

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Subcommittee

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Sale — 7 October 2016

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Ms Jenny Bland, secretary, and

Mr Paul Hamlett, member, Snake Island Cattlemen's Association.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Mr Paul Hamlett, who is a member of the Snake Island Cattlemen's Association, and Ms Jenny Bland, the secretary of the Snake Island Cattlemen's Association, and thank you for coming to present at this public hearing today. Just a couple of things to note before we start. First off under the parliamentary committees legislation what you say and present today in this public hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, that is not the case once the hearing is over. Also, the information here today is being recorded, and you will receive a transcript of your submissions and your presentation, and you have a chance to look at that and fix up any inaccuracies prior to it becoming public. On that note, if we pass it over to you, I understand you will provide a PowerPoint presentation for 10 minutes or so and then we will get the opportunity to ask you lots of questions. So thank you again for coming, and over to you.

Visual presentation.

Mr HAMLETT — Firstly, thank you for inviting us to present what we will cover today, and I will try to get through this as quickly as possible. There are a few things here that might look a bit out of left field. Firstly, it really is a privilege to address the committee, because the issues you are considering are really important. All I hope is that the experiences and insights that we bring will be of some value. That is all I can hope.

So the next question is: why are we talking about koalas? We are talking about koalas because in the context of Snake Island they are an invasive species, because they were introduced onto the island, so they are an invasive species. And there are some lessons, we think, to learn. Here is what the koalas used to look like on Snake Island in that manna gum tree, and that is one of our members who was a koala spotter for 15 years, not in an eradication program but in a control program.

I will just give you a little bit of history. Koalas were hunted for their skins, and they were hunted to near extinction by 1927. Actually in 1926 there were a million koala skins exported from Australia to America. Because they became almost extinct in Victoria, 133 were introduced onto Snake Island by well-intentioned people because they were at severe risk. There was no monitoring done. So in 1943 they were introduced; by 1997 there were 5000 koalas on Snake Island — Snake Island is 3500 hectares — but there had been no monitoring work. So it has almost come like a bolt out of the blue that we have got to do something, because they are starving to death and they are killing all the trees on the island.

So in 1997 there was a program put into place. Now, it was decided at that time not to shoot them, and the reason they did not shoot them is that public expectation would not allow them to be shot. You could imagine the uproar with a species that was nearly extinct from shooting, for shooting to then become the solution, and that is why it was not done. I am not saying it was not right, but that is why it was not done. So they went through a sterilisation program. So they actually catch the koalas and sterilise the males and the females. They were originally released back onto the mainland but they did not do well, and in the latter years they were released back onto the island basically so they could not breed. The population now is down below 200. So that program went for 15 years, and they sterilised 3500 koalas through that program — hugely expensive, a hugely expensive program.

That finished in 2012. There has not been monitoring of the population that now exists on the island since 2012. We are now talking four years, so we do not really know what the population is doing, whether it is going up or down. We know there are still breeding pairs of koalas on the island, but there is no ongoing monitoring.

I have put here a quote because it is one of the other points we would like to make. The point really is that there are learnt behaviours. When you interact with animals in any sort of program, in any sort of way, they will react to that and their behaviours will change. So the koalas became not scared of a person on a horse, because they just saw that as another animal, but if they hear a motorbike or a vehicle, then they just move around to the other side of the tree, and you can watch them doing it. They are still doing that behaviour four years later. They have never been taken out of a tree in four years, but the population has learnt if it hears a noise like that, a foreign noise, they will actually move around the back of the tree and they will hide. So that behaviour has been learnt by that remaining population.

Ms BLAND — I can attest to that, because I was a spotter for four years with Parks Vic, subcontracting, so yes, I can attest to that happening. Even now, a vehicle goes past and you will see a tagged koala, and he will make himself quite invisible by moving around the tree away from spotters.

Mr HAMLETT — So what we really want to highlight from that program is that major changes to the ecosystem need to be managed. The introduction of the koalas had a significant impact on the island, on the amount of manna gums that were left, and they were starving. There were 14 koalas by the way in that tree, in that one branch — 14. Interventions must take into account public expectation about how it is going to be dealt with, and there are a wide variety of options. We can involve community groups into the management of public land. So it was not just the cattlemen; there were tree planting programs, there was the actual capture program, there was the sterilisation program and there were interactions with the koalas.

Management plans must consider the impacts and the implications across the entire ecosystem. That is one of the issues, I guess, with this inquiry; it is really quite narrow in dealing with invasive animals, but the invasive animals exist in ecosystems and they impact on the other animals. So in dealing with one species then it is really necessary. Otherwise you will not get what you wish for. You might get an explosion of another population or you get a weed invasion or a whole range of other things. The other thing that we are talking about is the opportunities for a wide range of community groups to deal with that issue. That is enough about koalas.

One of the things that has been really clear in our background information is the modelling around how to go about this. This is just really any project management model. There are a number of stages in that, and all I have done there is put six in. So there is plan, set objectives, implement, monitor, evaluate and review, and that is a constant process. That is a circular process. Then I have put a line across it because what I wanted to try to do is highlight the difference between community engagement and the difference with community involvement.

So the community engagement stages of that process are around the planning and setting of objectives. So the communities and the stakeholders actually agree with what the objectives are, and that is done up-front as part of the planning process. Then community involvement really sits with the implementation and actually doing the job. There is the monitoring and then the evaluation of that, and then you get back into the review process. You go back into community engagement again, and then that cycle simply continues on and should be a continuous process as an integrated flora and fauna management plan. So it is not just one — it is not just looking at deer or dogs; it is looking at the interaction between deer and dogs in that environment. And you have heard a lot from different people about that.

Then I put the red line through it as where I think the system is actually breaking down with our existing public land managers — that is, they seem to spend a fair bit of time planning and they spend a fair bit of time setting objectives, and they do some implementation. I probably could have put that little cross maybe through the middle of implementation as well, but they do very little monitoring and evaluation, and they do very little review as to whether it is working or not working. It is almost like crisis management. They only react to when things get out of hand. A bit like the koalas, when they did not react until they were 5000 of them. You know, they could have reacted a lot earlier than that and not had such an expensive program.

So just to go through that, this is a generic model. It is establishing community engagement and community involvement. The other thing is it is about setting objectives that are quantifiable and measurable objectives that take account of all of the ecosystem. So it is not just looking at what is current practice, where you have a cull and then it is counting the animals that have been harvested, the stats about those animals, but not really looking at how many of the population is left — what was the age, what were the species, all those sorts of things.

I guess to make a point, I have put in there ‘professional guidance’ in both of those stages because the community does not know what it does not know. Without being properly advised by professional land managers and the like, then how would they know what are all of the implications? I have gone into the planning a bit there. And I think just in support of that I would like to say that the VAGO reports of recent

times — and one on Victorian land management meeting its obligations under the Ramsar site, which was only published I think in September of this year — were highly critical of land managers, to say that this is an ongoing issue. It is not just we have not identified it this time around; we identified it last time, and they have looked at it again and there has not been any progress made in meeting our obligations. I think the words were that Victoria is at risk of not meeting its obligations under the international Ramsar convention because of lack of work — lack of actual monitoring. Then there is the submission to this inquiry again from VAGO saying that they were concerned about the lack of planning and monitoring that is going on with the public land managers.

What I would like to get to now is to talk about some recommendations, and I will not speak to all of them. You have got those in advance. But what I would like to say there is community and special interest groups need to find ways to work together. It cannot be done in isolation. Trying to focus on one aspect of the environment — in this case invasive animals — will not work in the long term. The land manager's role here is to facilitate collaborative approaches based on science and best practice, not on kneejerk reactions, and the welfare of all volunteers must be held up by the land manager. That does not matter whether it is shooting, fox baiting, culling — there is a whole range of activities that go on on public land where the land manager holds the responsibility to ensure the community and those volunteers within it are kept safe.

The next one is — and look, I throw that out there — about what the definition of invasive animals is, because this inquiry is quite narrow. I would like to say it is a bit like weeds. A weed is any plant that is growing where it is not required, whether it is in a paddock of weeds or it is in the front garden or wherever. You know, whether it is a valuable plant in some other circumstances does not make any difference. But invasive species really should be about where there is a local imbalance, and, look, you have heard presentations today from people on Wilson's Promontory and the hog deer, and by all account, by anecdotal evidence, there are more hog deer than there need to be. There is also anecdotal evidence that there are more eastern grey kangaroos there than there ought to be. And on the Prom both of those species are invasive species. Before agriculture occurred anywhere down on the peninsula there were no grey kangaroos on it, but people expect them to be there. People expect the hog deer to be there. We have now got a management issue about how to go about it, but removing the hog deer might cause an increase in the population of eastern grey kangaroos. You might not get the end result that you want without dealing with both of those communities together is what I am saying.

The other thing is that interventions — and this is a bit of a conundrum — need to be allowed time to adapt, and they must be monitored. So it comes back to that monitoring thing, because changes to ecosystems can occur slowly. It could have a big impact if there is a population explosion, but they adapt slowly. So any intervention that you have you will need to allow it to adapt again, and you are not likely to get the exact result you want because that ecosystem is going to be changed and modified by that intervention.

I guess when we are looking back at the management model this is why the objectives should cover the entire system, not just the one single issue. I will put it out here: the removal of a large number of deer from the regions could mean the removal of a food source for wild dogs, which as a result will turn to other sources of food. That might be other native animals; it might be domestic animals. As I understand, wild dogs are now having a capability to pull down a sambar deer. If the sambar deer are not there, they have got the capability to pull down a cow or a steer. So we might get a consequence by looking at deer, from the dog — so it is really saying you need to deal with the dog issue and the deer issue concurrently. You cannot look at them separately.

Land managers need to retain the expertise in their management. So there needs to be some mechanism put in place where they are required to report how they are going about that. VAGO has tried to address that. That is something where, I guess, from a parliamentary perspective, there needs to be some mandated reporting process so that Parliament is actually looking at the efficiency and effectiveness of its land managers. You cannot get away from it; there has been a massive reduction in funding into land management over a period of time, for whatever reason, and that is seriously impaired their effectiveness to carry out groundwork.

I think it has also seen a reduction in the amount of on-ground work that is being done. Of the budget that they still have left, they spend a lot of time strategically thinking, planning, coordinating and those sorts of things, but the number of field staff that they have and the number of on-ground works that they do have actually diminished. There are some examples of that which we could throw forward. Not necessarily around invasive animals, but, for example, on Refuge Cove on Wilsons Prom — and you will know Refuge Cove — in the last three weeks the toilets were locked. Campers were going down there, and then what they were doing was having to go out into the bush around Refuge Cove. Then there is now toilet paper all over Refuge Cove because they did not have the resources to clean the toilets. That is a major, major, major issue for land managers.

So we do accept that partnerships are an important way and they do reduce the cost of providing opportunities for the community to help. It is an important part of developing community capacity, because I do not know that that has been mentioned here. It is about the community being able to take control and actually be part of the solution. But I really want to stipulate that that should not be an excuse to reduce the funds, because those community groups need to be supported as well.

The last thing about partnerships is that it should not limit the range of tools available to land managers to maintain or create competing priorities. In other words, we are supporting this particular group — let us say recreational hunters — and because of that, then we cannot support the other groups. So it should not be that they are limited in their tools by the relationships they develop. Partnership relationships should not exclude other forms of control or other tools within their management capabilities.

Now I really want to talk specifically about hunting. I will start off with public safety. Really we are saying, and I think everyone would agree, that that has got to be of the utmost priority in all things we do. There has been a lot of discussion about that, but I would like to draw the committee's — I have provided a paper written by a research company in New Zealand based around a thing called buck fever and cognitive biases.

The CHAIR — Mr Hamlett, if you could just read out the title of what you are referring to for the transcript. That is the white paper, the HFEx paper?

Mr HAMLETT — Yes, that is the white paper.

The CHAIR — Do you want me to?

Mr HAMLETT — Yes, you can. That is all right.

The CHAIR — It is the HFEx white paper titled *Mistaken-for-Game Hunting Accidents — A Human Factors Review*, prepared for Hunter Safety Lab, September 2015, and authored by Kyle Wilson and Karl Bridges. Sorry, go ahead.

Mr HAMLETT — Now, in that, what they are doing is looking at the New Zealand experience. One of the things in looking at the New Zealand experience is that they are losing about one person every nine months to a hunting accident, and 80 per cent of the people they are losing are hunters, and that is of concern. This paper was prepared trying to identify some of the issues around the accidents that are happening. It is September 2015. It is the latest report that I could find on that very issue around safety. I present that here. It has got some interesting concepts in it. One of the concepts is around the effect of cognitive bias, and that is really the way your brain works. You actually fill in the blank spots in what you see. When you read or when you are driving a car there is a whole lot of information going into your brain, and if you do not really see it, your brain makes a decision for you based on the best evidence available to it.

What they were suggesting in here is about that cognitive bias. The question is: how can an experienced hunter — as they are saying here it is about experienced hunters — make the mistake? And actually when they are questioned they say, 'I 100 per cent identified that target as a deer', and when they fired they have actually shot one of their hunting partners. But they were 100 per cent convinced what they were looking at was in fact a deer. This paper goes to try and explain that.

Since presenting that to the committee I have been corresponding with Karl Bridges, because I wanted to know what the impact was and how this report been taken by the hunting community in New Zealand and by the New Zealand government. His advice back to me was that there has been a mixed reaction to this report. I guess I was heartened by the fact that he is now talking about undertaking a PhD in this, and that PhD is principally going to be funded through the hunting associations in New Zealand, because they see the value of trying to understand and trying to mitigate this. They really are dreadful accidents by experienced people, and we just do not want that. I think we are lucky here because we do not seem to have that many accidents, but it would be an issue if we were having someone killed every nine months.

So I just really want to put that out there, and I am happy to have questions around that later. The other thing is that hunting should be aimed at the optimal benefit. Again, I will put it out there, the partnership should not be a disguise for other motivations. If a cull is needed and we need to reduce a population of animals, then that is fair enough. Then that is what it should be.

The CHAIR — Mr Hamlett, I am just mindful of the time and our need for questions. If there are things you need to say, please say them. I am just letting you know.

Mr HAMLETT — Okay. I think this is really critical.

The CHAIR — I was just letting you know.

Mr HAMLETT — No, I understand. I really think this is the critical part of the discussion from a community acceptance point of view. It should not disguise other motivations. Hunter skill and humane killing of animals go hand in hand. I just want to make a comment there as well. There has been a lot of criticism about recreational hunters and their skills. I think that that is a gross generalisation and that recreational hunters are in the main highly skilled. I would recommend that that be recognised. The community has a perception, and I think it is a wrong one, so there needs to be a set of mechanisms whereby that potential reputation can be overturned.

One of the things I would like to put out there is something around the issue of a skills passport type of arrangement, where through a series of training and mentoring arrangements with experienced hunters, their actual skill, accuracy and those sorts of things can be recognised, and then the hunters can move through a section of levels within that. And that would provide recognition for what are very highly skilled hunters and might also provide an incentive for people coming into the sport to develop their skills into being really highly and high-end skilled people, which would be really valuable in what we are talking about here.

The last thing is about sustainable commercial harvesting. That really relies on the continued supply of product, and what we do not want to do is to either encourage people to go into business to do that and then lose continuity of that supply or that the underlying abundance of game is only for a short period of time and therefore you are really encouraging people to go into a loss leader business. Where there are other opportunities, as long as it is a sustainable population and you know what the take is going to be and it is a sustainable thing, then that might be something to look at, but generally I do not think that commercial harvesting should be contemplated as a driver for control of deer.

I guess the main purpose in being here is about the current ballot for hog deer on Snake Island. It is up there for people to see, but what I would like to say is that Minister D'Ambrosio in this instance has failed to consult with all legitimate stakeholders on the island. I will quantify that in a moment. The second thing I want to say there is that Parks Victoria as a land manager has responsibility to prepare the risk management assessment, which identifies all the potential risks and documents a strategy to eliminate them. I believe it is the land manager's responsibility to do that, and at this moment they have not done that.

I would also just like to make a statement about tourism and tourism into the Nooramunga park and Corner Inlet and right down around the barrier islands, I suppose. Natural Victoria has been identified in all of the tourism strategies as having huge opportunities for Victoria. The 2010 discussion paper around alpine parks specifically mentions hunting as being an inappropriate activity, and I guess the question is we need

to identify what may have changed around that. This committee in 2014 undertook an inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism and identified the development of these industries as a massive opportunity for regional Victoria, and regional Victoria is struggling financially. Tourism Victoria's latest campaign, Wander Victoria, aims to attract Melburnians out to enjoy nature in the regions. And in fact of the nine key objectives put out by Tourism Victoria, eight of them are specifically designed around people going out to experience nature and to have family-based activities. What we are proposing here really needs to fit into that strategy as well. It cannot be looked at in isolation to that.

The last thing I really want to say, and it is probably the main thing I really wanted to say the whole day, is that in regard to Snake Island and the population of hog deer it has not really changed significantly in 40 or 50 years. It is a stable population that is around 500 — it might go up a little bit; it might go down a little bit. Hog deer can actually go on and off the island. They swim on and off the island. They are not causing any particular damage, but the great benefit for it, and what I think recreational hunters also see as a great benefit, is accessibility. You can walk to within 10 or 15 metres of a hog deer during the day. You can watch them interact. I think we have got photos of that. It is a really unique environment in terms of being able to observe the activities of those deer. Our view is that we do not think that the opportunities have been explored to maximise the benefits to be derived from that unique environment on Snake Island so that all the stakeholders, including recreational shooters and recreational hunters, can share in that resource and provide economic benefit back to Parks Victoria and the community.

There are a couple of things that come to mind that might be appropriate, and I am happy to take questions about those. It is an area for hunting skills training — tracking, stalking, looking at deer behaviour — not necessarily shooting them. It is a study area to engage with universities, because the total population of hog deer in Victoria is estimated at about 3000, which is not a huge population but it is a valuable population. Snake Island might be an opportunity to be able to study those in pretty free activity and their interaction with other species. There are also opportunities for outdoor education, opportunities for interpretation centres around population and public education around issues around hunting, culling, managing our populations, as well as to obviously manage the populations on Snake Island, and as they exit Snake Island and what the impact of the deer leaving the island is on the populations along the mainland.

That is essentially what we came to say, and I thank you for the opportunity. I am happy to take as many questions as you might have.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that. That was really helpful, and there are some good ideas that you are proposing. Can I just ask about what you are saying about the consultation, or the lack of consultation, on the balloted hog deer program, and maybe my geography might not be right around this area — and I think you might have been in the public gallery — because we heard from the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority that they promote that they are part of making sure that there is proper community engagement and involvement and consultation on things like this. But your organisation had no involvement.

Mr HAMLETT — I do not think the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority has any involvement with the barrier islands at all. When we looked at the thing, all of the barrier islands were excluded.

The CHAIR — Right. So it does not affect Snake Island.

Mr HAMLETT — It is really around Parks Victoria. Parks Victoria are the land managers and the cattlemen's association, I guess, facilitate the agistment of cattle on the island, because it is actually Parks Victoria who agist the cattle, not the cattlemen's association. We are a registered tour operator that take people out onto the island, and we assist Parks Victoria with managing the cattle on the island as well as undertaking work to compensate the impact of the cattle on the islands. We have been doing that for over 100 years.

The CHAIR — So in terms of this trial program are you saying that you were not told about it at all?

Mr HAMLETT — No, this is ballot hunting. There are two things. There was the trial culling on Wilsons Promontory and — —

The CHAIR — So which one were you not consulted on?

Mr HAMLETT — I do not think there was any publication of the trial that was going to happen on Wilsons Promontory that I was aware of, and certainly not of the second one, which occurred last August. I am not sure, because it is only about rumour because there is no information. And that is probably not the right way to do it.

The CHAIR — Because if there was a problem, we are just trying to get the information to try to address it for the future.

Mr HAMLETT — The problem in particular with balloted hunting was that it came out as a ministerial announcement. There had been no stakeholder consultation. There are a number of tour operators that actually use that and have a licence to operate with Parks Victoria. One of those operators has been operating down there for over 20 years, and he runs outdoor adventure type activities — kayaking, camping and those sorts of things. He runs that for schools — school programs — and he takes groups of 20 students over there and they camp and then paddle along that inland side of the island, because it is really safe. It is a safe place to do that. He also runs programs for at-risk youth, so he takes at-risk youth over there. They camp over there, and obviously a lot of that is developing life skills and team skills. So he runs those programs. There has been no communication with him or his business even now. There has been no official communication through Parks Victoria with him, and he is responsible for over 2500 visitation days onto the island. He is a major user of the island, but there has been no consultation.

There has been no consultation with the Victorian kayakers club. I would say that kayaking is an emerging recreational activity, because I think it is here and it is here to stay. There are lots of kayakers. This region is a really safe place for those people to come and enjoy the environment. That is 5000 visitation days by those tour operators. That is organised days, and what is being proposed here with balloted hunting is eight people on eight occasions for five days. That is 320 visitation days maximum.

We are not talking informal, because the island is also available to anybody as well as it is for the bushwalkers. They will hire a boat and drop it on one side of the island and then walk to the other side of the island. That is what they commonly do. Kayakers will camp. They will take three or four days to paddle around the island. They will camp at various places around the island. So those are the sorts of things that I believe the minister has failed to take into consideration when she made that statement, because what she has done is approved it and now everyone is on the back foot trying to work together to see how we can make this potentially work.

Mr YOUNG — Just on that point, to my knowledge I do not think any hunters or hunting organisations have had any formal consultation about this process either.

Mr HAMLETT — Well, it staggers me, Daniel. It is an important decision, and I think there should have been some really good, valuable consultation.

Mr YOUNG — I do agree with a lot of what you are saying about the lack of resourcing and work that has been put into looking after Ramsar-listed sites. I have read through those same reports that you mentioned about, basically, the mismanagement of these places and how our departments are not doing a good enough job. What do you think are the main areas that the departments need to improve on, and what support do they need to do that?

Mr HAMLETT — I think it is the development of a management plan. That is not a strategic plan, not a regional plan but a plan for those particular environments and how they are to be managed. That needs to be transparent. All the stakeholders need to be aware of it, and then they can work together. They do not need necessarily to be micromanaged by Parks Victoria. As long as there is a plan in place and everyone knows what their bit is, then we can get on and do it. There are opportunities for monitoring of populations. Recreational hunters could be invaluable in monitoring populations.

Mr YOUNG — And there are many other tourism operators that could work in with that as well.

Mr HAMLETT — Absolutely, and I think it could work in really well — and linkages with universities. I think the guy from Wilson’s Prom said there used to be massive amounts of work done by Melbourne University into those areas. Two of the other operators that are involved here include Monash University. Monash University runs their outdoor education programs down here, so they do their training for their outdoor education, and so does Federation Uni. They were already involved. So there are opportunities I think to expand that back into some of their other land and environment courses. But what it needs is the plan, and it needs to invite people to participate.

Mr YOUNG — And when you start incorporating many people and groups and organisations and tourism operators into those sorts of plans, do you think there is room for hunting as a tourism aspect to fit into that and to work with everyone?

Mr HAMLETT — Yes, I do. I have sat here for two days, and I have learnt heaps about how things could work and meet everybody’s objectives in this, so long as it works together and as long as the public is brought along in that process. We just need to avoid the confrontation and conflict. That is what we need to avoid, and I think people would be happy. If they see the land manager, they see other users of that place with recreational shooters as part of the process, and then I think that would give the general community a fair degree of comfort. That would be my view.

Mr YOUNG — As I said, I do not think any recreational hunting organisation has been part of the process either.

Mr HAMLETT — Yes, and I think there are lots of really good ideas.

Mr YOUNG — I just want to talk about this paper that you presented, which is really, really interesting; I did have a read through it. There are some pretty cool concepts in there.

The CHAIR — Maybe just refer to the names.

Mr YOUNG — This is the white paper on mistaken-for-game hunting accidents by Kyle Wilson and Karl Bridges. Karl Bridges in particular is the person you mentioned before and you have had communication with him. He is from New Zealand, I believe.

Mr HAMLETT — Yes.

Mr YOUNG — This idea of cognitive biases is something that I read about in here. It talks about buck fever. That is an expression that is pretty well known within the hunting community. It is an example of one of the cognitive biases that you get in those situations. I would say that is also present in a lot of other aspects of life. Just driving down the freeway on the way here I suffered from a bit of cool car fever. You know, an awesome looking car drives past and I go, ‘Wow, that looks cool’. Those things are in every part of our life every day. Why do you think specifically this should be singled out as a public safety issue when statistically hunting accidents are very, very minute?

Mr HAMLETT — Yes, okay. It is not that we are really saying that hunting is more dangerous than anything else or that hunters are more susceptible to this than other people. That is not true. This psychological phenomenon exists in a whole lot of risky behaviours. It may well be present when they do street racing, for example, when people push themselves beyond what would be normal reasonable behaviour.

This paper was trying to look at the circumstances. You as a hunter would know better than me because I am not a hunter, but it is about intense periods of concentration. So if you are stalking an animal and you are trying to move through the bush quietly, your eyes are focused, your ears are focused, you are listening and you are concentrating at very high levels for long periods of time. Then you see a movement. You are keyed up; you have got very high adrenaline levels. You have been after this animal for a long time. You

look at it, and what the cognitive bias says is that it actually tends to get you to see what you want to see rather than what is actually there.

That is one of the causes of hunting accidents. It is because in that split moment — and it is a split second — there is a misidentification. Your brain has told you that you have seen it here, you have pulled the trigger and some of the reports in here are of people shooting their best mate in that split second. It is devastating to them.

So this is attempting to explain it. It is not vilifying hunters; it is just saying, 'Here is a possible reason, and what can we do to overcome it?'. Hi-vis vests do not seem to stop it either. There have been occasions when people wearing hi-vis vests have been shot, and when they go back to the person who has fired and said, 'Talk me through this', they say, 'We were 100 per cent sure that that was a deer before we fired. We moved. We had a second look at it, and we still fired, because our brain told us that was a deer'.

I note this paper was prepared on behalf of Hunter Safety Lab. That company are producing some additions that they think might help to overcome this. They are running an infrared radar system a bit like you have on your car if you get too close. Your partner hunter can have a transmitter, and on your rifle, along the sight, it actually has a receiver. If you are pointing the gun and that receiver comes up with a red light, it says stop, because what you have actually targeted is very close to your mate.

Mr YOUNG — That is pretty interesting technology. I will have to have a look at that.

Mr HAMLETT — Yes, have a look at it. What they were saying is that it is not possible to guard against cognitive bias. It is not possible to guard against buck fever — that is, super-high adrenaline levels. You as an individual cannot say, 'I'm going to control this'.

Mr YOUNG — They are all very valid points. But I suppose what this piece of paper is actually missing and what is missing from your arguments is the statistical evidence that suggests that this is actually an issue. Based on figures, there is a 1 in 33 million chance that you are going to get shot by your mate while hunting in Australia. When you compare that to other figures from the bureau of statistics, you have got a 1 in 11 million chance of getting bitten by a snake and a 1 in 890 000 chance of dying whilst falling out of bed. Those things are statistically more of a risk.

Mr HAMLETT — Yes. Life is risky, but in this circumstance where you have got public concern about the potential, then it is about making sure that we have ticked all the boxes, that we have looked at everything that is possible and that we have given the community the greatest comfort that we possibly can. It is no good denying there is a risk, because the thing is that if you are shot, it is potentially going to have a very devastating impact, just because of the load and the size of the rifles, particularly if you are shooting something like sambars. That is a big load. If you hit a person with it, it is a lot of damage. Those are the issues. It is really about trying to understand that, and that is why I was pleased when Karl was saying he is going to do a PhD specifically on the neuroscience around hunting to try to make it safer. This is not criticising hunters. Do not think that. It is just trying to make it as safe as possible. If we could stop every accident in every industry in every sector, we would.

Mr YOUNG — It is not possible.

Mr HAMLETT — I know it is not possible, but that does not mean we accept it.

Mr YOUNG — Just based on that and the community acceptance of that, would you agree that the minister getting police safety reports would be an acceptable part of addressing those community concerns? We know that there have been numerous police safety reports done on this specific issue.

Mr HAMLETT — We are aware of that. We have not got the most recent one, as you are probably aware. We have got a freedom of information request in to get that. We were advised by the minister's office about that. In the past the police assessments have lacked detail, I believe. They have basically been a visit by one of the licensing compliance groups to the island to have a look, and in this case they did not talk to anyone other than maybe Parks Victoria. They then came up with an assessment to say it is safe.

Whereas if you do a risk assessment in any other circumstance, the requirement is that you have got to look at all of the stakeholders and say, 'What are the risks to you? Do you have a risk concern?'. If there is a risk concern, then you can note the risk. You then look at how that might be mitigated, and you then have a plan.

Mr YOUNG — Or if it is justified risk.

Mr HAMLETT — That is right. But the first thing is that you have got to talk to people, understand what their concern is and what their specific issue is and then look at how you mitigate, accept or not accept that risk. That is a proper risk assessment. My view is that it is the land manager's responsibility to undertake that risk assessment. They are the responsible party here. They are responsible to all of the people who visit Snake Island now, including recreational hunters, and they have a particular obligation, because they have a contractual obligation, to the licensed tour operators, because we pay them a fee. They are contractually obliged to look after us and to have a plan in place that can be then put out. If the plan is in place and those things are identified, you put it out to the community and say, 'This is the work we've done. This is how those risks are going to be mitigated. These are the implications'. Do we have to have an exclusion zone? How is the signage going to work? How are individuals that access the island now on a random basis going to know? It is not in the interests of the recreational shooters to have an accident on the island, is it?

Mr YOUNG — Absolutely not. It is not in the interest of anyone.

Mr HAMLETT — Those are really key issues. I do not believe the rigour around that risk assessment is enough. That is if — and I am saying if — the police report that we will eventually get in some 40 days is actually like that. It might come back as the most comprehensive risk assessment I have ever seen, but I do not know because it is not being made publicly available.

Mr YOUNG — It may do, and I look forward to seeing it myself.

Mr HAMLETT — We can live in hope, can't we.

The CHAIR — Thank you for coming in. That was a really comprehensive and good presentation.

Ms WARD — It was wide reaching.

The CHAIR — Yes. Thank you very much for your attendance today.

Mr RAMSAY — Can I ask a quick question? I get everything you have said, but at the end of the day the land manager has made a decision to do a trial on Snake Island to reduce the number of hog deer. They have identified estimates of up to 500. Your submission indicates that population is stable. I am not sure on what evidence you have based that. Obviously there has been work done, despite what you have said, in relation to there being a problem with deer numbers on Snake Island and that needing to be addressed through some reduction method. Your whole submission seems to be somewhat in denial about the fact that the population is increasing or the fact that those 500 hog deer are having an impact, environmentally or otherwise, on the island.

Mr HAMLETT — Okay. Let me go — —

Mr RAMSAY — In a short answer.

Mr HAMLETT — Yes, absolutely. These are complex things.

The CHAIR — We actually have to go to a site visit after this.

Mr HAMLETT — For example, there is not a population issue on Snake Island. There has been no count of hog deer on Snake Island. The correspondence from Parks Victoria is that Parks Victoria have been directed by Minister D'Ambrosio for the ballot to go ahead. It has not been initiated by Parks Victoria. It has been initiated by the minister. It is the minister's decision — —

Mr RAMSAY — Yes, but she would be getting advice from Parks Victoria or other agencies.

Mr HAMLETT — No-one knows where they are getting advice from. We have had a meeting with Parks Victoria — it was a public meeting that we had with them — and their very words were, ‘This has got nothing to do with the population control of hog deer on Snake Island. This is to increase recreational opportunities for hunters to access hog deer for the purposes of trophy hunting in particular’. Those are the words from the acting eastern regional director of Parks Victoria. Those are his exact words.

The CHAIR — Okay, I guess we will be seeing them soon, and we can ask them if that was the case.

Mr HAMLETT — I am not in denial. I am — —

Mr RAMSAY — I am sure it is partly motivated by increased tourism to Snake Island by the use of balloted recreational hunting.

Mr HAMLETT — What we want to do is make sure it does not exclude anybody.

The CHAIR — Okay. Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.