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 privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of the 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, could witnesses please state their names and any organisation they are appearing on behalf of.

Lynn TRAKELL: My name is Lynn Trakell, on behalf of the Coalition Against Duck Shooting.

Laurie LEVY: Laurie Levy, Coalition Against Duck Shooting.

The CHAIR: I will now invite you to make an opening statement of around 5 minutes, and then we will introduce the committee and get on with the questions.

Lynn TRAKELL: I will make a few comments and then go over to Laurie. I first attended a duck rescue 23 years ago. I could not believe that a civilised society could condone and even encourage its citizens to be involved in such disgusting behaviour. Witnessing young men cheering and shouting 'Go, Rambo!' when defenceless, gentle birds fell into the water wounded and writhing in agony left me totally traumatised. I was shocked to learn that native waterbirds could be legally treated with such callous brutality, that the wounding rate is at least one in four, that shooters only had to pass the waterfowl identification test once and that even 12-year-olds could legally shoot. Our youngsters should be learning compassion and kindness, not be encouraged and often bullied by their fathers – which our rescuers often witness – into shotgun violence to birds.

Once I knew what happened on the wetlands, it was impossible for me to stay away, and I knew our birds needed all the help they could possibly get. I started writing letters to newspapers about the issue, and Laurie helped me with the background and information regarding duck shooting. He was a huge source of knowledge and experience, and I always respected his campaigning approach: his use of the media, his understatement of facts rather than exaggeration and his ethics and honesty.

Laurie has been a television cameraman who had fought numerous wildlife battles even before starting the duck campaign. He worked with Project Jonah in the 1970s to have whales protected, and whaling subsequently stopped in Australia in 1980. He started rescuing beached whales with colleague Neal Bethune and the help of hundreds of volunteers. They worked with the federal, Tasmanian and Victorian governments to set in place whale rescue plans and procedures. He had two farmers prosecuted for cruelty to kangaroos; both spent time in jail after the RSPCA prosecuted. And he worked with Greenpeace to stop Taiwanese 25-kilometre-long high seas driftnets in Australia's northern waters in order to protect dolphins, whales and turtles, which Prime Minister Bob Hawke banned. Over to you, Laurie.

Laurie LEVY: Thanks, Lynn. In 1985 I realised that nobody had ever looked after our native waterbirds, and in those days there were 100,000 duck shooters out there. Ten thousand duck shooters would go to Lake Buloke, but there were 100,000 duck shooters, many of them – and probably most of them – using semiautomatic and pump action shotguns against our beautiful, defenceless, sentient native waterbirds. I thought probably in the last 100 and 200 years nobody has ever looked after our native waterbirds, so we took on that role.

In 1986 we put together a small team of 15 rescuers to go out into the wetlands to see what we could do to help native waterbirds. And you might say, 'How can 15 people ever, ever be effective against 100,000 duck shooters?' Well, there were two reasons. Our rescuers were courageous and brave, and they have always been that way, and they went into the water to rescue native waterbirds and they came out with wounded birds. The other reason is the power of the media, and we got a lot of media coverage. Now, the great thing about media coverage is that when you are debating the issue in the media – and part of our job was to force duck shooters out into the open, to make them debate the issue out in the public arena. And when you are debating in the media it is not 15 rescuers against 100,000 duck shooters: it is one spokesperson against another spokesperson.

And of course the first day we went out to the 1986 opening morning we had 15 rescuers against 100,000 duck shooters. Now, the media coverage that went to air that night highlighted that you have these guys out there with semiautomatic weapons dressed in camo gear, and you have 15 rescuers. So you have got two images: one of the duck shooters and then the public, for the very first time ever, saw rescuers coming out of the water with wounded birds. Those images of kindness and compassion will always beat an act of violence, and that is how the campaign got off the ground.

We have been fighting the issue now for 38 years. The government of the day has always looked after duck shooters to the tune of millions of taxpayers dollars. The Coalition Against Duck Shooting is a volunteer organisation. Nobody has ever been paid. We have never taken government money – not that it has been offered – we are funded purely by the public, and that is how we fight our issues.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Laurie. I might get members of the committee to introduce themselves, starting with Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Katherine Copsey, Member for Southern Metropolitan.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria, and I should say – I think the committee is aware – that I am a rescuer with the Coalition Against Duck Shooting.

Sheena WATT: Thanks, Georgie. Hi. I am Sheena Watt, Member for Northern Metropolitan.

Michael GALEA: Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

Jeff BOURMAN: Jeff Bourman, for the Eastern Victoria Region.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region, nothing to do with the coalition against whatever they are.

The CHAIR: I am Ryan Batchelor, Member for Southern Metropolitan and Chair of this committee. I will be asking the first block of questions and then we will take it in turns to ask you questions.

You have obviously both been engaged in this issue for a long time. We heard evidence this morning from some of the hunting organisations that things have gotten a lot better in recent years, acknowledging there were some problems in the past but that actions from the hunters and during the hunting season have improved considerably in recent years. I am wondering if you have any reflections on whether hunter behaviour has changed appreciably and positively over the course of the last few years.

Laurie LEVY: I would say hunter behaviour is the same. The big difference, Ryan, is that there are fewer duck shooters today. When we started out, as I said, there were 100,000 duck shooters. Today, because public opinion has changed, there are probably less than 8000 duck shooters in Victoria. That is a huge drop in the numbers of duck shooters. They cannot use semiautomatic weapons after the Port Arthur tragedy. Duck shooter numbers today make up only 0.2 per cent of Victoria's population.

The CHAIR: Do you think that recent rule changes, such as the midweek start, the 8 am starts, changes to bag limits and those sorts of elements of the hunting arrangements, have changed the conduct of the hunting season, in your opinion?

Lynn TRAKELL: Wherever our rescuers go they find wounded birds, they find illegally shot protected and threatened species, they find illegally buried birds and they find that shooters breach the regulations consistently – wherever we go – so it has not improved, no.

Laurie LEVY: Last year even, the 8 o'clock start was really good and the midweek opening was really good, but even on the opening morning in 2022 rescuers found threatened species that had been illegally shot, and it was the same again this year. You would have thought that even with duck shooters knowing that their activity is under pressure at the moment, they would not be doing that sort of thing. They still do it.

The CHAIR: Regarding evidence from this year's season, which has been arguably the season with the most amount of scrutiny in recent years, do you have any evidence from your activities about non-compliant activity this season?

Lynn TRAKELL: Well, I was at the wetlands during the first five days, and all the rescuers there heard shooting start before the legal shooting time. And like I said, one of the first birds that was brought in was a blue-winged shoveler, which is a protected and threatened species, so yes, the non-compliance goes on and on.

The CHAIR: How is that non-compliance dealt with by the Game Management Authority?

Lynn TRAKELL: They have to be there, to start with – they cannot be everywhere – and there are 20,000 wetlands across Victoria where duck shooting takes place. Compliance is basically impossible except for the small areas they go to.

The CHAIR: Did you witness GMA officials this season in the locations that you were?

Lynn TRAKELL: Yes. Even when GMA are present, duck shooters still breach the regulations, because very often the GMA do not go into the water in the wetlands, where the shooters are, and that is where you have to be to see what goes on. If you stand on shore, you can hear that they are shooting illegally, but you do not know who is doing it.

Laurie LEVY: See, the way the system works is that compliance officers cannot really go into the water to monitor duck shooters unless there is an armed police officer with them. What does that say about the danger of duck shooters? Our rescuers go into the water with the shooters, so we know what is going on out there. The reason we go out onto the wetlands – and we go out before 10 o'clock, the prescribed time, and yes, we are doing it illegally, Beverley – is because birds are being shot from the opening of the duck-shooting season, and our rescuers need to be there to help those birds.

The CHAIR: This year there was a lot of water – last year a lot of rain, this year a lot of water. That is not always the case. In your experience, are there observable differences between those periods where there is an abundance of water and those years where we might be in drought or where there is not an abundance of water?

Lynn TRAKELL: Do you mean in the numbers of birds or shooter behaviour?

The CHAIR: Both.

Lynn TRAKELL: When there is no water around, there are virtually no birds, so everything gets very quiet in those years. When there is plenty of water around, of course the birds turn up, and that is when everything happens.

The CHAIR: Do you have any observations about the dispatch methodology used by hunters on the wetlands?

Lynn TRAKELL: There has been a lot said about windmilling, and we see that all the time. In fact most shooters try to kill wounded birds that way, by twirling them round and round and round, but the problem is that they are still flapping and moving around – many of them are – after they have done that. They hang them on their belts while they are still jerking and moving around, or they throw them in their punts while they are still jerking and moving around. The Game Management Authority might say that they cannot prove that the birds were still alive when they were jerking around because of the responses of dead birds.

The CHAIR: My time has expired. I might ask Ms Bath whether she has a question.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you very much for attending. I am sure I have watched you on television over the years too in your pursuits, Mr Levy. I am going to speak to your submission to the inquiry. In part of your submission you speak about nature-based tourism and you highlight something in my electorate: Phillip Island and the penguins. You give great compliments to former Premier John Cain and Minister Kirner, and you make the point that the Kerang Ramsar wetlands could be Victoria's Kakadu.

Laurie LEVY: Yes, correct.

Melina BATH: This year the Kerang Wetlands have been open to the public for 47 weeks without any hunting on them out of 52 weeks, if you look at year to year, because we have had five weeks of duck hunting. Why couldn't it have been Victoria's Kakadu last year, the year before or the year before that? People could have visited that area irrespective of hunting except for that small period of time.

Laurie LEVY: What happens when you have a duck shooting season is that at the end of it all the birds are basically gone. They have either been shot dead or they are wounded and they die. Other birds fly off, including threatened species. South Australia tried to incorporate shooting and tourism in the 1980s. They opened Bool Lagoon for shooting at 7 am. Shooting would stop at 12, and overseas tourists would come in at 12:30, half an hour later. Of course all the tourists were there to see beautiful native waterbirds. All they saw, Melina, were dead birds, the guts hanging out of them and wings and heads all over the place. People complained to the Premier, and that was the last time South Australia's national parks ever did that. When John Cain started tourism at Phillip Island – the first thing they did was they had to buy houses back that had been built over the burrows. John Cain, Joan Kirner and Evan Walker were all involved in the tourism industry, and they set up a great tourism industry.

Melina BATH: Yes, but there is a vast difference between penguins that access a very small part of a particular location and duck species that can occur along the whole of the eastern seaboard. But I want to bring you to the next comment and get you to comment on this: in 2009 Lake Mokoan and Winton Swamp were closed to recreational duck hunting – 2009.

Laurie LEVY: Yes, correct.

Melina BATH: In 2010 Labor decommissioned it, drained it and set up the Winton Wetlands. So this was 2010, and that was about, going in the old money, 1000 acres. It is now just for ecotourism. To date – and I am reading this from reports – \$20 million has been pumped into those wetlands, and in the last 2021 annual report the income generated from ecotourism, on their balance sheet, was \$1.7 million. The loss was \$1.9 million, and if you look at their website and their report, there are a significant amount of grants propping them up. Now, I am not casting aspersions over the Winton Wetlands, but if you are going to say, 'We'll stop this and then all of these other areas will become amazing Kakadus with ecotourism', this example in front of us, Winton Wetlands, is not a good example of that.

Laurie LEVY: Well, I have offered to work for five or 10 years with the tourism industry to set up a nature-based tourism industry, especially in the Kerang region and in the Boort region. Now, if you look at Boort as an example, Lake Boort is a Dja Dja Wurrung wetland, and it is rich – rich – in Indigenous heritage. Paul Haw takes tours out, and that could be a thriving nature-based tourism industry. Along with Kerang and the Kerang wetlands it could easily, easily with good promotion –

Melina BATH: But Winton, Sir, has been around for now over 13 years and it is losing money on ecotourism. So my next question goes to Indigenous people. You have talked about the last hundred years. Indigenous people have been killing for food, harvesting for food – ducks – for millennia. How are you going to marry that with closing down their right to do this into the future if the Coalition Against Duck Shooting have their way?

Laurie LEVY: Gary Murray from the Dja Dja Wurrung clan, the Yorta Yorta people and many others do not want duck shooting on their wetlands. They do not want duck shooting on their wetlands – they want their wetlands opened up to tourism.

Melina BATH: And we are going to hear from Rod Carter from Dja Dja Wurrung, who might have a very different opinion.

Laurie LEVY: He does. Rod Carter is also with Field and Game –

Melina BATH: But he is still a Dja Dja Wurrung.

The CHAIR: All right. That is time, Ms Bath. Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. You have a lot – between you and across the volunteer network, I am sure – of direct observation of what goes on during duck seasons. I am interested to know from your observations: how confident are you, with our current arrangements, about how good Victoria is at anticipating the location of endangered or protected species prior to the opening of duck seasons? Do you think our methods are accurate for finding out whether wetlands should open?

Lynn TRAKELL: I am sorry, I could not hear that. I am sorry.

Katherine COPSEY: That is okay. I will repeat it. How confident are you that we are locating and anticipating the presence of protected and threatened species prior to wetlands opening for shooting?

Laurie LEVY: Well, I do not think the government is. Our rescuers start going out to the wetlands in late January or early February to do surveys. When we find threatened species on a wetland the first person we contact is Georgie, and Georgie will go and talk to the ministers and the minister will send the Game Management Authority out to witness the birds, and that wetland will be closed off if they see those birds. And the GMA have been very honest in their bird counts. I know a few years ago, on the Thursday before the opening weekend, we received a tip-off from an ecologist that there were about 25 blue-billed ducks on Lake Elizabeth. We just passed that straight on to Georgie – and Andy in those days – and that wetland was closed off. And normally, by working through Georgie, we get wetlands closed off a lot faster than going through the system.

Katherine COPSEY: Yes. And so if volunteers were not undertaking those surveys, they would not be occurring. There is no-one funded to do that work, yes?

Laurie LEVY: Well, if we had not have gone out to the wetlands in 1986 to help native waterbirds, this would not be happening.

Katherine COPSEY: Yes, it is a long road. I wanted to ask about how accurate you think the numbers are of birds that are shot. Are you confident that we are recording the numbers of birds that are shot, or do you see evidence when you are on the wetlands of more birds being shot than are reported by hunters returning from the wetlands?

Lynn TRAKELL: I am really concerned about this because the government and Kingsford rely on figures from shooter surveys. Shooters are not going to say that they have shot above the bag limit. They are not going to own up to shooting and wounding birds that fly away. They are not going to own up to shooting protected and threatened species and burying birds that they have shot over the bag limit. How on earth can they judge how many birds are killed every year, relying on shooter surveys? It is just insane. We actually have no idea at all how many birds are shot. It could be twice as many. Who knows? It could be twice as little.

Laurie LEVY: Peter Walsh from the National Party admitted in 2012 that the only reason they have some idea of the amount of protected and threatened species that are killed each year is what we bring in. Nobody else does bring in illegally shot protected and threatened species. That has been left up to us. We only cover 10 wetlands, yet there are 20,000 wetlands. If you extrapolate the number of birds that we bring in from 10 wetlands over 20,000 wetlands, it is a lot of illegally shot protected and threatened species – totally unacceptable.

Katherine COPSEY: You just touched on this in your answer, but you have found evidence of birds being buried. Does that include protected and non-game species, in your experience?

Laurie LEVY: Yes. You can answer that, Lynn.

Lynn TRAKELL: Yes. In the Koorangie marshes of course there were – how many were there, Laurie? – 107 birds dug up, and some of them were protected species. But mainly it is shooters burying them because they have shot over the bag limit. I mean, they shoot anything, so, you know, you could find anything there.

Laurie LEVY: And in 2017 when we had the Koorangie marshes massacre, rescuers brought in 1500 birds. Of those 1500, 296 were illegally shot protected birds, and of those protected birds, 183 were illegally shot threatened blue-billed and freckled ducks.

Katherine COPSEY: We have heard from some other witnesses today that birds are being shot so that they can be consumed. Does that correlate with what you have seen on the wetland?

Laurie LEVY: No, not at all. If on an opening weekend you have got the police out there and you have got the GMA there, shooters will tend to behave a lot more. On other wetlands they shoot and bring down one bird, the bird is wounded and they just keep shooting. Also they have a habit of shooting pink-eared ducks. Pink-eared ducks are another game species that will be on the threatened list very shortly. They shoot them, and they are a small bird. They do not bother to take them home, so they leave them, whether they are dead or wounded, on the water and they just keep shooting them.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, and thank you both for joining us. We have heard this morning in fact from hunters that they support the right to protest but do not support groups such as yours being in the water, on safety grounds. I note your submission on the 2011 shooting incident as well. Why do you need to be in the water?

Laurie LEVY: There is no point standing onshore holding a placard. We are not protesters. We are rescuers. We have modelled the Coalition Against Duck Shooting on the Red Cross. The Red Cross go into a war zone to help the innocent victims, and that is exactly what we do. We go into a war zone to help the innocent victims because there is nobody else out there to help the innocent victims.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. From my observations of this issue, mostly during this inquiry but also of course before, it seems to be a very shall I say contentious, aggressive environment. Is your approach to engage with the hunters, or do you avoid engagement and just focus on rescue activities?

Laurie LEVY: We are and have been for 38 years a volunteer organisation. We are totally non-violent, but we play the game hard. We are a bit like an AFL football team going out for the grand final. They are going out, they are playing the game hard, but they are playing it fair – and that is what we play.

Bev McARTHUR: But they do not break the law.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Laurie LEVY: So we play it fair out there but we play it hard. Our role is to protect our native waterbirds. Nobody else is doing it. There are other groups involved now, which is fantastic. The government of the day looks after the shooters. For 38 years it has been our role to look after native waterbirds, and we have done that without fear or favour. We break the law if we have to, but rescuers often pay for that. If a rescuer gets a fine of \$1000, the rescuer will say, 'Oh, well, it's \$1000, but if we rescue a wounded bird, it's worth it.' The difference between rescuers and shooters is empathy. Shooters have no empathy for those birds. They stand there, shoot them and they cheer. You see a bird falling out of the sky after it has been shot, and the shooters cheer – they love it. Our rescuers hate witnessing it. They have to witness animal cruelty at its worst, and the reason they do that is because they have empathy with the birds.

Lynn TRAKELL: We actually hold information meetings before we take rescuers out onto the wetlands, and we do tell people not to talk to shooters.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. From your observations and experience do the shooters often try to engage with you, either positively or aggressively?

Lynn TRAKELL: Yes, there is a lot of argy-bargy that goes on out there, of course, and a lot of sexual innuendoes. I mean, it is not fun. Going to duck rescue is not fun. You are sleep deprived – you get up really early in the morning. You have got to drive a long way to get there in the first place. It costs a lot of money. You have got to traipse through freezing cold, sludgy, stinky, horrible water for hours on end, and then you come across shooters. Well, you can understand they get annoyed with rescuers because we save the birds.

They wave the flags and keep the birds away. Of course the rescuers do not enjoy that very much, but we save birds. That is what we are there for. We are there for the birds. We are the voice for the birds.

Laurie LEVY: Of course rescuers carry long poles with flags on them. When you have got duck shooters on the wetlands and the shooters are in camouflage gear, the birds cannot see them. So when rescuers are out there in bright colours, the birds can see them and they will keep away. When you are carrying flags that are flying up 50 metres, the birds can see the flags and they will keep away from the guns. So we can stand on shooters for hours, and they will not shoot a bird because –

Michael GALEA: So the flags are not to alert shooters that you are there, the flags are to deter birds from the area. Is that correct?

Laurie LEVY: Sorry, what was that, Michael?

Michael GALEA: So the flags are not to signal to shooters that you are there, they are to deter birds in the area.

Laurie LEVY: They are to deter birds – yes, purely.

Michael GALEA: I see. From your observations what have you seen of the enforcement activity of the GMA? I know that you said it is hard for them to be at all these wetlands, but where you have seen them, have they been proactive, have they been reactive in terms of checking bag limits – all that sort of stuff? What has your observation of that been?

Lynn TRAKELL: Well, it is very frustrating because rescuers see breaches of the regulations. They see shooters targeting a bird, shooting it. It will fall down, and they do not even bother to go to collect it; they target another bird, and they should not be doing that. The rescuers get very, very upset and yell to the GMA, who are standing on shore – you know, ‘Do something!’ – but they very often cannot.

Michael GALEA: So you feel they are not proactive?

Lynn TRAKELL: I guess it depends on the actual GMA officer.

Michael GALEA: Sure. If I can ask –

The CHAIR: Your time is about to expire.

Michael GALEA: I cannot. Thank you.

Laurie LEVY: You have got to remember that the shooters are the GMA's clients as well.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Levy. Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for attending. Ms Trakell, you mentioned that Mr Levy is not prone to exaggeration.

Lynn TRAKELL: Absolutely.

Bev McARTHUR: That was right, yes. We have just heard Mr Levy tell us there are 20,000 wetlands, correct?

Lynn TRAKELL: Yes, and I got that figure from Simon Toop at the GMA.

Bev McARTHUR: I think there are around about 2000, so maybe you missed a number.

Lynn TRAKELL: Well, that is not what the GMA say.

Bev McARTHUR: It is also a fact that you said that there are not enough GMA inspectors out in these wetlands to check on all these dreadful hunters. But isn't it a fact that the police, you have said, actually have to be there to protect the GMA? The truth of the matter is they have got to be there to ensure that you are not misbehaving. You have already admitted you break the law by going into the water, which is illegal, so we

have got the police needing to be there to ensure that you do not break the law. But clearly you do – and maybe you do get fined – so they are tied up, the GMA resources and the police, in actually babysitting protesters, which is effectively what you are; you are protesters. For instance, at Lake Buloke at the opening this year there were about half a dozen hunters, and because you routinely act illegally and dangerously a large number of GMA and police were tied up policing your illegal activity rather than checking on hunters. So aren't you defeating the purpose here?

Laurie LEVY: By us being there, there are probably about 70,000 native waterbirds there. In the late 80s and early 90s Lake Buloke would get 10,000 duck shooters on it, and it was a frightening place to be because they were using semiautomatics in those days as well.

Bev McARTHUR: We have moved on from there, haven't we, though?

Laurie LEVY: This year shooters did not turn up at Buloke because we put a media release out saying we were going there and our rescue team was going there, and we have got a great rescue team.

Bev McARTHUR: So the police and the GMA were tied up making sure there was not confrontation between you and the shooters. But let us go to another point you have raised.

Laurie LEVY: No. Can I just answer that? When the GMA was first formed, Graeme Ford, who is the CEO of the Game Management Authority, told me that what they wanted was for shooters to self-regulate. The only reason they could not let them self-regulate was because our rescue team was out there.

Bev McARTHUR: Right. You also discredited Rodney Carter, the CEO of the Dja Dja Wurrung. Are you seriously questioning an Indigenous leader's legitimacy to speak on behalf of these people?

Laurie LEVY: I am, and a lot of other Indigenous members of the clan challenge his leadership as well.

Bev McARTHUR: Have you got evidence of that?

Laurie LEVY: I can get it.

Bev McARTHUR: Please provide it to the committee. You also mentioned that you contact Georgie. I am presuming you mean Ms Purcell.

Laurie LEVY: Yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. And she contacts somebody in the government, and before we know it we have had a closure. Isn't that proof that this whole activity is purely political?

Laurie LEVY: Not at all. All we are trying to do is get a wetland closed off to protect threatened species.

Bev McARTHUR: So will you be out of business if duck shooting is banned? What other issue are you about to take on?

Laurie LEVY: In our job, we want to become redundant as soon as possible. Yes, we do. And we do not get paid, by the way; we have been volunteers for 38 years.

Bev McARTHUR: Like all the volunteers that help look after the wetlands, do you go out and help look after the wetlands, prepare nesting boxes and ensure that the wetlands thrive? Do you do that sort of conservation work?

Laurie LEVY: We spend our time looking after the inhabitants.

Bev McARTHUR: So you do not do any conservation work. So when duck hunting is potentially banned, you will not be out there making sure that these wetlands thrive.

Laurie LEVY: Can I just say that there are many Landcare groups that revegetate.

Bev McARTHUR: But not you.

Laurie LEVY: Not us – but they do it. We look after the inhabitants of those wetlands.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, there may not be any inhabitants, Mr Levy, if the wetlands do not survive. And they survive –

Laurie LEVY: We do not need Field and Game to do that.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, who is going to do it – the taxpayer via the government, then?

The CHAIR: Order!

Laurie LEVY: Field and Game will only revegetate a wetland if they can shoot the birds after they do that, and the Winton Wetlands would not give Field and Game that permission. And also, just on Field and Game, in 2009 we went onto Field and Game private shooting wetlands Heart Morass and we caught them stealing water. And I heard the interview this morning. But the reason why they stole water – it was a week before the opening of the 2009 duck-shooting season, and they wanted water there to attract birds.

Melina BATH: Where did they steal it to?

Bev McARTHUR: I would just go to Ms Trakell. You made an assertion that fathers bully their sons out shooting. Are you going to provide evidence of this?

Lynn TRAKELL: Well, I have heard from other rescuers who have seen that happen, so –

The CHAIR: That is time.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, I think if you make these assertions, you need to provide evidence. Can we take that on notice, Mr Chair?

The CHAIR: Yes. Mrs McArthur, your time has expired. Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Mr Levy, I do not expect us to agree on much. We do agree on a couple of things, like whaling and longline nettings and stuff like that. I acknowledge your decades of commitment to your cause. I remember, well, from the 80s when you first popped up. But your organisation – I am not going to a particular person – is notorious for breaking laws and operating outside the laws. Do you agree with that? I know you have admitted it, I am just –

Laurie LEVY: If we can help native waterbirds and we need to, we are happy to break a silly law, like not being allowed to go into the water before 10 o'clock.

Bev McARTHUR: Oh, it is okay to break laws if they are silly!

Jeff BOURMAN: Hang on –

The CHAIR: Order! Let the witness finish answering the question, please.

Jeff BOURMAN: So if I may paraphrase for you, Mr Levy, and you can correct me, bad laws are made to be broken.

Laurie LEVY: Yes, in the case of native waterbirds. Jeff, if you are in a car park and it is a hot day, it is 40 degrees, and you are going to the supermarket and you hear a baby crying and it is in the back seat, it is turning blue, would you smash the window to help the baby?

Jeff BOURMAN: It would actually be a law for me to. You would be negligent.

Laurie LEVY: Would you –

Jeff BOURMAN: Of course I would, but it would be basically criminally negligent of me to walk off, so it is not a comparable situation.

Laurie LEVY: And I say it would be criminally negligent of us to leave wounded birds out there to die. And we are out there to protect those birds.

Jeff BOURMAN: Well, I will take that. That is your answer, Mr Levy. Why do you expect other people to obey laws when you do not?

Laurie LEVY: Well, for the same reason. I am not talking about people breaking laws, I am talking about people helping native waterbirds, and laws are often brought in by governments to look after the shooters.

Jeff BOURMAN: That may or may not be so; that is not the point. The point is you say that there are laws that you do not believe are right, so you are breaking them. Why should a shooter obey all these laws – and you criticise them for not obeying these laws – when you just break the laws you do not like?

Laurie LEVY: Because at the end there is a suffering waterbird.

Jeff BOURMAN: Is there? If it is killed outright, there is no suffering.

Laurie LEVY: Well, if it is wounded – and the vast majority are wounded. And just on the wounding rate –

Jeff BOURMAN: Sorry, may I –

The CHAIR: Let the witness finish, please.

Laurie LEVY: We use the wounding rate that one in four birds are wounded. That wounding rate came from an American, Tom Roster. Tom Roster is a ballistics expert. He is also a duck shooter. And when we used that figure, for years shooters could not argue against it simply because Tom Roster was one of them.

Jeff BOURMAN: Well, I must point out, Mr Levy, you said the vast majority are wounded and then you said one in four, so even if we take both your statements, they are just at odds with each other.

Laurie LEVY: Play on words.

Jeff BOURMAN: Well, it is true –

The CHAIR: Keep going.

Jeff BOURMAN: I have got this. There is a whole lot of stuff here, and I have got not much time, but you said that Professor Kingsford gets his data from the shooters. I do not understand where you got that from because my understanding is Professor Kingsford –

Laurie LEVY: No, I did not say that.

Jeff BOURMAN: You did. I wrote it down when you said it. It will be on –

Bev McARTHUR: Hansard.

Jeff BOURMAN: It will be on Hansard. Absolutely you did.

Laurie LEVY: When?

Jeff BOURMAN: Today. Just then.

Laurie LEVY: I did not say Professor Kingsford gets his –

Lynn TRAKELL: Maybe it was me.

Jeff BOURMAN: I am afraid you did.

Lynn TRAKELL: I probably said that. Yes.

Jeff BOURMAN: Well, one of you did. You are both representing the organisation. Be that as it may, that is not the case. So what do you say with that? Professor Kingsford gets his own data. He supplies data to the GMA who supplies it to the government.

Lynn TRAKELL: But not on the numbers of birds that are wounded.

Jeff BOURMAN: But that has got nothing to do with Professor Kingsford.

Lynn TRAKELL: No, but he would use that information.

Jeff BOURMAN: No, he does not. He works on waterfowl indices, long-term decline or otherwise, of the birds. He may or may not be personally interested in waterfowl wounding, but professionally he is not.

Lynn TRAKELL: But when he says that the numbers of waterbirds shot do not have an impact on, you know, bird numbers –

Jeff BOURMAN: Sorry, I might interrupt. Being an ecologist, when he says that, we should take that fairly seriously.

Lynn TRAKELL: I am sorry. I cannot hear what you are saying.

Jeff BOURMAN: When Professor Kingsford says that it – and I think the term used was ‘a tiny amount’ – affects the overall number of birds, don’t you believe that we should be taking his data seriously rather than extrapolated and supposed data and –

Lynn TRAKELL: I do believe we should take his data seriously, of course.

Laurie LEVY: It is the shooters that do not take Richard Kingsford seriously. They are criticising him all the time.

Jeff BOURMAN: That is actually –

Melina Bath interjected.

Jeff BOURMAN: Order! Come on. I have got this. Whether the shooters do or do not is immaterial, it is whether you do or do not, and I am hearing conflicting ideas here.

Laurie LEVY: No, you are not.

Jeff BOURMAN: All right. I am pretty sure Hansard will show me something different.

Laurie LEVY: Okay.

Jeff BOURMAN: I think it was you, Lynn, who mentioned – I am getting it all confused over here – what Graeme Ford said about self-regulation. What organisation was Graeme Ford working for at the time?

Laurie LEVY: The Game Management Authority.

Jeff BOURMAN: No, he was not. He was not the first CEO of the Game Management Authority.

Laurie LEVY: He might not have been, but it was around that time when he first took over, and that is what he said to me. It might have been 2015, Jeff – I do not know – but it was close.

Jeff BOURMAN: Well, maybe. I can only go on what you said before, and you said when it first started he made that comment.

Laurie LEVY: Yes. When Graeme Ford first started, that is the comment he made to me.

Jeff BOURMAN: Last question. If we lose regulated hunting, we are going to go to a system where there is authority to control wildlife. The birds will still be shot under a far less regulated environment. Is that something you really want?

Laurie LEVY: No, I do not, and we have tried to stop that.

Jeff BOURMAN: But it will happen, because the farmers and, believe it or not, the vegans of the world need it to happen or else their food will get eaten.

Laurie LEVY: Most native waterbird species, Jeff, do not feed on farms. They are filter feeders.

Jeff BOURMAN: Tell the Baxter organic farm that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Bourman. That is time. Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you both for being here, for your submission and for your patience here today. I had a question about the environmental conditions and if they affect the behaviour of hunters. What I wanted to ask particularly about was: during drought do you see any difference in hunter behaviour from your perspective as rescuers?

Lynn TRAKELL: No. I think we answered that before. Whether it is drought or not, the shooter behaviour does not alter. The numbers out there might alter – the numbers of birds – but not the shooter behaviour.

Sheena WATT: So not the numbers of shooters?

Lynn TRAKELL: Yes. There might be fewer shooters out there because there are fewer birds to shoot.

Sheena WATT: Okay. That is all right. I had a question about section 86. Are you aware of any section 86 wetland closures having occurred without rescuer involvement?

Lynn TRAKELL: Yes.

Laurie LEVY: Yes, quite a few happened this year.

Sheena WATT: Are there any that you would like to share with the –

Laurie LEVY: Well, quite a few wetlands were closed off this year – more wetlands than ever before – and we did not have a hand in most of those. They were closed off by the government, which was fantastic.

Sheena WATT: Did any other groups, to your knowledge, have a hand in that? Assuming that there are other wildlife rescue groups, is that –

Lynn TRAKELL: No, not that we know of.

Sheena WATT: Not that you know of.

Laurie LEVY: Not that we know of.

Sheena WATT: Okay. Helpful.

Laurie LEVY: And we compliment the government for closing those wetlands off as well, Sheena.

Sheena WATT: Thank you. I had a question about tourism and ecotourism. It is one that I have explored with a couple of witnesses earlier today and one particularly that I raised with the RSPCA. Do you think that ducks, which are in our state a relatively common sight, would possibly attract the same ecotourism that we have for other animal species? I am just trying to understand the potential for a thriving ecotourism sector around ducks – duck viewing –

Lynn TRAKELL: The birdwatching industry is huge. I mean, it is gigantic worldwide. It needs to be promoted properly, of course. You would not expect the birdwatchers to just flow in without promotion and the development of a system.

Sheena WATT: Yes. So are there any other things that you can think of beyond promotion that would encourage birdwatching for native waterbirds in our state? Are there other things that we need to do beyond a promotion campaign? Are there infrastructure needs?

Lynn TRAKELL: Well, that would be part of the promotion, yes, definitely – all of that, yes. I mean, look at what happened at Phillip Island, you know.

Laurie LEVY: And again, that was the vision of John Cain, Joan Kirner and Evan Walker, and that vision worked. They turned it into a \$500 million, \$700 million tourism industry. It protected the penguins, it was great for Phillip Island and the people down there, and it was great for Victoria. It takes vision.

Sheena WATT: Yes. Do you know of any other thriving ecotourism sites in other states or territories around native waterbirds, any that you can kind of point us to that are good examples of ecotourism promoting native waterbirds?

Lynn TRAKELL: Well, the Phillip Island one stands out because they have been so incredibly successful. They have done it really well, haven't they? I am not aware of other –

Laurie LEVY: Kakadu, for example. It has been a major tourism spot, and there are other wetlands around. But Victoria – see, the Auditor-General a few years ago made the statement that regional towns in Victoria were doing far worse than regional towns in other states. You have got what could be a thriving tourism industry there, Sheena, sitting there, but a handful of shooters are preventing it from going ahead.

Sheena WATT: I would actually be quite interested in that report. Is that something you think you might be able to provide the committee at a later date, if possible?

Laurie LEVY: Yes, we can.

Sheena WATT: Thank you. Now you have talked a –

Laurie LEVY: And just – sorry, just to butt in –

Sheena WATT: Yes, please.

Laurie LEVY: The Dja Dja Wurrung people, for example, want tourism to Lake Boort. They want tourism because they know there is money in it. It is a beautiful spot and it is rich in Indigenous heritage. So do the Yorta Yorta people, but they are prevented from doing that because of a handful of duck shooters.

Sheena WATT: Yes. I would be happy to raise that directly if they are in fact invited to present to us, Victorian traditional owners. There has certainly been a change in public opinion, as you wrote in your submission. Have you got any thoughts about to what extent you think the work of the Coalition Against Duck Shooting and other organisations has impacted that change or if that is just a natural sentiment of –

Lynn TRAKELL: Laurie definitely generated that change. When he started the campaign it was a totally different scenario: duck shooting was accepted by the community. There were inserts in the newspapers advertising, in Kmart and Myers and places like that, guns and decoys and everything that goes on with duck-shooting season. Duck shooting was imbibed in the community in those days. Today duck shooters are seen as outrageous, and that is because of Laurie. Before Laurie started, it was not like that.

Sheena WATT: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Laurie and Lynn, for coming along today. We heard some pretty extraordinary claims from witnesses earlier that rescuers steal wounded birds off shooters. I am obviously aware, as a duck rescuer, that rescuers go through a training process on what to do when a bird is wounded. I wonder if you can explain that for the committee.

Laurie LEVY: In the early days we raced duck shooters for wounded birds when they came down. We could move a lot faster than the shooters because we just wore a pair of running shorts and a T-shirt and they were bogged down in waders and guns and everything else. But we do not do that now, because one of our rescuers, in 2009 – and this was not connected with racing a shooter for wounded birds – was shot in the face. She had nine pellets lodged in her face. She was rushed down to the Horsham Base Hospital and – when I first heard the news, I know the damage a shotgun can do to somebody's face – she was just so lucky. You could

see in the photographs in the *Sunday Herald Sun*, in the colour photographs, blood coming down from her temples. When Julia was being brought off the wetlands, shooters were yelling out to her 'Why don't you wipe the tomato sauce off your face, love?' They did not help. They did not help her out. They just yelled abuse at her when she was down and wounded.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Laurie. Am I correct that rescuers are now told to inform shooters to take the birds before rescuers attempt to get them themselves?

Laurie LEVY: Yes.

Georgie PURCELL: We hear claims continuously that when the Coalition Against Duck Shooting does the annual waterbird display they are frozen birds brought in that have been stored for the year and have died of natural causes. I am wondering if you can talk us through the process of how that display is prepared each year.

Laurie LEVY: We pick up what birds we find out there, and we bring them in. The reason we have always displayed birds outside the Premier's office is because politicians in the early days and now refuse to go to the wetlands to see the carnage that they sanction, so we bring the carnage to them. We display the birds there. It has become a ritual over 38 years. The media expect it, and we bring in mainly protected and threatened species that have been illegally shot to highlight to the public and to the government that these birds are still being shot.

Georgie PURCELL: And what happens to the birds after the display?

Laurie LEVY: In the early days the department of conservation officers would take them away and X-ray all of those birds. They have never ever complained to us about birds that should not be there, and now the Game Management Authority does the same thing. In fact even the old department of conservation and the Game Management Authority have phoned us to say if we can let them know when we are having a bird display, they will just stand back until we finish all the media that we do and then they will come in and collect the birds. So all the birds are open for the Game Management Authority to X-ray and check.

Georgie PURCELL: And they dispose of them, making it impossible to recycle them.

Laurie LEVY: And they dispose of them, yes.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. You have spoken about the Koorangie marshes massacre that happened in 2017. Could you run us through any other events over the years where similar events have occurred?

Laurie LEVY: Well, there was Box Flat in 2013. I received a phone call from somebody inside government on the Sunday afternoon to let me know about it and what had happened. Winchester, the gun manufacturer and ammunition manufacturer – sales reps had taken crates of ammunition up to Box Flat, and they had given that ammunition away free of charge. What happened that morning was a massacre of about 2000 waterbirds, and included in that were 200 freckled ducks. We were tipped off. We put out a media release. It became public news, and it was admitted. There was a big investigation into it, which lasted about seven or eight months. But our rescuers went back a week after to Box Flat to have a look around, and we found 43 illegally shot freckled ducks – a threatened species – that the investigation had missed. There have been a lot of other massacres that have been covered up in the past.

Georgie PURCELL: How do you think the landscape of duck shooting has changed since 2017? Do you think that was a pivotal moment after opening weekend?

Laurie LEVY: Yes. The massacre led to the Pegasus report being done, and that Pegasus report did change things, yes.

The CHAIR: That is time.

Georgie PURCELL: Perfect timing.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is our time with you today. Thank you very much for your spirited participation.

Lynn TRAKELL: There is a lot we have not covered.

The CHAIR: I am sure there is. We do appreciate you taking the time to join us here today.

Laurie LEVY: Thanks, Ryan; appreciate it.

The CHAIR: You will receive a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings for review before it is published on the website. The committee will take a short break and return at 2:45 pm.

Witnesses withdrew.