

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Sale – Monday 26 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 Gary Howard,

Mr John Byers, and

Ms Glenda Anderson.

The CHAIR: Thanks, everyone. We are going to get started on the last session of today's hearings.

All evidence taken 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 this 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 the Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and 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.

Gary HOWARD: Gary Howard. I do not appear on behalf of any organisation.

John BYERS: John Byers. Likewise, I do not appear on behalf of any organisation.

Glenda ANDERSON: And Glenda Anderson. I also do not represent any organisation.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. I will get the committee members to introduce themselves and then get you to make your opening statement, and we will go. So I will start with Bev.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Evan Mulholland, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Jeff BOURMAN: Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region, where we are.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Sheena WATT: Hello. Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: Ryan Batchelor, Southern Metropolitan Region, Chair of the inquiry. If you would like to make a short opening statement in whatever combination you would like – usually these opening statements are going for sort of 5 to 10 minutes. If you could try and keep it brief, then we can get into the questions.

Gary HOWARD: I am going to go first. Thank you very much. My name is Gary Howard. I am 70 years of age. I have hunted and conserved wetlands and waterfowl since I was 16. At this young age I was fortunate that it was drummed into me that if you are going to hunt, you must conserve. I attended my first nest box working bee 54 years ago and have not missed one since. Currently I oversee and manage all volunteer work at the Heart Morass restoration project.

I have attended every duck season opening since 1969. Since 1975 I have missed 11 Saturday morning hunts, even managing a morning hunt on my wedding day. I have spent 45 years in the sporting goods and firearms industries, 36 years in my own business. I am a qualified firearms safety instructor and also conduct waterfowl identification training courses.

I served four years as president of the Victorian Field and Game Association, which was the predecessor to the now Field and Game Australia – at 29 years of age, the youngest who has ever served in this role – also

undertaking many executive positions within Sale Field and Game. I have also held a position on the Victorian Hunting Advisory Committee.

I am a life member of Sale Field and Game, a life member of Field and Game Australia, a recipient of the prestigious Dr Hugh Martin Medal and also the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority's Lyrebird Award for wetlands conservation. In June 2022 I was awarded the Australia Day honours award, the Order of Australia Medal, for services to conservation and the environment. Thank you very much.

John BYERS: I am a hunter and I am a conservationist and have been hunting game since I was 15 years old, some 50 years ago now. I have been a continuous member of the Sale Field and Game Association for the past 46 years and am a life member of that organisation. In my time with Field and Game I have held a number of different positions within the organisation and held the position as branch secretary for a 10-year period. Whilst I have hunted various species of game birds and game animals and pest animals, my passion is with duck hunting. That passion of duck hunting has taken me to more than half the states of Australia, to New Zealand, to the USA, to Canada and to Scotland, predominantly hunting waterfowl. In 2006 I was selected by the Victorian government's hunter advisory committee to evaluate and report on the Cooperative North American Shotgun Education Program CONSEP in South Dakota, USA. Following on from that, in 2008 I attended a concept train-the-trainer course that was held in Tasmania and qualified as a trainer to deliver shotgun education training to Victorian duck hunters. In 2014 I contributed to the content of the Game Management Authority's *Be a Better Game Bird Hunter* booklet and consulted in the production of the GMA's *Duck WISE* DVD. In 2003 I commenced a business of handcrafting duck calls from Australian timbers for sale online and in selected gun stores. The business is now in its 20th year and is the longest running duck call business in Australia.

I joined Field and Game primarily to engage in their conservation work and, as a firm believer in sustainable hunting, I acknowledge the responsibility a hunter has in replenishing the resource with more than what was harvested. I have engaged with all the conservation efforts of the organisation since I joined and have volunteered thousands of hours over that time. On a personal note, five years ago I invested \$2000 in some earthmoving works to create a 2½-acre wetland on my farm. The area has over 300 planted and self-sown native trees, ground rush and cumbungi in the water. The area is fenced from cattle and provides excellent breeding habitat for ducks. During the last breeding season the wetland hatched six clutches of black duck, grey teal and wood duck. Over 40 ducklings were produced from that area. For clarification also, I do not hunt any of the ducks on my farm.

Glenda ANDERSON: My name is Glenda Anderson. I am also a passionate, dedicated hunter of both duck and deer. I have got three children who have also come up as young hunters. They have come up through the school system – well, first of all following us out there shooting clays and then obviously coming with us as a family hunting. Then they have got into the clay shooting, and that is through the school program that goes out to the Field and Game club. As part of Field and Game we have also participated in their conservation efforts of fox drives and the duck nest work boxes, and the children have also come along with us to do that. They are adult children now and a couple of them still do the clay shooting. My son occasionally still go out on the ducks, and my son is right into the deer hunting. They have been taught to utilise all the game meat that they are out to hunt. It is all ethically and sustainably harvested, so what we hunt we actually take from the game animals. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I might kick things off. Mr Howard, you are the manager of the Heart Morass project?

Gary HOWARD: Correct. The Heart Morass Restoration Project.

The CHAIR: How many volunteers do you usually get out to your working bees?

Gary HOWARD: The bigger ones, when I need the numbers, 40, 50 attendees is pretty regular. Then for some work we may only need three or four, so I have got a regular group that I can call on for that. But when the need is, you put the call out, and generally I have got more than I can handle.

The CHAIR: Okay, so 40 or 50 out of the thousand-odd members of Field and Game in the area?

Gary HOWARD: In the area, yes.

The CHAIR: One of the things that has come up a lot today and in the course of the hearings is that there is clearly evidence of hunters doing the wrong thing. The committee has heard that; I do not think we can refute that, and no-one has sought to. What do you think we should do to weed out the hunters who do the wrong thing from the hunting community?

Gary HOWARD: Good question. Peer pressure is probably the biggest factor that can be brought to bear on hunters that are doing the wrong thing, and by and large I see them in the minority. The majority of hunters that I interact with in this area are quite ethical and follow the rules. I think probably the biggest thing is peer pressure. Yes, enforcement is one thing, but ultimately it is peer pressure that will rein in this sort of activity. And I must say, in this area – and I think even the GMA would bear this out – there are very little problems with people doing the wrong thing. There is always going to be somebody who will stretch the boundaries or break the law, and it does not matter what pursuit you are in, there is going to be somebody who will do the wrong thing. I had a question from the GMA one day: why do we not have problems in Gippsland like we do in other places? My most simple answer to that is that it is disciplined hunting in the fact that the hunters are stationary in normally set positions, usually hunting over decoys with a clear field of fire in front of them so they can ethically take a bird. I think that is the big thing, that it is very disciplined here in comparison to some other wetlands.

The CHAIR: So what actions do you think should disqualify a hunter from holding a game licence?

Gary HOWARD: Well, I think possibly – disqualify them?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Gary HOWARD: I think somebody shooting well over the bag limit, and people can make a mistake –

The CHAIR: What is ‘well over’?

Gary HOWARD: Good question. Do I have to put a figure on it? Four or five. I think you can – and I have seen it done – unfortunately take two, three, four birds with one shot.

The CHAIR: When you saw it being done, did you say anything to the hunter or report it to the GMA?

Gary HOWARD: Well, it is not something that you can prevent. The hunter, if they have done the right thing, has targeted a particular bird in a mob, but you have a certain amount of spread in the shot – particularly with teal, they tend to be at times very thick – and unfortunately two or three or four birds can fall with one shot.

The CHAIR: So shooting over the bag limit is not preventable, in some circumstances?

Gary HOWARD: In some circumstances, yes.

The CHAIR: But you say you would not do anything about it if you saw it.

Gary HOWARD: Sorry?

The CHAIR: You said you would not do anything about it if you saw it.

Gary HOWARD: Well, if I knew somebody was knowingly and wantonly shooting over the bag, I would speak to them about it.

The CHAIR: And have you done so?

Gary HOWARD: Yes.

The CHAIR: And what was the response?

Gary HOWARD: From very frank discussions to being told bluntly where to go, unfortunately, but that is a reality. You know, we have spoken to people and some will say, ‘See you later’, and others will take it on board, and I try and educate them that that is not really the ethical thing to do.

The CHAIR: Okay. Ms Anderson, you mentioned that your family likes to do a range of hunting activities, from clay targets to deer to duck. What is the spread of time, do you think, you would spend on each of those over the course of the year, those different types of activities?

Glenda ANDERSON: Obviously duck season, we shoot within the seasons. We are not the type of hunters that would be out there every weekend; we are not the type of hunters that are out there every day. Obviously we have got other commitments and stuff; my husband and I both still work, so, you know. But this season we probably got out half a dozen to eight times, maybe.

The CHAIR: For duck?

Glenda ANDERSON: To duck hunt, yes. Deer hunting – I mean, this season is only closed between 15 December to 15 February. We do not want to be hunting then anyway because of the snakes. Other than that, like, we have got property at Dargo, so most of the times I have packed my rifle and I go nearly every time we go up there, which is probably every week.

The CHAIR: And clay?

Glenda ANDERSON: On clay shooting, yes. We are out at the Sale Field and Game Club every month, and my husband follows that. Probably it ranges anywhere from maybe twice to three times a month that he goes. He follows the clubs locally: Bairnsdale, Morwell, Moe, Traralgon or Sale.

The CHAIR: How typical would that pattern be in your experience of other hunters in the community?

Glenda ANDERSON: That it is a good question. From Field and Game out there, I know that they are probably getting more time to hunt ducks through duck season, because I suppose they are fortunate enough to be in the age bracket of being retired. In regard to the others, I do not know how many of the others do deer hunting and that type of stuff, but I know the group of people that we squad with with clay target shooting, they are the same. They shoot three times a month chasing the clays – the sporting clays or Field and Game clays. But I am not sure what their preference is in terms of duck hunting and stuff. I can only go off what we do.

The CHAIR: Sure. That is all we ask. Thanks very much. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you, Mr Howard, Mr Byers and Ms Anderson for presenting today. Mr Howard, we have just heard from the previous witnesses that hunters or hunter conservationists, hunters in their words, do not care about Indigenous trees – that they chop them down et cetera. We were out on Heart Morass this morning. Four MPs took up your offer to come out and have a look around Heart Morass. Can you explain your interaction with GLAWAC and any Indigenous interactions when you have found old trees that you suspect may have been scar trees or canoe trees or the like.

Gary HOWARD: Both GLAWAC and cultural heritage have made several trips to the property and have had a good look around. They have identified trees. In a discussion I had with representatives from the community at Dowd Morass one day we discussed scar trees, because there was some school of thought that they should be fenced off. They were very much of the opinion that, no, do not fence them off because it makes them targets.

Melina BATH: You said that or they said that?

Gary HOWARD: No, the cultural heritage group said they were better off not fenced, because it then makes them targets. We have quite a number of what would be classed as birthing trees. One tree there has been identified as a marker tree, and there is actually a marker tree just outside the front gate, between the gate and the bridge. These trees were said to have had, as saplings, their limbs twisted together to form a marking process for whatever reason – possibly territorial markers or something like that. But there are several on the property.

Melina BATH: Mr Howard, just because we are short of time, how do you treat those trees?

Gary HOWARD: We do not touch them.

Melina BATH: You treat them with respect?

Gary HOWARD: We treat them with respect and leave them alone. Nobody goes near them. We make people aware of them, but that is it. That is the end of it.

Melina BATH: Thank you. We were out on Heart Morass. In 2007 it was a wasteland salt pan. In 2023 we have Matt Bowler from the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, who has partnered with Field and Game in the WET trust for that period of time, endorsing this as one of the best projects that he has ever been on, and I am sure I am quoting him correctly. Can you just share with the committee the volunteer hours that you put in – not you, but the whole of the hunter conservationists, and do you reject people who want to come and help you if they are not Field and Game, or do you encourage them?

Gary HOWARD: Absolutely, we do not reject them. Actually there was a group of cyclists went through this morning. They are regular cyclists that go through there. At our last major tree planting there were a number of people from that group who assisted and further, had come back when we wanted to remove the tree guards and gave us a hand with removing the tree guards. The property is open to anybody who wishes to attend. Unfortunately we have got to keep it locked because of vandalism, that sort of stuff, but we openly ask people and want them to come in and let them enjoy the property. As long as they treat it with respect, it is open to anybody.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I see you have planted over 66,000 trees – a huge restoration project. You have got services to conservation and the environment for your OAM. There has been comment – we heard it just previously – that you were charged, it was levelled at you, for stealing water. Before anyone else jumps in, I would like you to answer to me or to this committee: back in 2009 you were fined. Is that correct?

Gary HOWARD: Correct.

Melina BATH: Can you just describe it? Because you described it to us in the bus this morning.

Gary HOWARD: First of all, I was not charged with stealing.

Melina BATH: They were not my words. So could you clarify?

Gary HOWARD: I was charged with illegally diverting water from the Latrobe River. I was not convicted. I was fined without conviction plus costs.

Melina BATH: Why did you do it?

Gary HOWARD: The wetland was suffering. We had done a lot of planting in the immediate area of the drain, and we were suffering from an almost acidic soil. The pH level was well below 4. It was pretty hard to watch it all go by the way. All these wetlands on the Lower Latrobe had always been watered this way. Before I even went to court Parks Victoria were told, 'Do not let water into Dowd Morass or the Sale Common because you have no authority whatsoever to do it.' So this all came to light out of my situation. Since then the environmental water holder has taken over and we have not a volumetric water right, but we have ability to water the wetland under the control of the catchment management authority.

Melina BATH: And you have a very good relationship with the catchment management authority.

Gary HOWARD: Absolutely.

Melina BATH: That water that was going into the Heart Morass after you pulled up the barge board was only going to go where?

Gary HOWARD: To Bass Strait. There was no –

Melina BATH: Thank you. I have not got time, Mr Howard, I am really sorry, because we have got only a short time each.

If I could ask Mr Byers: you were involved in developing a shotgun education program in the past. In your opinion what is the solution to address concerns around wounding?

John BYERS: With regard to the concerns, I think the only way is education and by training hunters about certain strategies they can use to reduce wounding. That is the word: 'reduce' wounding. It will never go to zero. It is a bit like the road toll. We would all like the road toll to be zero, but common sense says it will not be zero.

Melina BATH: So you would like it to go to zero?

John BYERS: No, I am saying that wounding will never go to zero. There are some expectations that you can make it zero, but it can be significantly reduced by proper training of hunters.

Melina BATH: Do you endorse the wounding rate program?

John BYERS: Beg your pardon?

Melina BATH: The wounding rate program.

John BYERS: No, I am not involved in that. I am aware of it and I know it is with government at the moment, but I do not know much about it.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Bourman

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, guys. Glenda, there is a very big narrative going around about how unsafe it is for women around shooters and hunters and things like that. I would like your perspective; I am not going to lead you on. I would just like to hear your perspective of how you feel amongst them all.

Glenda ANDERSON: I feel sorry for those people out there that actually believe that, because it is far from the truth. It is one of the most male-dominated areas and it is most inclusive of women and families – children. Honestly, I have never experienced anything like that ever. We have a bit of banter and a bit of fun, but it is never anything more than that. I would feel completely safe, whether I am hunting or whether I am at the Field and Game. Yes, I have no issue at all. I have never experienced it personally myself. It has always been very inclusive and very encouraging. When I was first starting out, they would fall over hand and foot to try and teach you, to try and include you and that kind of stuff. It is the same with getting the kids in and getting them up and going: encouraging them to come through the ranks as young Field and Game members and potentially hunters in the future.

Jeff BOURMAN: That is good, because I am the father of a very small daughter at the moment but one day I want her to be able hunt and shoot if she wants. I am not going to force her to – which actually brings me to my next thing. There was a narrative at one of the hearings a while ago that fathers were forcing their children to hunt and shoot. Have you ever seen anything like that?

Glenda ANDERSON: I have personally never experienced or seen that, no.

Jeff BOURMAN: I did not think so.

Glenda ANDERSON: I honestly would invite those people who feel that that may be the case to come out and have a look at Field and Game, because that would certainly open their eyes and they would certainly change their point of view, that is for sure. It is very inclusive.

Jeff BOURMAN: Excellent. Thank you. John – we both have a shared background, actually.

John BYERS: We do.

Jeff BOURMAN: You were there somewhat longer than me. Obviously you are an ex-policeman now –

John BYERS: I am.

Jeff BOURMAN: so there are no constraints on your answers. We have heard all sorts of stuff about lawlessness and poor behaviour, and Gary went to some of it earlier. You would have noticed, being a police officer, and particularly in this area. Have you seen the wanton destruction that we have all been hearing about?

John BYERS: I have only experienced it once in all the time that I was here, and it was at a duck opening, I believe in 2004, where I witnessed a gentleman – and I use that phrase loosely – who had shot a number of protected species, seagulls. And what I did is – I am a bit of an avid photographer – as I had finished shooting, I took photographs of this guy and his boat and identified him. Then when I went back to work, I got involved with – I am just trying to think – there was just the DSE game unit, as they were in those days. We took out warrants on his house and went and arrested him and charged him and put him before the court, and he was fined many thousands of dollars. So I too would not put up with anyone, whether I am involved as a policeman or an ex-policeman now, doing the wrong thing, because it impacts on all of us hunters, and we bear the brunt of what people do – wrongdoing. And I agree with Gary: it is peer pressure that has got a lot to do with it and education from the shooting organisations.

Jeff BOURMAN: Things go wrong, and there are always some ratbags out there –

John BYERS: There are.

Jeff BOURMAN: but it is up to the royal us to get rid of them, whether it is the GMA or all of the hunters. But the wanton destruction that I was hearing about before – look, in the early days, maybe in the 80s and 90s perhaps, but we have come a long way.

You went to South Dakota in 2006, I do believe, to look at the American shotgun education program.

John BYERS: I did.

Jeff BOURMAN: And you have been helping, I believe, with the GMA, working along with those sorts of things. Obviously hunting education – and it is not just ducks – is going to be a big thing in making sure we have a future for Victorian hunting. Can you talk about the benefits you have seen from the education in the USA as well as here – and I understand the USA is a different place, particularly when it comes to guns, but hunter behaviour is hunter behaviour.

John BYERS: It is. But both have had CONSEP courses to do with waterfowl wounding, and there is quite a substantial amount of research and data has gone on over the years since the early 1950s into the wounding rates. One thing I did learn is that there is no comparison with that data about wounding rates in the USA with what is in Victoria, and that is due to the lack of data on wounding rates in Victoria. There is absolutely no data in Victoria about wounding rates, so you cannot really say anything about that.

That aside, as far as a course like that goes, yes, there are certainly some wonderful things to be learned with skill sets on how to reduce wounding by finding your effective shooting range - to be shooting within it; by using camouflage and concealment to get birds closer; to use decoys and duck calls, again to get birds within your effective shooting range so that you are reducing any chance of wounding. And both of those courses, the one in South Dakota and the one in Tasmania, were conducted on live birds – on pheasants in South Dakota and chukar partridge in Tasmania. At the start of those courses untrained hunters shot at birds, and then after the courses, learning all the techniques and retrieval strategies, that was done again, and you saw a noticeable reduction in the wounding of the birds between the first and the second stage.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you. Was that my time, Chair?

The CHAIR: That was your time. Ms Watt.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you. Six minutes is not long.

Sheena WATT: No. Thank you very much for being here today. I am going to draw on Ms Bath's earlier comments about sites of Indigenous cultural heritage and significance, and we heard earlier about some of those sites being damaged. What do we do to prevent that? What does Field and Game and its members do? What is the support that is around for hunters to make sure that while participating in this they do not disturb or damage sites of Aboriginal cultural significance or heritage? Are there any such formal programs or such? Can you talk to me about that?

Gary HOWARD: Me?

Sheena WATT: I will leave it to you to decide.

Gary HOWARD: Unfortunately nothing – there is nothing that we run. Yes, you talk to people down there – I am talking about the Heart Morass. We talk to people about it, and as I said, the people that I have spoken to from cultural heritage have basically said, ‘Look, leave them alone, and they will be, by and large, untouched.’

Sheena WATT: But folks would have to know what is a culturally significant site, wouldn't they, to then leave it alone?

Gary HOWARD: Well, I do not know that we have necessarily got any sites other than scar trees. Chainsaws are banned from Heart Morass. They are not allowed to take a chainsaw onto the property. Therefore they cannot attack a tree with a chainsaw. Members who are camping on the property must take their own wood. They can pick up small wood off the ground to burn, but chainsaws are banned full stop – no chainsaws.

Sheena WATT: Okay. And the practice on other sites apart from Heart Morass – can you speak to any others?

Gary HOWARD: Well, I am aware of sites at Jack Smith Lake. I am also aware of some scar trees on Dowd Morass. They are controlled by Parks Victoria, and what they undertake I am not sure. I know one of the significant midden sites at Jack Smith Lake was fenced quite a number of years ago, but last time I was at Jack Smith Lake those fences had fallen into disrepair – the fencing of the midden area. But any other sites that I am basically aware of are on Crown land and generally, by and large, controlled by Parks Vic.

Sheena WATT: Okay. That is very helpful. Does anyone else have any comments on that? Otherwise I will move to another question. You talked about peer pressure and how peer pressure works for hunters, but clearly it does not always if you have been given some fairly firm language by some other hunters. You are quite an esteemed member of the community and honoured as such. Do you have any other suggestions for managing bad practices of hunters? Beyond peer pressure and calling it out, what else can we do? Because it is clear that if even some of the most esteemed members of the hunting community are calling out bad behaviour, it is not always listened to and practised.

Gary HOWARD: Well, by regulation. And I suppose one of the issues that we face is the old Australian adage, ‘You don't dob anybody in.’ That probably, to a degree, has got to change. That is something that we should work on changing, because as has been pointed out, the Game Management Authority cannot be everywhere all the time. It is still back to peer pressure, regulation, education – definitely education – and I think to a degree education is lacking. I know the Game Management Authority put out quite a large manual some time ago, but most people have probably forgotten about that now. I do not hold with social media, so I am not a Facebooker or anything like that. Yes, I know the Game Management Authority put stuff out on Facebook and that, but there is still a large part of the hunting community that are not involved in that. So how do we get to them?

Sheena WATT: Are there any other comments from the other panellists about how we might tackle badly behaving hunters?

John BYERS: Yes. I think in my younger days so much came down through family – through my brothers-in-law and my uncle who hunted. They tended to put me in the right direction, for want of a better term, and they would certainly call out and would not allow me to do anything wrong. I am not sure whether there are issues within families that do not pass those things on to younger hunters or not nowadays. I agree with Gary that peer pressure is probably the major one. It certainly happens around here; you do see people calling other people out.

Sheena WATT: Okay. I wanted to ask about litter, and that was brought up by our earlier panel. Do hunters pick up their spent cartridge shells?

John BYERS: I do.

Sheena WATT: And just yourself, in your practice of going out and the sights you have seen at the end of this season, can you reflect on the practice of the shells? What happened to them? Were they overwhelmingly picked up or not by –

Gary HOWARD: By and large most pick them up but, yes, I will admit there are a few that do not. With the advent of these newer what we call bolt-action firearms, the cartridge is actually spent out the side and lands. We are using the traditional under and overs or side by side; you take the spent cartridges out and you put them in your bag, it is quite simple. But these newer firearms that are now available in the market are probably going to create some problems, and I think most people would go to some effort to pick those up. But if they do not find one or it drifts away, yes, there is a problem. I walk the shores of our property a lot and, yes, I do pick up an odd one and I pick up an odd decoy that has drifted away, but there are not significant numbers. Like, if I walked a couple of hundred metres of the edge, I might pick up one or two, and some of those quite often can be quite old and deteriorated. I do not see the issue particularly in the Heart and other areas where I hunt, and if I see them, I pick them up, even during the hunting season. If I am out there and I see something either floating or somebody has left something, I will pick them up and take them away.

The CHAIR: All right, that is time. Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you very much. I am fascinated about what you have done at Heart Morass, because you have transformed a desert into a flourishing wetland by just effort and work and volunteers. How many bird species have come into Heart Morass since you have transformed a desert into a wetland?

Gary HOWARD: In very early days, people from BirdLife – and there are people from BirdLife who have access and have a key to the property – were identifying in the order of 20 to 25 species. More recent surveys – and one of their members ad hoc sends me results of what he has seen there – they have been seeing in the order of 80 to 100 different species of birds, yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Really? So that is BirdLife Australia who have done that?

Gary HOWARD: Well, I do not know if it comes under their – but they are BirdLife members.

Bev McARTHUR: BirdLife members, right, yes.

Gary HOWARD: Yes, and BirdLife I believe are involved with a national snipe survey, and that is a once-a-month survey while the Latham's snipe is here in Australia. They have access and they have a key to the property, and they have three sites that they survey in the property every month.

Bev McARTHUR: Now, I am familiar with Lake Connewarre and the wonderful education program they have down there, where children are brought into the Field and Game site where they learn about – well, Bug Blitz, it is called. Do you have similar education programs for children?

Gary HOWARD: Well, Bug Blitz use our property as well, and that is – for those that are there today, that is why it is all kept nice and mowed – so they can see the tiger snakes and everything else while they are there. It is a wonderful sight to see 80 or 100 kids running around down there with gaiters on, turning over rocks and pulling up bits of bark looking for bugs, and John Caldow with his group explaining everything. It is a fantastic sight. Outside of that, we have interaction with other schools who will contact us and want to do a tour of the property. The kids will turn up with specific questions that they have got to answer, so they question me and whoever else is with me to seek their answers. So it is regularly used, and in actual fact Bug Blitz, in conjunction with Federation University, have had I think three days down there now where they have had student teachers, educating them as to what –

Bev McARTHUR: Oh, educating the teachers. That would be good.

Gary HOWARD: Yes, it was fun.

Bev McARTHUR: So would you say over time thousands of children would have gone through this program?

Gary HOWARD: Absolutely, thousands on the Heart Morass, yes.

Bev McARTHUR: And where else could they have this sort of education, if it was not for your facility or at Lake Connemara?

Gary HOWARD: Well, there is probably –

Bev McARTHUR: The zoo.

Gary HOWARD: Yes, the zoo. It is difficult to get, the site that we offer to them.

Bev McARTHUR: Now, we heard this morning that the council think you are marvellous because you leave the areas better than you found them and you pick up other people's rubbish. But we heard a previous witness suggest that there is devastation writ large and that there are pieces of dead birds buried and left to rot. Is that your experience?

Gary HOWARD: Hunters do bury carcasses, and if they do not do it effectively, yes, they can be dragged up by foxes or feral animals. By and large they take their carcasses home, because they have got to harvest at least the breast meat out of the birds. But yes, some will harvest them onsite, and there is a particular way that they can take the breast out and leave the wing on and then leave the rest to be buried or whatever. And yes, they will be brought to the surface at times. I actually found one the other day, where they had buried them quite deep but a fox had managed to dig down to where these carcasses were and expose them.

Litter – our experience on the Heart Morass is zilch, nothing. The only time we end up with litter is every time we have a flood, we get all the flood debris come down. But outside of that and generally in other state game reserves that I attend, you do not see that much litter.

Bev McARTHUR: Glenda, we heard in a previous hearing that there was this misogynist approach to the whole activity of duck shooting and that children were sort of bullied into shooting. In your family's history do you hunt to eat the product or shoot for thrills?

Glenda ANDERSON: No, hunting is about sustainably harvesting meat or food for the family. You know, at the end of the day it is not about the pursuit or thrill of the kill; it is about providing food for your family. Because duck season is such a legislated and managed time frame, you treat it like a delicacy. You cannot buy organic, free-range, sustainably harvested wild duck from the supermarket. It is completely different to anything else that you would eat. It is something that you just prize and treasure for that short period of time that you can harvest it.

Bev McARTHUR: That is marvellous. We would love to all eat organic food. What a good thing.

Glenda ANDERSON: It is wonderful. Yes, it is beautiful.

Bev McARTHUR: Tell me, all of you, if you had a crystal ball and you could tell us how we could keep duck shooting happening but making it so that everybody in the community thought it was acceptable, how could we do that?

A member: That's not a crystal ball, that's a wishing well.

John BYERS: You are asking a lot.

Bev McARTHUR: You are helping us to solve our problem.

Gary HOWARD: Well, it is difficult. There is very much a –

Bev McARTHUR: Well, maybe we will take it on notice and you can give us a thesis on the matter.

Gary HOWARD: I think so. Yes, I think this is a big one.

Glenda ANDERSON: I think it comes down to respect from both sides.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Respect from both sides. Very good.

The CHAIR: Ms Purcell.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Chair. Thank you for appearing today. Mr Howard, you mentioned that you have reported illegal behaviour in the past of duck shooters. What process have you taken to do this?

Gary HOWARD: Peer pressure.

Georgie PURCELL: So you have not reported it formally to the Game Management Authority?

Gary HOWARD: I did once, on one occasion. But yes, I probably still live to the old Australian adage 'you don't dob anybody in'. I do not like it, but it is something I have got to get my head around. I have reported once some people that were doing the wrong thing because I could not get to them.

Georgie PURCELL: People who were what? Sorry, I missed that.

Gary HOWARD: They were doing the wrong thing and I could not get to them to speak to them.

Georgie PURCELL: That leads me to my next question. You have described today that you have seen illegal behaviour from shooters over your time duck shooting. Can you please describe to us the types of illegal behaviour that you have seen?

Gary HOWARD: I have seen shooters – no, I have heard shooters shooting before time and after time. I have seen over the bag being shot. Look, many years ago I did witness some protected species being shot, and this is going back into the 1970s. No, that is about it.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. Thank you. Do you do all of your duck shooting at the Heart Morass? Sorry, I missed if you mentioned you go elsewhere.

Gary HOWARD: No. Only a small amount, and in actual fact I did not hunt the Heart Morass at all this season. I hunted every day for the season bar one, but I did not hunt the Heart Morass at all this year because bird numbers were better elsewhere and the opportunity was better elsewhere. But in a normal season, yes, I might hunt the Heart Morass six or eight or 10 times for the season.

Georgie PURCELL: And what is done with the birds hunted at Heart Morass?

Gary HOWARD: I take them home and I clean them. I take them home and I eat them. And if we are going to talk about our –

Georgie PURCELL: PFAS problem.

Gary HOWARD: PFAS problem, I have read and studied, and I have had a friend of mine who is a scientist study it, and we have yet to find any clear connection between PFAS and cancer. Our information from the RAAF base, from the Department of Defence, is that it is safe for dogs to drink the water. It is actually said to be safe for humans to drink the water as long as they do not drink significant quantities, and the only time they would be if they had fallen over.

Georgie PURCELL: Sorry, just because we are short on time, do you warn other shooters who shoot at –

Gary HOWARD: Yes. And in the paperwork that they sign, they acknowledge that they are aware of it.

Georgie PURCELL: Do you acknowledge that there is a contradiction between the game regulations that require breast meat to be harvested and the fact that the EPA does advise shooters to not eat birds at Heart Morass?

Gary HOWARD: Well, fortunately, ducks have wings, and they can be on Dowd Morass on the other side of the river within 30 seconds. And they can be out on Lake Wellington –

Georgie PURCELL: Dowd Morass has the same warning, so that is obviously happening.

Gary HOWARD: And so do most of the others around here.

Georgie PURCELL: So do you acknowledge that there is a contradiction between the wildlife regulations and the EPA regulations? It is not possible to follow both.

Gary HOWARD: No, because the EPA have now allowed commercial fishing in the Heart Morass. The commercial fishers can take eels and carp for human consumption as long as they do not take them within a certain radius of the drain where the contamination came from. So there seems to be a –

Georgie PURCELL: Yes. Ms Bath alluded to this before on the illegal diverting of water. This was obviously done during a period where Victoria was in severe drought. Farmers were walking off the land. Why was Heart Morass special?

Gary HOWARD: I do not think it was necessarily special. It was just a decision I made at the time based on what was happening in the Heart Morass. And as I said, any water that went beyond that drain was headed for Bass Strait. There was no irrigation take-off below there, and the water was not of suitable quality for irrigation. It was probably even marginal as to whether it was good enough water to go in the Heart, but it was going to be better than the low pH water that was there because of the acid sulphate soils. So that is why I made the decision.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. Ms Anderson, you described duck shooting as ethical in your opening remarks. Something that has been clear from all sides during this inquiry process is that wounding is a problem. How can duck shooting possibly be ethical as long as wounding exists?

Glenda ANDERSON: You always endeavour to take the bird with your first shot.

Georgie PURCELL: So how do we address wounding if it is unavoidable?

Glenda ANDERSON: You follow the practices by Field and Game as to how to dispatch that bird humanely.

Georgie PURCELL: I want to talk about dispatching methods, since you have brought it up. What do you believe is the best process?

Glenda ANDERSON: Personally I follow up with a second shot.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. And do you have any views on practices that are still legal but have been advised not to be followed, such as windmilling?

Glenda ANDERSON: Sorry, say that again?

Georgie PURCELL: What are your views on windmilling birds?

Glenda ANDERSON: Well, that is not an approved method or a suggested method by FGA.

Georgie PURCELL: Okay. Ms Anderson, you said you felt sorry for women who believe duck shooters can be unsafe to be around. I have been in Parliament for six months now, and due to my views on duck shooting I have received rape threats, death threats and ongoing sexualised commentary in a volume that is impossible to say it is on a minority. Do you acknowledge that you probably are not on the receiving end of this because you are a duck shooter yourself and this culture needs to be addressed still?

Glenda ANDERSON: As I previously stated, I have not personally been exposed to that.

Georgie PURCELL: Yes. My question is: do you acknowledge that this is a problem despite you not experiencing it?

Glenda ANDERSON: No, because I have not witnessed it. So –

The CHAIR: That is time, Ms Purcell. Mr Mulholland.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you, and thank you all for attending today. Gary, congratulations on your OAM. I must say, having not much knowledge of duck hunting prior to this inquiry and having visited Heart Morass and seeing the success of the conservation works there, I would say you probably deserve an AC. But I

want to talk about Heart Morass. It was great to be able to visit this morning and see it for myself, and I just wanted to hear from you: what do you think would happen to Heart Morass if not for hunting?

Gary HOWARD: If not for hunting as currently or if we were to lose hunting?

Evan MULHOLLAND: If we were to lose hunting.

Gary HOWARD: Right. I myself have thought long and hard about this, and yes, I would continue in that role there and get the enjoyment out of it that I do. I do not know how many members would follow me and continue on. I use the analogy: nobody would look after a golf course if they could not play golf on it. That is very much the case. The difficulty that would come out of that is that we would have a shortage of funding to manage the property, given; well, the ballpark figure – we spend about \$8000 or \$9000 a year on the track and we probably spend somewhere in the order of \$5000 a year on chemicals. Other incidentals, whatever needs come up, all come out of the money we earn from key sales and a bit we get from agistment every year. Now, that money is just going to dry up – yes, we will probably get some from agistment, but that is about it. But even then, the agistment – we have got to run electric fences, and I am not going to be able to put them up on my own to cover the distance. So, yes, we are going to need money.

Evan MULHOLLAND: And programs like the great Bug Blitz program we heard about, would that still exist?

Gary HOWARD: Well, that would still exist, because they are funded outside to an autonomous organisation, partially funded by the Williamson Foundation. But they are in a situation where they have got to be generating their own funds now. For them, yes, it is an access point and we would be able to maintain that for them – and I would have no doubt I could keep that front bit mowed for them, for sure.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Today we heard from Wellington Shire Council, who spoke about the economic benefits of hunting and said something along the lines of \$3.1 million in 2019 to this area, even with a limited season. They were a bit sceptical of so-called ecotourism and birdwatchers contributing to the economy in the same way if hunting were to be banned. Would you agree with that? I will ask all the other witnesses as well.

Gary HOWARD: Yes, totally, I would agree with it. By and large, most of the areas in this area, the state game reserves that people would want to go to, half of them you take your life in your own hands getting in there, unless you have got a four-wheel drive and a second four-wheel drive to get you out. For ecotourism to work the public have got to have access, and they have not got unfettered access to most of these state game reserves.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Well, some people contributing to this inquiry seem to suggest there would be an economic benefit, but some evidence has suggested otherwise. What is your view – and I might ask John this as well – on the handling of the 2023 game bird seasons announcement and the restrictions? Do you think the process for the announcement and the season could have been handled better, for the future?

John BYERS: Most definitely. The fact that the minister had the available science in her hand to say that we could have had a full-length season and four birds and she indiscriminately changed that season to what it is, for a season of 35 days; and the length of time that it took for that season to be announced. As I mentioned in my submission in the preamble today, I run a business making duck calls. The problem there is that generally before a season I will make up stock that will need to go out to hunting stores or where hunters will buy my stock. If you do not know when there is going to be a season or if there is going to be a season, then you are in limbo about making excess stock that you are not going to be able to sell. All the hunting stores are in the same position, without knowing whether there is going to be a season and when it is going to be. So, yes, the very late announcement of the season is detrimental to it all – and it causes hunters angst. It is depressing when you talk to people that are hunters – they are just waiting to hear. It is like kids with Christmas: ‘When is it? Is it here? Are we there yet, are we there yet?’ It never came, and then you get hit between the eyes with a sledgehammer again.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Just one last question: Glenda, we heard from BirdLife Australia before. They opened up by saying the science is in against duck hunting, and they also referred to what they described as ‘citizen science’. Do you believe that the science backs native bird hunting – that is, the science we were talking about before that went to the minister as well?

Glenda ANDERSON: I do not think I am qualified to comment on that.

Evan MULHOLLAND: John?

John BYERS: Look, it is moving in the right direction. We have come from a time when we were relating solely with the eastern aerial waterbird survey, which you are probably well aware of and which has got issues in relation to setting duck seasons and actual populations across Australia. It is an abundance index. But with what the GMA has done over the last couple of years with their helicopter surveys and the other things that they are doing, I think that the science is getting better. There still needs to be a lot more money poured into research and science on the matter, I agree, but hunters will base themselves purely on the science. That is the right way, and that is what we ask the ministers to do – base their decisions on it –

Bev McARTHUR: Keep the politics out of it.

John BYERS: so we can keep the politics out of it. Thanks.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you.

The CHAIR: That is your time. Thank you all for coming in today. Mr Howard, on notice, can you give us a breakdown of what your outgoing costs are for Heart Morass? You sort of mentioned it.

Gary HOWARD: Yes. I can give you a breakdown.

The CHAIR: High level – it does not need to be everything, just what your costs are.

Gary HOWARD: Give us some time, and I will come up with that.

Melina BATH: And income too, Chair, maybe for balance.

The CHAIR: Yes, that would also be good.

Jeff BOURMAN: Do we need to provide receipts?

The CHAIR: Yes, please.

Bev McARTHUR: And do we calculate the volunteer hours?

The CHAIR: Well, if you would like to provide an estimate of the volunteer hours, I am happy to receive that.

Melina BATH: I think it is in the report.

The CHAIR: Yes, and the other thing – I did ask this question when Field and Game were here. There are the references in the documentation you gave us earlier to the WET trust and the underlying land ownership of the site. I am sure it is coming, but I just want that to be really clear as well, thank you.

Thank you all for coming today. You will receive a copy of the transcript to review before it is published, so please have a good look and make sure it is all in accordance with what you think you said. The committee stands adjourned for today. Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.