

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Subcommittee

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Sale — 6 October 2016

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Mr Ken Slee.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Ken Slee, for coming in to speak to us today at this public hearing. I will just go through a few of the formalities, and then I will hand it over to you to give a bit of a presentation before we ask questions. Before we go on I have to remind you that in accordance with the parliamentary committees legislation, the presentation or anything you say today is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, once the hearing is finished, whatever you say after that time is not protected by parliamentary privilege.

The hearing is being recorded. You will be given a copy of the transcript to look at and check for inaccuracies prior to it becoming publicly available. Perhaps if you could just start by telling us your interest in this and a bit of your background.

Mr SLEE — My name is Ken Slee. I am a long-time deer hunter. I have been involved in the scene for about 50 years. I am also a member of Field & Game Australia and the Australian Deer Association. I have held various positions in the Australian Deer Association over the last 40 years. With a background in science, I am particularly interested in the evolution of the deer scene in Victoria. That was mainly my motivation for commenting to this inquiry. I have put in a submission to the group.

The CHAIR — Yes we have got that, and we have read it.

Mr SLEE — As far as I am concerned, the formal culls that have been undertaken by the Australian Deer Association and the Sporting Shooters Association, with Parks, have relatively limited application in the wider scene. If you have got a localised problem and you have got a rational basis for intervention, there is the potential to get a good outcome. Where there is not that local focus and not a good reason for doing it, I see no reason for getting involved in that sort of campaign. Across the majority of deer country in Victoria, these formal campaigns really have very little place, and they should not be allowed to happen, basically.

There are other invasive species in Victoria, particularly in the deer country, which I know particularly well — horses, obviously, but increasingly pigs. I was down at Clydebank Morass on Friday, and in fact there is now at least one pig in Clydebank Morass, which is about 10 kilometres from here. It is unheard of, in my opinion, that they are in there.

As far as the bigger invasive species situation, I see opening up all or most areas of public land to hunting, to recreational hunting, as being the most significant thing that you can do to control animal numbers, particularly deer and pigs. But I would be reluctant to say that recreational hunters are going to get involved in brumby control; I do not think so. I certainly would not encourage it. Thank you.

The CHAIR — I will start off. Going to your submission, one of the things that you say in terms of recreational hunters is that the Game Management Authority does not really have the resources to manage for that. What should it look like? How do you see it working?

Mr SLEE — Where do we start?

Mr YOUNG — At the beginning.

Mr SLEE — The Game Management Authority has got a very limited world to operate in. They are a licensing authority, and they do a bit of enforcement but not much else is my understanding. I like to compare that situation with the recreational fishing situation in Victoria. I just think that hunting and the Game Management Authority are very, very poor cousins to the equivalent fishing side of things. For example, I am appalled that recreational hunting is not encouraged in Victoria whereas with fisheries there is actually an active campaign to increase the number of recreational fishers in Victoria to 1 million in the next few years. As far as I am concerned, the community or government or the bureaucracy have real concerns about firearms ownership and hunting, and I would very much like to see that changed and hunting actually encouraged as a worthwhile community activity.

The CHAIR — In terms of hunting or, I guess, management of invasive species — pigs or deer or whatever — those that professionally get rid of invasive species and, as you mentioned before, the trials

and the programs where recreational hunters have been used, do you see both as playing a part, or what are the pros and cons of both?

Mr SLEE — In the limiting circumstances of the culls that have been done recently, I see both recreational hunters and professionals as having a role, but it needs to be in those well-defined situations, as I mentioned previously. You would not employ professional hunters, I don't think, to control deer in the wider Alpine National Park. It would be too expensive and basically not deliver a worthwhile outcome.

The CHAIR — Okay; thank you.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks, Mr SLEE for coming in. Your submission was pretty insightful in a lot of ways but lacking in some details in some of the areas that I really want to explore, and that is mainly the differences and similarities between New Zealand and Australia. You mentioned New Zealand as far as the issues that they had with deer — how they first started approaching those issues and then how they changed their methods. Can you just talk a bit more about that and sort of elaborate on that compared to what we are doing here?

Mr SLEE — New Zealand has got a similar situation with deer to what we have got in Victoria at the moment. They have been through the whole gamut of introduction with great enthusiasm 150 years ago. Red deer have spread everywhere, and sika and other species as well. When they realised that there might be an issue there the government started to employ professional cullers, and that continued for quite a few years. I think belatedly they realised that in fact recreational hunters were shooting as many or more deer as what the professionals were shooting each year, and that opened people's eyes to the worth of recreational hunting. The situation then changed dramatically. Ground shooting for meat for export to Europe started, and that had a minor impact on red deer numbers in particular in the country.

Then, I think as an outcome of the Vietnam War, people realised that you could shoot from a helicopter and that you could actually recover carcasses by helicopter. That boomed for a number of years, and there was a dramatic decrease in particularly red deer numbers across the South Island of New Zealand. Then of course you had the realisation that perhaps we could grow these deer behind wire, and we had live capture commence in New Zealand and very high prices justified helicopter live capture. All that tended to fall over with time. Markets in Europe disappeared or reduced. There were concerns about 1080 poisoning carcasses, there was concern about tuberculosis in carcasses, and poor standards of meat hygiene in a lot of cases.

In more recent times my understanding is that deer control in New Zealand now primarily depends on recreational hunting, and it is almost a traditional thing for young blokes in New Zealand to buy a rifle and go deer hunting. It is very, very much part of the social set-up in the country. So you have got large number of recreational deer hunters, and the New Zealand government is stepping in and doing helicopter culling or whatever other control mechanisms need to be implemented where they have got specific issues in local areas. So if they have got a high-value patch of forest they may in fact say, 'Well, no, recreational hunting is not the solution. We're going to go in there and helicopter shoot', or whatever. So that is the New Zealand situation.

I was looking through my files yesterday, and I came across this document, *Issues and Options for Managing the Impacts of Deer on Native Forests and Other Ecosystems*. It is put out by the New Zealand Department of Conservation. Off the top my head I do not know about a date — 15 years ago I think, 1998.

The CHAIR — Would you mind if we get a copy of that?

Mr SLEE — You can have that if you get it back to me sometime. It is actually doing exactly what this inquiry is doing. We are 15 or 20 years behind New Zealand as far as looking at some of these issues.

The CHAIR — Okay, so we will have that document tabled; thank you.

Mr YOUNG — So as far as the New Zealand change of method is concerned, was there a significant difference because of the attitude of the government and their input into recreational hunting?

Mr SLEE — Government has basically stepped back from what has been happening in New Zealand for many years, since probably the 1960s. The helicopter shooting for meat and live capture was basically a free-for-all with minimal government intervention, and when venison prices dropped away, which they have done periodically, deer numbers have come back up and government really has not stepped in to target recreational effort. In fact one of few positive things that government has done in recent times is that they have committed to a game management unit in New Zealand. It is in its infancy, and it has got very restricted terms of reference, I guess, but it is one of the first efforts to actually get in there and try and do something with recreational hunting to improve their impact.

Mr YOUNG — Helicopter shooting for red deer specifically you mentioned would have been a pretty effective method and I imagine would have been the most successful method. Our biggest problem in Victoria is sambar. Is helicopter shooting in any way, shape or form appropriate here?

Mr SLEE — I have never shot deer from a helicopter so I cannot be pedantic about it, but the big impact in New Zealand was the helicopters were shooting the open tops above the forest level and shooting gullies and landslips and so on where there was no vegetation. If you come to the Victorian sambar situation, the sambar are a forest deer species and most of the habitat that they inhabit in Victoria is dense forest. There are some areas obviously where helicopters could get deer. The very low rainfall along the Snowy River, for example, you could shoot through the tree canopy there. It is very open. Some of the alpine meadow country up on the top of the Dargo high plains, Dinner Plain area, Wellington high plains, yes, you could certainly have a localised impact there. But across the whole area, most unlikely.

Mr YOUNG — In relation to the New Zealand method of having professional hunting in certain targeted areas where there is high-value assets, would you liken that to what has happened here as far as the Wilsons Prom operation?

Mr SLEE — I do not know very much about where that sort of culling has been done in New Zealand. It has certainly been done in the past with tahr and chamois in Mount Cook National Park. I think in the sika country in the North Island they have certainly targeted areas there. Because sika were not a commercial proposition, the deer numbers were not being well controlled and they stepped in there and intervened with helicopter shooting. But apart from those couple of examples I really do not know.

Mr YOUNG — In your submission you mentioned the Wilsons Prom cull and the operation that took place there, and there are a few examples in Victoria of places where there are small land areas or high traffic areas that are closed down for a short operation. You have got some very strong assertions in your submission as to the appropriateness of that operation and how it is not appropriate in other areas. Can you explain why?

Mr SLEE — I think I was fairly positive about Yellingbo and culling close to Melbourne; and Wilsons Promontory as well, because I think there are supporting activities going on that they will in fact get better regeneration of native species and so on. I guess my one concern with the Wilsons Promontory cull is that there has got to be a cull of natives. It is all very well to say that the deer are not native and they are causing issues, but by the same token I do not think grey kangaroos and wombats are indigenous to Wilsons Promontory. I am told they are not. Unless there is a cull of kangaroos, wallabies and wombats you are not necessarily going to reduce the grazing pressure. Native animals will overpopulate and put pressure on resources just the same as introduced animals do.

When it comes to Bogong, I went along to the discussions prior to that program starting, and the focus there was on protecting alpine bogs and wetlands, and the real concern was that stags were wallowing and creating wallows in these high-value bogs and wetlands. I do not think there was any chance that they were going to get the result they wanted — you know, a reduction in wallowing and the revegetation of those wallows, because it is well known that several stags will use the same wallow. It is not a stag to a wallow; several stags will use it. So you have got to basically get rid of every stag in the area to prevent wallowing,

and when you have got a million hectares of surrounding bush that is full of sambar the chances of achieving that are minuscule, and I think that culling in that location is totally misdirected; it cannot work.

Mr YOUNG — Yes. As to the millions of acres of surrounding area, I would imagine a lot of that you cannot shoot in.

Mr SLEE — The immediate surrounds of the Bogong high plains is ‘no hunting’, as I understand it. When you get a few kilometres away from sections of it there is hunting, but it is very inaccessible and difficult country to hunt in.

Mr YOUNG — Yes. Another thing you talked about at the end of your submission was areas that we are not allowed to hunt in and some of the reasons for that. Why do you think there are so many areas that we are not allowed hunt in that could potentially be good hunting areas?

Mr SLEE — The Land Conservation Council was responsible for recommending the formation of most of the national parks in Victoria. When the LCC was set up the deer association mounted a fairly fierce campaign to maintain access to the bush for hunting, particularly for stalking but also for hounds, and we took out David Scott, the chairman of the LCC at one stage with Mike Cecil, his — I do not know — major offside, and talked them through the requirements of deer hunting, the fact that there are very few shots fired, the fact that it was a very dispersed, low-impact activity, and all that sort of stuff.

The LCC subsequently recommended that hunting be allowed to continue in national parks where there was a history of that occurring, but where there was no history of deer hunting they recommended deer hunting not be allowed to continue, and that basic separation between hunting and no hunting areas in the Alpine National Park has continued to this day.

VEAC, which is the successor of the LCC, has been a bit more enlightened with their attitude. For example, with the recent addition to the Snowy River National Park, the Tara Range Park, hunting by stalking is allowed in that park. In some of the eastern Alpine National Park areas legislation needs to be changed to allow stalking in them. For other areas it is just a change to the regulations that are required. I can provide you with a map of the area with these different situations in them.

Mr YOUNG — Yes, that would be great. I suppose when we are talking about traditional areas, it is back to when deer were X amount of a problem and now they are a far worse problem. I dare say they have spread into some of those areas that — —

Mr SLEE — Thirty years ago deer were hardly recognised as being an issue at all. It is only in very recent times that various people have been starting to point the finger and say, ‘Well, you know, there’s definite change and damage here’. Thirty or 40 years ago there was general acceptance that damage was minimal or non-existent. In my opinion the major bushfires of the last 15 years are the major reason for the change in sambar deer density in the bush. It is well known that they respond to disturbance to the forest. Fire, logging and that sort of thing is what increases deer numbers. So we are actually seeing the results of a couple of million hectares of wildfires in the last 15 years, and deer numbers have responded dramatically to that fire. Deer numbers may in fact decrease as that forest goes back to a more stable state. The feed will disappear from the bush and deer numbers will too. In my opinion, not getting too excited about the current situation would be a good thing.

Mr YOUNG — One more, if I may, Chair. You talked about the GMA and their restrictive set-up. What kinds of changes would you like to see to enable them to be more involved in active game management, as their name suggests?

Mr SLEE — I think the GMA ideally should be better funded. It should have the ability to undertake research or commission research into deer and their impact. They should not just be licensing and enforcement. They should have a much broader role, and they should be involved in encouraging recreational hunting, for one thing. In my opinion, recreational hunting is of no risk to the wider community: the bushwalkers, little old ladies sniffing flowers, or anyone else. We have been vilified in recent years, and I find that appalling.

Mr YOUNG — I know exactly what you mean. Thank you very much.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you, Ken. You have covered off a fair bit of what I was going to ask. I note you have talked about GMA being under-resourced. You have indicated in your submission you think that recreational shooters are best equipped to reduce the populations of deer particularly, and you have mentioned wild pigs. Your submission indicates your preference for professionals to look at culling some of the wild horses in some of our high plain country. You have talked about perhaps more strategic planning of culling areas. You have not talked about what potential there is to do with the resource, the carcasses.

As I understand now, there is a requirement to remove carcasses, so you have all these potential recreational Rambos running all over the place, and you want to extend that and have them into the greater national parks to shoot. But then we have got to do something with the carcasses themselves, so whether there is potential there for some rendering process that could be used for these carcasses to be made into pet food, a process they are trialling for kangaroos particularly. It has been said to us that the recreational shooters tend to go for males rather than females, so they keep the continuity of supply so that can go and play their games out in the parks. I would like to hear some comments on that, because professionals will shoot both males and females; they do not have the propensity to keep populations at a point where they can continue to shoot.

The CHAIR — Do you want to start with that question?

Mr RAMSAY — Yes, perhaps if you want to respond to that initially.

Mr SLEE — Yes, look, when hunters are in the bush they tend to leave camp in the morning with a firm idea about what they are targeting that day. So if they come across a deer close to camp or close to a road or a fairly accessible spot — you know, if it is downhill all the way back to the vehicle — they might specifically shoot a hind or a calf or any animal because they will be able to get the meat out. Most hunters do not like leaving dead animals in the bush. They do not shoot them just to shoot them; they are going out there for a reason. So if there is good access, they will tend to be fairly non-selective as to what they shoot.

If they are walking two days into the Alpine National Park, it is 2000 or 3000 feet back up the ridge line to the vehicle. They are not going to go in there to try to shoot animals for meat, because it will be a gut-busting walk and carry to get that carcass out. The back leg of a sambar stag, for example, would weigh about 45 or 50 pounds, so if you are carrying camping gear and you are expecting to carry out a back leg as well, you are going to be struggling. So when people go into isolated areas, they tend to focus very much on a trophy stag and nothing else, because it is just impossible to carry out meat from that situation. I guess the solution to that issue is that the better the access to areas, the more people are likely to be non-selective in the way they hunt. That is a major issue. People, depending on what they are targeting, will go to areas where they can best target what they want.

Mr RAMSAY — I suppose the point there is that in the old days of the forestry commission there was actually very good access through local roads through some of our parks, whereas they tend now not to be maintained.

Mr SLEE — Yes, most of the tracks that were put in are still there. Seasonal road closures is one issue — for example, you cannot drive into the Wonnangatta station during the winter months; high rivers and gates stop that, and there are lots of examples of that around the area. The King Spur track, for example, down to Mayford and the head of the Dargo River, the gate does not officially open until 1 December, and by that stage the weather is hot. Deer hunting is not really a proposition by 1 December. The blowflies will basically beat you to the deer, and you have got to go home because you cannot keep meat if you shoot a deer in December. You have got to refrigerate it.

Commercial use of meat I do not think is a proposition. I saw the proposal in yesterday's *Weekly Times*. I think the guy was flying a kite. I think there is a lot of potential though to have the situation with processing meat freed up. If you go to New Zealand — I do not know about deer so much, but I have been over there trout fishing at Taupo — and if you catch a 4 or 5-pound trout in the Tongariro, you can take it

to a commercial operator, who will fillet it, smoke it and vacuum pack it to Australian quarantine standards, and you can get it back through customs into Victoria. There is the potential to do that sort of thing with venison. A lot of what is shot and dragged out of the bush is wasted, because there are not the facilities there to make the best use of the venison once it is brought out of the bush. That is something that I would like to see changed.

I think the second of your questions, Simon, was about continuity of supply of deer.

Mr RAMSAY — I was just looking for a response. It has been said to us that the recreational shooters tend to focus on the males rather than the females to allow continuity of supply. Is that a reasonable comment to make?

Mr SLEE — Hunters do not think about what might or might not be there next year. They go into the bush to hunt now. If there are 20 deer in a gully, as they walk through it they might see 1 or 2. Probably most of the deer that they see will see them and evade them before they can get a shot at them, but the problem is not that people make a decision to pass up animals for breeders or for next year; the problem is that the deer are very elusive and it is impossible — it is not a shooting gallery. No, I would reject the idea that hunters leave animals behind for next year. It is not part of the situation at all.

Mr RAMSAY — Can I just ask, apart from the GMA, which you have identified as maybe something we could recommend in relation to resourcing and financial support, and other than recreational shooting as a means to an end for reducing some of these invasive pests, what other control methods could government introduce to try to control the populations of horses, pigs, deer and wild dogs? We have heard this morning that they seem to be the principal ones.

Mr SLEE — Horses — I think the government has got to bite the bullet and introduce either ground shooting by professionals or helicopter shooting by professionals. There are a lot of horses out there over a very broad area, and although some recreational hunters might be willing to target a horse if they see one, I would suspect that most hunters would say, ‘No, not my thing’.

As far as pigs go, there is a growing issue with pigs in Victoria. My opinion would be that they are probably beyond control by any mechanism. They are going to be everywhere in large numbers in the future. They are probably much more damaging than either horses or deer. Recreational hunting might be part of the solution to that, but I do not think there is a realistic solution at the moment — maybe poisoning.

As far as deer are concerned, I suspect that the feeling of crisis at the moment might go away with the maturation of the bush, particularly with sambar. I am not so sure about fallow deer in farm fringe country. They are a much more open-country animal. Recreational hunting is one option there and culling by farmers is another. I do not know if government has got a role there. I am not sure that I have answered your questions, Simon.

Mr RAMSAY — Yes, you have gone through them all. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Can I just ask a follow-up question about the commercialisation or use of the carcass? We have heard a lot about this idea: what do you do if you do shoot a deer? You can only shoot one, if that, out because they are so big and it is hard to get them out — all that sort of stuff. Abattoirs will not take deer because of various quality and hygiene standards, and you did mention, I think, about the hygiene of the meat in New Zealand. I think you were talking about TB and traces of poison. Can you just explain how you see the trout idea — making sure that the meat was okay — and how that works?

Mr SLEE — I am not terribly familiar with what happens around the world, but my understanding is that in the United States and Canada, when you shoot a deer or an elk or a bear or whatever, you can take it to a meat packer.

The CHAIR — For your own personal use?

Mr SLEE — For your own personal use. So you take the carcass in, you pay your money, they break the carcass down into various cuts, they vacuum-pack it and hand it back to you in an esky or whatever and you take it away. I think that is almost standard through North America and Canada.

When it comes to New Zealand I am not so clear. I think there are people that are doing that sort of business as a private enterprise, not through abattoirs but through a local butcher or whatever, and my understanding is that, well, certainly butchers cannot hang a deer carcass in their fridge in town unless it has been through an abattoir and inspected and all that sort of thing. But what other restrictions there are on individuals with portable refrigeration units and so on I am not quite clear on, but there is a potential industry there if we can sort out what the issues are and give it a stimulus. There are lots of jobs in deer hunting at the moment — taxidermy, firearms, camping gear and so on. This is another potential rural industry if the issues and pros and cons and so on can be addressed.

The CHAIR — Okay, and so in your submission where you talk about maximising the value to the community, that is the sort of idea you are thinking about in terms of government policy?

Mr SLEE — Yes. Deer hunting is a big industry out there at the moment. I think the total recreational hunting expenditure in Victoria five years ago or thereabouts was 400-and-something million, and of that a fair percentage was on deer and deer hunting. There are other business opportunities out there as well if they can be found and the roadblocks taken out of the way.

The CHAIR — And the examples — you said the meat — —

Mr SLEE — Processing meat, sausage making, pickling, whatever.

Mr RAMSAY — But you are talking about human consumption where I was talking about pet food consumption.

Mr SLEE — I am talking about recreational hunters having somewhere to take a carcass to get best value from it. I would be very sceptical if there is a commercial opportunity out there. It would certainly need to be tightly controlled, otherwise you would have a free-for-all — people spotlighting even more from roads and so on than what you have at the moment.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Slee, for coming in to speak to us today.

Witness withdrew.