

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Bright — 19 October 2016

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Mr Dennis Keith.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Mr Dennis Keith. Thank you for giving us your time today to present evidence. Before you start your presentation, I will go through a few formalities. First of all, the hearing is being recorded, and you will be given a copy of the transcript to check it for accuracy prior to it becoming public. Also, anything that you say today within the hearing is subject to parliamentary privilege under the Parliamentary Committees Act. However, that same parliamentary privilege does not necessarily apply once you are outside the public hearing.

Thanks again for coming today. If you would not mind, could you give a bit of an introduction about yourself. The secretary would have spoken to you about giving a presentation for 5 to 10 minutes. That then gives us lots of time to ask you questions. Over to you.

Mr KEITH — Thank you for inviting me here today. I am here to participate in this inquiry. My background is that I was a small game hunter 40 years ago, and that developed into deer hunting as an addition to that, and then it became solely sambar hunting and wild dog hunting. I concentrated on all that. To aid in doing all that, I established a gundog breeding and training kennel. The dogs that came through my hands ended up being sambar specialists. We hunted wild dogs, too, but mainly sambar.

My hunting changed a lot after the first stag I shot, because it broke every rule that we expected at the time about what the deer would and would not do. It actually ran to me. The theory, the common knowledge, at the time was that they would run away — you would never see them. This came up to me from about 30 yards away and stood there, and I shot it. After that event, I started thinking that all of what we know is wrong, so I then began three decades of studying, researching and observing sambar doing their particular thing in the bush. My knowledge grew from the fact that I could understand what the sambar is doing, why it is doing it, where it has been and where it is going. At different times of the year they do totally different things. Every four to six weeks the sambar move. Because they are in small family groups, they move 300 or 400 metres and start again, and they are there for a little while.

There are a couple of things I would like to clarify that I have heard a lot about over the last couple of months with this inquiry. One is that sambar are loners. They are not. They never have been; they never will be. They are a family group of two or three hinds, a youngster or two and maybe a three-year-old stag. That is the family group. People see them and say, ‘There’s a deer. It’s on its own. It’s a loner’. But what they do not understand is that the family group will be spread over a couple of hundred square metres. They only see one. They do not see the others walk away, run away or whatever. That is where this fallacy comes from.

The other thing I hear a lot about is that the headshot is the most humane shot to take on a deer, on a sambar. It is not. A sambar will stand there, and that is fine, but its head is highly mobile. In trying to ascertain what is going on, its head will go left, right, front, right and left. That movement can occur between the shooter squeezing the trigger and the bullet arriving, so that the brain would be in a different position and then you have got a wounded deer which you are never going to find. The most effective shot, if you can get it, is a front-on shot into the throat, a side-on shot into the neck or from the back into the neck. With the chest cavity, where you have got your heart and lungs, you have got to go through the shoulders. It is a big target, the size of a reasonable television screen, and that is where most hunters shoot and it is effective. Quite often the deer will run. It will run 50 metres, but it is dead on its feet.

The other thing I would like to point out is that there has been a lot of talk about hunters not taking enough care. The thing with that is that they are not hunting to cull numbers; they are hunting for themselves. No government has asked them to go out and shoot a lot of deer. They are out there to take a trophy stag or to get some meat. It does not matter what animals they see, they will take it.

Trophy hunting is a part of sambar hunting, but the average guy will go out in the morning and he will hunt for 3 or 4 to 5 hours, and if he cannot find a trophy stag, on his way back or at the end of that afternoon he will shoot the first deer he comes across to get the meat. But it is all for him and his family and his friends; it is nothing to do with culling numbers. I think it has been established that recreational hunters shoot about 50 000 deer a year. If you got all those hunters out there actually shooting more deer for a cull number or for some other reason, that 50 000 number would increase. That is about it for me.

The CHAIR — You also talked a little bit about wild horses and wild dogs as well. Would you mind maybe just expanding a little bit on that? Do you think, for example, wild horses could also be controlled effectively by the use of recreational hunters? Just like there is a community perception about safety in hunting, there also seems to be a bit of a community perception about them.

Mr KEITH — With the wild dogs? There are a few guys kicking around the state, recreational hunters, who are terrific wild dog hunters. There is no doubt about that. They are a tough animal to hunt. The way to hunt them is to find yourself a good position and call them in yourself — imitate another dog howling — and it might take 2 hours of howling to get a dog to come, and he will answer you. He will be a kilometre away when he starts, and he will gradually come in and he will be talking to you. Then he comes in and he will stop somewhere around about the 40-metre mark, knowing something is up — what's up? — and he will be looking around. That is when you can take him.

They can be aggressive. I had three have a go at me one particular afternoon. I killed the three. I have had others just stand there and snarl and growl, and they died for that. But they come in all shapes and sizes. I have seen a couple that were the equivalent of a large Doberman. There were two of them. They looked pretty much the same. There was another one, it looked like a big Siberian husky. Now even though they may look like these breeds, they are not actual breeds. They are mixed and matches inside. Sorry, what else did you want to know?

The CHAIR — Wild horses, in areas where there are problems with horses.

Mr KEITH — Horses — there are plenty of brumbies in the bush. Shooting them — I do not know any recreational hunter that would want to shoot a horse. There is nothing in it for them, and I think they would find it abhorrent, as I would. The thing here is for government to take the initiative and perhaps engage a media company to work out the best way of presenting a way to cull the numbers. I have no other help on that one, sorry.

The CHAIR — That was helpful. Thank you.

Mr McCURDY — Dennis, in your submission you say you do not support reclassifying deer as a pest. Can you just take us through that, please?

Mr KEITH — Yes. Deer are a game animal. We can hunt them in state forests, in some parts of the national parks we are allowed to stalk deer — no hunting dogs are allowed — and this is part of the legislation where deer hunting is allowed by stalking only. If you take the status of the deer away from being a game animal and classify it as a pest, then all that hunting of deer in national parks stops instantly. I do not know how else to put it.

Mr McCURDY — And they would then just hunt on private land?

Mr KEITH — You hunt on private land and in state forests, but there would be no hunting in the national parks. The national parks — particularly now where no hunting is allowed — they are repositories and the deer are continually spreading out from them into adjacent state forests and private properties.

Mr TILLEY — Dennis, talking about family groups and those sorts of things, I just want to talk about your observations over your years of research and study — that is, that we are seeing these family groups coming into freehold areas or more populated spaces. What are your observations in relation to those matters? For example, around here, on the road between Bright and Harrierville there are companies that have told all the drivers they can only drive the buses at 80 kilometres. Similarly there on the Murray Valley Highway, anywhere between Tallangatta all the way to Corryong, Mitta Valley, Tallangatta Valley, all those areas, we are seeing significant challenges, with road users coming into those challenging issues. With the timing of the day and those types of incidents, can you sort of give us a bit of background on that?

Mr KEITH — Sambar are a jungle-loving deer. They like the thick country — it is blackberries, very thick country, hard to walk through. That is where they live. That is where they like to be, and they do this

during the day. When they come down to what you just said now, down onto the farmlands and the private properties on the 1-acre blocks and whatnot, it is all night-time activity.

A family group will come down from the bush, and it might not arrive on those properties until 10 or 11 o'clock at night. They will do their thing, feeding that night, looking around, and then they will leave the lower ground and go back to where they came from, but it will not be exactly the same spot where they came from and it will not be the same group that they walk down in on. There will be other family groups there that will come down on a route where these ones are leaving. Another family group will leave in the opposite direction. They do not come and go in the same position, but another family group does not know what deer used what tracks to come down on, so they will use them.

When they get down to the bottom you might get 20 or 30 deer, and they will intermingle. Sometime during the night in the early hours of the morning the dominant matriarch hind of the family group, she will give the signal and start walking off, and her little group will follow her. I do not know how you are going to stop them coming onto highways, Bill. I just do not see how you are going to stop them from coming onto private properties, house blocks, unless you have got exclusion fencing.

The distance that they travel coming down to the lowlands, I would have to say it is somewhere around about the 2–2½-kilometre mark. That is a fair sort of a walk, and they do it just slowly and then they will go back the same way. They are very slow movers, but they cover big distances. Sorry, I have forgotten where I was.

Mr TILLEY — The inquiry is about a number of invasive species. One thing that we have not discussed is European wasps, which in your submission you made mention of. Can you just expand a little bit on that? Particularly, as we were talking to the previous witness, about carcass management and those sorts of things where something is left out in the bush. With carcass management, what is the effect of European wasps on our environment, biology and those sorts of things?

Mr KEITH — The wasp comes from Europe. It is a cold weather insect. In Europe, when the winters come, the snow comes, the wasps die. Here they are viable 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, except for those really, really cold, bitter winter days. They live in an area of about 500 square metres, and that is their area. Anything in it that is mobile, they will kill and eat. They have voracious appetites. The nests can be tens of thousands of wasps. If there is a dead carcass there or the remains of a carcass and they find it, which they will, then that carcass is off limits to every other animal. No scavengers can come in, no foxes can come into it, no person can go near it. In the summertime a deer hunter has got a couple of hours to get some meat off an animal, then he has got to walk away from it because the wasps take it over — and they are aggressive. I watched one particular dead Hereford steer that had died on a farm. It dragged it up near the bush line.

The wasp found it almost the same day. You could see looking at the ground around it that dogs and foxes had been there, but it was not touched. The wasp owned the carcass. The carcass eventually solidified into a white sort of clayey, chalky mass, and then it just decomposed. And the wasp owned it the whole time. Even when there were just bits of hide left kicking around there, the wasps were there.

Their effect on the local environment bothers me a lot because I think they are doing tremendous damage to the other inhabitants of the area — the insects, small birds and this sort of thing. They are changing it because they are taking away a food source. If you have got the little blue wrens that feed on small insects and the wasps are there, the wasps will eat the insects. What does the blue wren eat? Nothing. The blue wren will not fly away to another gully because they live in a territory. That is where they live. If there is no food there, they will die.

I can see some pretty serious implications for our wildlife because of the wasp. The wasp is just spreading through the bush. There is colony after colony after colony. This is something that needs to be looked at. I do not know of anyone that is doing any research or study of them, and I think we are going to find there is going to be major damage done and it will be all too late. We need to be acting now, in my opinion.

Mr TILLEY — With our native bees for the purpose of pollination and those other things, have you got any observations about the sorts of numbers in the bush where we need bees for pollination?

Mr KEITH — They will kill the bees. They kill the native bees, they kill the honey bees and there is nothing left. Wasps will eat nectar too, and they mimic the bees in getting the nectar to turn into honey, but are they doing it to the same plants at the same time? What I am getting at is: is their behaviour in accidentally cross-pollinating the plants the same as what the natives are doing? I do not know. Are they doing the same job? I do not know. But if they are not, then the plants in the long term will die off and there are no plants coming up from seed to grow again.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks, Dennis, for coming in and for your time in presenting here. It is a really comprehensive submission you have given and it touches on a lot of things, especially wild dogs. Your submission touches on wild dogs quite a bit, so a nice and easy one to kick it off is: what do you think of the wild dog bounty situation?

Mr KEITH — It should be reinstated and it should be of a greater amount of dollars. Recreational hunters will hunt them. If there is money there, they will go in looking for them and they will take them. There was a \$100 bounty. I think it was \$100 — yes, \$20 for a fox, \$100 for a dog. There was some response to that, but \$100 does not buy a lot of fuel. There is a lot of time involved. I know they are recreational hunters and they are supposed to be doing it for fun, but there is still a cost factor involved. A person hunting wild dogs might spend the whole day and not see one, so it is a difficult question. Should they increase the bounty? Probably. Should they put a bounty in? Yes. Should they increase it? Yes.

On a completely different side of the coin, in the bush should we be shooting the dogs at all? Australia has got a huge kangaroo problem; there are probably — what? — 10 times more kangaroos now that when Australia was colonised. Those kangaroos are breeding unchecked. The predators that we had at the time were the thylacine and the Tasmanian tiger on the mainland. They were the top-order predators which kept the numbers in check. The only predator now on the kangaroos is the wild dog dingo. I do not believe there are any purebred dingoes anymore; I think they are all wild dog crosses. But they are filling the role of the previous predators and keeping some numbers under control.

A good example is Yellowstone National Park in the United States where all the wolves were taken out. The environment suffered. It got heavily overgrazed, and it was going down because the elk numbers were growing and growing. So they put the wolves back, the elk numbers reduced, and the environment recovered. This is something we have got to be looking at today.

Mr YOUNG — You talked a bit about baiting in your submission, and just today the government has announced an increase in aerial baiting for dogs. One of the things you brought up was the actual determination of numbers that it impacts on, and we have discussed previously the lack of looking into these things and the inability to actually come up with numbers and figures that are substantiated. What are your thoughts on baiting insofar as its impact, because everything we do obviously has to have a cost-benefit sort of parity? How does baiting fit in with that?

Mr KEITH — To be honest, I hate it. Baiting is cruel; it is abhorrent. When an animal dies from sodium fluoroacetate, which is 1080 poison, they die horribly, in pain, screaming and yelling. Now, that is not what our involvement with animals should be. As far as chucking baits out into the bush from aeroplanes, yes, you can chuck out all you like, but you are not going to know how many animals died as a result of that. You are not going to know if there was a side killing of native species. Did they die too? Do we know how many wild dogs are out there in the first place? No, we do not. It is just a matter of flying over and going drop, drop, drop. There is no science to that so far as I can see. It is just casual chucking baits out. Throwing baits out and saying, ‘We dropped 2000 baits today’, has got nothing to do with the kill rate. So where is the science to back up the baiting? Not there yet.

Mr YOUNG — Contrary to an arrangement like the bounty, where we know exactly how many dogs are taken?

Mr KEITH — With a bounty system, yes. An interesting exercise is to look at the wild dog numbers. How many are there? I have been mucking around with them for three decades and I have got no idea how many there are. They come and they go. They can move 20 kilometres in 24 hours. I have no idea. The packs can be down to a — —

Mr TILLEY — Just one thing on that, Dennis, with your years of study, with your research in public lands and freehold, what about the interface with sheep grazing then, when we are seeing prolific numbers of graziers losing sheep to wild dogs?

Mr KEITH — Yes. This part of the world is where I live, it is where I hunt, it is where I watch what is going on. There are not many sheep being run by farmers. They have given it away.

Mr RAMSAY — They have been eaten by the wild dogs.

Mr McCURDY — But there are over the other side, Dennis, over Omeo way and further over that way.

Mr KEITH — There are that way, but I do not know that country. It is way out of my backyard, so to speak. Keeping the wild dogs away from stock — look, it is a good question. As I said in my submission, perhaps there should be some sort of study going on into using a combination of sound, lights or whatever, other technology, lasers. Will this stop a wild dog coming into a sheep paddock? I do not know, but it is worth throwing some money at it to have a look. The only research going on at the moment is with poisoning. I do not see any proper research being done on wild dogs.

Mr RAMSAY — I want to refer you back to the terms of reference, if I can, in relation to the role of this committee to assess the current trials that Parks Victoria is doing in managing invasive pests. I would like your opinion of what Parks Victoria as the land manager is doing and if you think they are doing a good job and are successful in controlling some of the invasive pests. And also, if I can just refer to your submission, we have just had some discussion around baiting and your certain preference or your concern around the baits. I have to say so far as rabbits, foxes and wild dogs go that the baiting methods have been quite successful, and there would be an argument that they have been perhaps more successful than the bounties that have been applied to foxes and wild dogs. But I will let you respond to that. I am a farmer myself; I suspect you are not a farmer?

Mr KEITH — No, I am not a farmer.

Mr RAMSAY — So we look at it as trying to reduce those predators that actually affect our ability to run our business — farming business — and that is domestic animals and keeping them safe away from wild animals, so baiting is an important tool as part of that work in relation to keeping the domestic animals safe. The view in the past testimony we have had is that there seems to be a consensus around a mix of hunters, whether they be professional or recreational, as one tool, trapping as another tool, baiting as another tool and the use of helicopters particularly in areas where it is hard to access and particularly in relation to the wild horses, and that would be done by professional huntsmen. So I think, as you have said and as many others have said, a recreational huntsman would have difficulty shooting horses purely for pleasure and recreation. I guess my question is: do you see a mix of all those things as part of a suite of tools to reduce — and I am not talking about preserve, I am talking about reduce — the numbers of invasive pests? In relation to Parks Victoria, do you think their current role as land managers is satisfactory or do you see areas of improvement that they can involve themselves in?

Mr KEITH — I will get my thoughts in order for a second. It is a mix and match of all the different types of controllers in hunting — poisoning, trapping in parks, whatever. It is a mix and match. It has got to have an effect, but I do not know what the effect is. I do not see it being quantified. The question you asked about national parks doing a good job — —

Mr RAMSAY — Parks Victoria.

Mr KEITH — Parks Victoria, sorry. Part of the Bogong complex is in my backyard, so to speak, and if you walk up through there and just walk, you will see wild dogs and you will see deer because no hunting is allowed. I do not know if any poisoning is taking place in those areas. I do not know of any controlled shooting taking place. There is a place for the professional shooters, and that is in areas where recreational shooting can be dangerous, and I am talking about the small, 1-5 acre blocks which are staggered along long roads. The professional guys use sound moderators, they use spotlights, they use night-vision gear. They set up with Victoria Police approvals. They have got clear fire zones. That is purely for them; it is not for us. A recreational hunter is far better off in a state forest or a national park. I do not know what else you want me to cover, sorry.

Mr RAMSAY — The reason I ask is because your submission pretty well is centred on recreational huntsmen as being the methodology for reducing some of the invasive pests in national parks and state forests. I guess I was trying to draw from you: do you see coexistence between a whole range of control methods — including professional hunters, including baiting and trapping — as a full suite of tools to be able to be used rather than just recreational huntsmen, which was the flavour of your submission?

Mr KEITH — Okay. Yes, all of it can work. I will not go along with the poisoning bit at all. I do not like it. It is cruel.

Mr RAMSAY — So is that just the 1080, the use of that chemical or any poisoning regardless?

Mr KEITH — As far as I know, 1080 is the only poison allowed. There is a new one that they are coming out with now — P-something or other — to replace 1080. I did see a thing on *Landline*, I think it was; it works roughly the same way as 1080 does, except that there is an antidote available for that. There is no antidote available for 1080. But the antidote for this new poison is a bit of a mixed bag, because the antidote relies on you getting your domestic dog or pet back to a vet within half an hour and that vet establishing an intravenous line into an artery. I do not think that is going to happen there either. I lost my train of thought there. Where were we going?

Mr RAMSAY — Well, I think we got there. Thank you, Dennis.

Mr KEITH — I am a better writer than I am a talker.

The CHAIR — No, you have done well. We have all been where you are at some stage, so we know what it is like.

Mr YOUNG — You are probably not the first person to have lost your train of thought when Simon is asking question. He is not bad at it. You said something a minute ago about hunting in areas that are affected by pests on land where you are allowed to hunt compared to next door where you not allowed to hunt; there is a big difference. You mentioned there is a place on small blocks for professional shooters to go in where it is not appropriate for others and there is a safety factor. Would you support opening other areas of Crown land, as long as there is no safety risk, that it is no different to, say, a state forest where people are already allowed to hunt? Should any other piece of public land be opened to hunters?

Mr KEITH — Yes. If all the safety concerns are satisfied, then I can see no reason why hunting cannot take place. When hunters go into state forests at the moment and the national parks where they are allowed to go to hunt deer, they are basically invisible. The general public does not see them. All they see is a parked car on the side of the track — that is it — or a parked four-wheel drive. They very seldom see the hunter involved with his rifle, with him actually coming into the bush or going out. At times in small deer camps where I have been involved, members of the public have come past and stopped to talk. They are four-wheel drive touring or they are fishing or whatever, and they will see the odd deer hanging up from a tree with a bag around it to keep the flies off or whatever. They are usually vitally interested. They would like to be involved. When you offer them some venison, the answer is always yes. With the anti-brigade, I do not think they really understand how big the country is out there when you start looking at walking in it and hunting.

The CHAIR — Thank you for coming in, your contribution has been really valuable, both your written and your verbal contributions. If we have any further questions, we might just write to you. Is that okay, if there are further things that come out during our deliberations?

Mr KEITH — Yes.

The CHAIR — Thanks for your time today too.

Witness withdrew.