

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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Witnesses

Mr John Atkins, chair, and

Dr Eleanor Hoy, Harrietville Community Forum Inc.

The CHAIR — Welcome to Dr Eleanor Hoy and Mr John Atkins from the Harrieville Community Forum, and thanks for coming today to present to this inquiry on the control of invasive animals. Before we pass it over to you, just a couple of formalities. First off, this hearing is being recorded and you will get a copy of the transcript proofs to check for accuracy before they become public. Also whatever you say in the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, that parliamentary privilege may not be afforded to you outside the public hearing — but I am sure on this topic everything is pretty okay. I think the secretary would have spoken to you about giving a 5 to 10-minute presentation because we have got your submission, and then opening it up for us to ask you questions. If you could also give a little bit of your background and the organisation you are from as well.

Visual presentation.

Mr ATKINS — John Atkins, I am the chair of the Harrieville Community Forum. Elly is a member of that forum. It is an elected body from the Harrieville community. It was formed after the 2013 fires out of the issues that were involved then, and over the last 18 months the issue of deer in particular has arisen and become a major issue for the community. I make no apology that our submission is primarily if not totally about deer, because this is the pressing issue.

I would just like you to look at the slide there to get an idea of Harrieville. Harrieville is a strip of private land approximately 8 kilometres long and at no point probably wider than 3 or 4 kilometres. The picture is the reverse way, but we are surrounded on the eastern side by national park and on all other sides by state forest. I could say we feel a bit like the proverbial wagon train surrounded by the Indians, but this time it is the deer.

Just to bring home what the problems are you can see, even though that is an older photograph, the difficulty of using firearms as a means of controlling deer in such a tight population, particularly when you also add that this is a tourist destination.

Dr HOY — I will just introduce myself. I am Dr Eleanor Hoy. I have got a PhD in plant biology from the University of Western Australia, and I am the chair of three 10-hectare Crown land reserves in Harrieville. So as well as being in the Harrieville Community Forum, I also have a land management role.

Mr ATKINS — Sambar deer we are saying are a pest if not by legislation, then by their actions. Sambar deer are pervasive across all the environment that we see around Harrieville from the valley to the very tip of the high plains. We just do not seem to be disrupting their growth and still there is ample feed, it seems, for growth to continue. There has been an apparently rapid increase post-fire. Whether that is just a matter of chance or exponential growth due to more grassland that occurred after the fires, no-one really knows. We know they have no natural predator and we believe that current recreational shooting is having an insignificant impact on the population growth in the Harrieville area.

We are using the Harrieville area, not just the town itself, but most of us do a lot of walking into the surrounding mountains and valley. We believe that essential deer control actions and research to support reduction in numbers around towns like Harrieville will not be considered and financed until such time as they become a pest status. For government to spend money on an animal they do not consider to be a pest is a difficult argument to get across in a Melbourne environment.

We are saying deer are impacting significantly on our environment. Deer are common every night throughout the township zone and are literally destroying gardens. I will just give one example of this, if I may, of a lady who lost her husband this year. He had a magnificent garden. Not a big garden, but a magnificent one. There is not a citrus tree that has been left that has not been eaten and smashed. Eighty per cent of the garden has been ravaged by deer over this winter. That might seem to be trivial, but what we are bringing here is the community reaction. That is happening in varying degrees across the town and it is getting worse every winter, and we do not see it getting any better.

We do not believe in fencing for deer exclusion. Besides being expensive it is just not the look we want. We do not want to go into a place, like if you have been to Johannesburg in South Africa or somewhere

where every house has got a 3 or 4-metre fence around it. That is not why we come to Harrietteville to live and that is not what tourists expect.

Deer are endangering life and property on our roads. The road between Bright and Harrietteville now, particularly over autumn, winter and early spring, is dangerous to drive at night. In fact one should not drive above 70 or 80 ks at the very best. So that is an issue, and car accidents with deer are common every week.

Deer are impacting significantly on our community, as I said. They are also affecting our revegetation programs that Elly particularly oversees. There has been a lot of money, \$71 000, spent by government on revegetation programs along the rivers, which the community has been intrinsically involved with, and many of those revegetation programs now have been laid waste by the deer. Despite the fact that we have used larger and more expensive means of plant control, once you remove them or the plants get above them, they destroy the plants.

Visiting deer shooters have a small positive impact on our community and we do not have an issue with deer shooters in a broad sense, but they do create concerns to locals and visitors when firearms are discharged near the town. I think some of those have been spoken about, and I am not going to go into detail about them. Dead animals are left near roads, tracks and rivers, so this has become a problem for us in terms of our economy, which is based on nature-based tourism.

An interesting one before about deer carcasses. The European wasps — we have managed to see a carcass almost totally eaten away within one week by wasps, and this is having an enormous impact on us in a very simple way — you cannot sit outside, you cannot have a barbecue. You know, restaurants had to close and now they have to have screening if you want to sit outside. We believe that is one of and not the only attribute of course, but anecdotally the amount of deer meat left out there is having an impact on that.

Where do dogs and cats fit in? You raised the cat issue and scavenging dogs. The anecdotal evidence suggests that dogs are not impacting greatly on the deer population, but is the meat and carcasses providing a source of growth for them?

As a community we continue to work with DELWP and parks. We are looking at programs to try to come up with some resolution of this, but as you can imagine it is a very difficult to arrive at something that is very practical. I have had deer shooters use my place as a venue to go into the state forest. Over the last three or four weeks they have probably shot 10 or 12 deer, but every night I still see fresh deer on my property. We believe deer are increasingly impacting on the local farming. We have talked about that. Farmers have to stay when they feed hay during the day to stop deer from coming in to eat the hay. They are destructive to fencing.

It was interesting with NECMA before, but we believe we are seeing after heavy rains quite heavy silting and impact upon water and water cleanliness. There is a lot of erosion occurring out in our valleys. There are steep valleys — from that map. The local trout farm has problems every time there is heavy rain now, and that has been a more recent event over the last couple of years. If you go into the smaller streams away from the bigger rivers, you will see an enormous amount of damage done from wallowing, destruction of habitat, ferns, even blackberries. It is just a mud pile. Our local tree farm is having problems again with deer getting into it and destroying product.

As we said, Harrietteville is a nature-based tourism destination, and most of our town income comes from that source. Deer are hurting our pristine brand and image. Deer are degrading our local waterways and gullies with heavy wallowing, local walking tracks are being eroded from heavy deer traffic and deer shooters sometimes leave dead animals near the walking tracks and along rivers. I understand the problem. I have been out with deer shooters. It is fine to talk about bringing carcasses in, but if you have shot a carcass up one of those hills there, you can bring a bit of meat back, but you are not going to bring the whole carcass back.

Deer are impacting on our local environment. Selective grazing is leading to changes, and Elly is quite able to talk about that. We believe there are extreme botanical changes occurring in our ecosystem. We are

concerned about the impact of deer in the environment as much as in the community, because we depend on that environment. The two go together. You cannot just look at us as a community without looking at the environment that surrounds us.

We believe deer range from the valley floor up to the high plains and endanger sensitive areas, such as alpine bogs. We have already mentioned the erosion that is occurring.

I am going to pass across now to Elly to finish on the Alpine National Park deer control program and to make some comments on that.

Dr HOY — We were looking at specific responses to your terms of reference, so I just want to talk about some of that first point:

1. assessment of the biodiversity outcomes, community safety and limitations of the trial conducted by Parks Victoria ...

The limitations are quite serious. The program itself is very well designed to do what it is designed to do, which is to protect the alpine bogs from deer. We have got an endangered ecosystem being threatened by a known threatening process, so all the triggers were in place to put something in place for that. We think its use as a trial to say how to best control deer over a greater area like the Alpine National Park is not valid because of the reliance on landscape-specific techniques when the landscape is very different. They are in high-level areas, which are quite clear, whereas we are looking at much more forested areas and areas of lots of different land tenures.

It is an asset protection program, so they talk about the various different types of program, whether it is an eradication program or a reduction program or an asset protection program. This is an asset protection program, so there are various statistical designs around how you create a program and what it is designed for, so the lessons and learnings from that were probably not going to work on another type of program.

The information only contributes to population sizes in relation to that area, but the deer are not in that area year round anyway; those deer are actually using other parts of the park for the winter and then going up there. So the information they are collecting is not really contributing to the bigger questions of how many animals there are there or what their population growth rate is.

The high plains are also suboptimal habitat, so their source population is lower down in the valleys and slopes where we are, and they are just basically going up there because there are so many deer that they are looking for somewhere else to go. So, no matter how many deer you kill up there, you are still going to have a massive source population — and we think a growing source population — so after a long trial you will still end up with an increased number of deer on the high plains. It does not deal with the complexities which we have in the valleys, which is multitenure — private property, shire property, DELWP, parks, lots of different land uses.

On the disposal of corpses, the previous speakers have talked about a potential use for those. We are just thinking, ‘What do you do with all those corpses?’. At a forum that we had recently in the town, that was the main area of concern. You can imagine culling them and doing lots of things and it all working out — even getting permission to shoot close to town. Things like that would all be fine, but it is the disposal of the carcasses which is raising the most concern for people. It is very limited in how it deals with a lot of the ways that we see the problems with deer.

In terms of biodiversity, there is very little overlap in the species distribution with the high plains and the slopes and the valley ecosystems. In terms of species-specific information on deer damage, there is very little possible information that can be used.

The deer are also not present in the high plains in that late autumn and winter period because of snow cover. That is when the food sources are the most scarce, and that is when they are really coming down and hammering the lower valleys — the gardens and things like that, which they have not necessarily eaten in the times when there are more food sources.

There are quite low densities in the high plains, so they are unlikely to be having the same impact on biodiversity, because they are simply not eating as much food — because there are not as many of them.

Major destruction to the biodiversity of the slopes and valleys will occur. If we wait till the trial is completed in 2018 and then find that it did not give any reasonable information for the rest of the parks and areas like that, and then another trial is put together to trial ways to cope with deer in our valleys and slopes and then funding is sought for that, we might be looking at 2025 before some sort of larger strategy is in place. We do not think that is a good time line for any positive impact for us.

Community safety was one of those parts of that question. It is very easy to keep the community safe when you are up in the high plains because there are very few people around. It is much more complex if you start looking at how to deal with community safety in towns like Harrierville. We are talking about shooters and using volunteer shooter groups and things like that. That is another sort of limitation, I suppose, on the community safety side.

The other two parts of those other two questions are:

2. consideration of the application of these types of programs —

which is those partnership programs with volunteers and parks, for instance —

for other invasive animal species in partnership with Crown land managers ...

We support any actions that have a primary focus on protecting the ecosystems and biodiversity and the sustainability and resilience of our town. We have no objections to partnership programs, but what we would like to see is a program that has a focus on dealing with deer and not so much a focus on — it would be great if we had a partnership program and we just got rid of the deer while we were at it. We feel like the focus needs to be the deer, and if a partnership is the best way to achieve that, then that is the best way to achieve that. If a professional shooting group is the best way to achieve that — we do not object to partnership programs, but we like to see that the best possible solution is chosen over something that has some sort of community input as a subgoal.

The third question was:

3. assessment of the relative costs and benefits, financial or otherwise, of other forms of pest control ...

It is the same answer, really: we support any action that has the direct — if that is the best course of action, then we support that for the aim of benefiting the sustainability and resilience of our town, which relies on these nature-based tourism outcomes.

Dr HOY — I will just go back to the control strategies.

The CHAIR — Do you have a copy of the slides?

Dr HOY — Yes.

The CHAIR — So you will give them to us?

Dr HOY — Absolutely.

The CHAIR — You can table them.

Mr ATKINS — Just in finishing, we believe very strongly that the long-term answer to this deer problem lies in scientific research and some sort of problem-shooting. All of these other programs are going to work at the edges, but a long-term solution is population control, and we do not see that population control — apart from having an army stationed in those forests — is going to have that impact. So I think we would be strongly recommending that there needs to be that.

But in ending I would say we strongly recommend also that relevant sections of the legislation must be amended to make deer a pest animal and where appropriate to allow deer to be hunted within national parks as part of the control eradication program. We do not see the two as being exclusive. In ending I have to say too that everyone must accept deer now present a major danger to our environment and that even with the best intentions the current methods of control are ineffective. The failure to act now will have a lasting and dreadful impact on our environment and will add significant cost to agriculture and reduce the quality of life of many rural communities. We really ask that you consider these things as being of almost national importance.

The CHAIR — Thank you. That was a really good presentation. As I understand it, you do not have a philosophical opposition to shooting of deer; it is about what is going to work?

Dr HOY — Yes.

Mr ATKINS — What is practical.

The CHAIR — And then the other issue is concern about shooting within a small and highly populated area. That is what I understand.

Dr HOY — Well, just with the legal framework at the moment it is very difficult for deer to be shot around Harrietville. They go up into the national park and the Crown land, where they are inaccessible to shooters, during the day, and at night they come down into the town where they are inaccessible to shooters. So it is very difficult to shoot them. There are ways around that, and we have had a forum with Parks Victoria as our mediator and the players have come back again with more of the legal information, but we believe it is possible to have permits for high-density population areas for shooting to happen. It would take a very high level of coordination which we are probably going to start working through as a community over the next few years, because we have a very strong deer-shooting community in town.

The CHAIR — On that, have you got some suggestions perhaps for us? One of the problems, I guess, is there are a whole lot of things happening around deer, there are various forums and organisations doing lots of different things and we do not always know what each other is doing. So we are doing an inquiry and you are doing things and we do not always know what each other is doing. I do not know about answering all that today, but even if you could provide us with something.

Could I just run through two things that we have heard today. One is the idea of trapping, where you have a paddock and you lure them and then shoot them all in one big group. The other one is this problem that people seem to say that there really is not any bait that will not affect other animals. Maybe they are working on having a bait that only deer can get to because of the type of mesh or whatever they have on the ground. Have you heard of any of those suggestions, or do you know anything about those?

Dr HOY — We have started to work through those. We have sort of taken the first step in coming up with some of those options. We had the Australian Deer Association come to that same meeting with Parks Victoria. They would all prefer to do some sort of non-lethal control method if possible, so they were reluctant to talk about specific lethal control methods at that time. I think their plan was to go away and get more information about the lethal methods and come back. So I think that at our next meeting they will be talking a lot more about those possibilities.

Mr ATKINS — We looked at the possibility. Maybe if you could just go right back to the original photograph. The problem is that any shooting program in a community like Harrietville has to be sustainable around the whole perimeter. It is no good having a shoot just here. So it really would require coordination beyond what we have attempted in the past, as best I can understand. I understand what happened at Wilsons Promontory, but that was within the parks and I understand also something was undertaken in Sherbrooke Forest. I am guessing that sort of thing would require people to be licensed to use night vision and silencers so that you are not scaring the whole population off.

The other thing that we do not understand and one of the areas where I think there needs to be some immediate research is that we understand the populations on the fringe but we do not understand what

depth of population lies back behind that fringe. For example, if you take out 1000 deer, how long will it be before that 1000 deer is replaced? Going back to Elly's point, I think to delay any sort of immediate research into areas like this — we need information, real information. You people need information, the government needs information on what the populations really are. Aesthetically I do not think that as a community we have any problems with any of the concepts that have been put as long as we believe they are going to have a real and possible and practical outcome.

Mr McCURDY — And the concern is, John, that we do need to find out how many are out there, what the numbers are, but that could take us five years or a long time to find out, whether it is two, three or five years, as opposed to knowing that the job needs to be fixed now; we need to do it. How long has it been? Is it just the last couple of years, has this grown over five years or has just gone from very limited a couple of years ago to now?

Mr ATKINS — I tried to study the best I can privately deer population because my background is animal health. I have done some estimates of how quickly those populations can grow. One of the problems is that even with shooting we are concentrating primarily on male species and that has very little impact on population. Evidence from England and elsewhere would show that if you are going to do mass shooting you have really got to concentrate — I do not mean this in any wrong way — almost on the female population, because they are the ones that have the biggest impact on population growth. Just going back to your question again?

Mr McCURDY — What time frame? Has it gone from — —

Mr ATKINS — It really has been a rapid increase. I know people say from 2003, but in the last three years it has been exponential. The numbers that we are seeing have got greater and greater and greater. It is almost like a doubling every year.

Dr HOY — Two years ago we started to see significant damage to our revegetation areas that we had not seen before, and then in the last 12 months has been when the commercial operations have started to really have significant economic damage, either to fences or to — —

Mr ATKINS — When I first came to Harrierville we could plant a tree anywhere in the town and expect it to grow. Now, unless you put wire guards or polystyrene boxes around them, there is every chance that they are going to be destroyed before they get to — —

Mr McCURDY — And it certainly is a town under siege — there is no doubt about it — from the deer population. I know you are prepared to try anything or be part of anything — and we have talked about suppressors or silencers that might be an opportunity — because with tourists and everything like that you do not want people shooting day and night for long periods of time because that might affect the tourist population.

Mr ATKINS — That is a tourism issue. Could I also make one other point. You asked me a question: what can we do? There is this area of shooting, but I think also whether it is on DELWP or parks or whoever to come up with some better information for communities, like a facts sheet about deer that deals with what they can do to help minimise the damage, what things will work and what things will not work. We tried to start a program in Harrierville looking at what plants they will not eat and what plants they will eat, and we have just found now that this year the population is higher and the things that we were told they would not eat they are eating, so I am not sure where that goes.

Dr HOY — Also, not just eating but they crush them. They would like to see the riverbanks as just grass, so they are quite happy to just crush any sort of shrub or small tree that is in the way.

Mr McCURDY — Just my final comment, John, can I just counsel you on the pest side of things, because not everybody is convinced that is the silver bullet, so to speak.

Mr ATKINS — I understand.

Mr McCURDY — Some say that if you turn it into pest status, people can shoot deer much easier in other parts. Instead of trying to get up in your goat country to shoot a deer, they can do it on flat country somewhere else. If that is the answer, let us pursue that, but there are many saying that turning it into a pest is not necessarily going to solve the problem either.

Mr ATKINS — No. I hear that and that is why I think you need to devise an eradication — not eradication, but maybe a control program similar to what they have in New Zealand or elsewhere, where they deal with smaller pockets of deer in limited areas and try and remove those and then work back towards the core. There are programs that we can take from overseas and develop, but we need a coordinated, organised approach to deal with this problem.

Mr McCURDY — We agree. Thank you.

Mr TILLEY — Probably one thing this committee has been learning is that not the same cap fits everybody, and I suggest that Harrierville is not unlike, for example, Mount Beauty. But similarly, in finishing off, it is what the community would be prepared to pay themselves if a pest status was changed, because then the landholders with freehold title would have to make a financial contribution themselves to manage it if it was classified as a pest. I just want to put that on the record. We have got to explore the legislation and the technicalities of reclassification. On that note, great presentation. We appreciate your time.

Mr YOUNG — Unfortunately I am going to touch on the same thing. On reading through your submission, it is great. There is not too much in there that I disagree with. Your sentiments are loud and clear as far as the degree of the problem and you certainly articulated it in a way that really resonated. On the issue of the reclassification, we have had a lot of people talking about it not being a change to anything. I just want to point it out and get your thoughts on it. I know you have put it in here that you need changes to legislation to change them to a pest, but you have also coupled that with the fact that there have to be changes to the way in which we hunt in national parks. That is great to see that next step in the thought process. Is it your view that any national park that it is appropriate to hunt in where there are no safety issues or no factors that are going to stop it or places that are no different from the state forest that they should be open to hunting?

Mr ATKINS — If the animal is a pest and a problem in that park, and one of the control methods that comes out of a regular control is to allow recreational shooters under limited conditions to go in and shoot, personally I do not see a problem with that. It is an issue of controlling populations however we can. I guess us saying that we want to see it declared a pest is to raise the importance of the animal in terms of how government looks at it. Secondly, it would be a pity to think that we would limit our actions by whatever legislation we currently have. I am not a legislative expert, but whatever legislation changes need to be done need to be done so that we are actually not inhibiting the control of this animal, but helping and assisting its control because we are not talking about eradication.

Dr HOY — That is exactly what our points were in the slides. Look at the best way to control the deer to the level that you are looking to control it to and then look at what legislation needs to be changed to do that, not necessarily just change it to a pest and then figure out how to deal with it. Let us figure out how to deal with it, and then if turning it into a pest is required as a step along for that, let us do that. But let us look at coming up with a plan first I suppose.

Mr YOUNG — Absolutely. The restrictions are there in national parks and they are one of the things inhibiting some of those controls, so it is definitely something we have looked at. Just the other thing, and this group obviously talked a lot about community opinions and community-based stuff, one of the big issues the community has obviously is with illegal hunting and poaching. By way of deer being a game species there is a requirement to have a game licence, so if they were declared a pest, you would not need that requirement. You could literally have anyone who has a shooter's licence shooting them. That game licence is actually the next level of weeding out of those people who are going to be a problem. By virtue of them being a game species and tied to that game licence, it gives us the ability to get rid of ratbags who

do the wrong thing by removing their game licence. Would you agree that is something that could be contributing — —

Mr ATKINS — It is something to be considered of course. What I am wondering, though, is whether you can try and do both things. Can you declare deer a pest under special exemptions or special stuff? I keep coming back to it. I did work in government. I understand a little bit about how government works. Unless you can get this problem raised a bar or two above where it is at the moment, it is going to take money. From somewhere out of government has got to come money for this problem. All I am saying and I think Elly is saying, and I am agreeing with her, is that as long as we do not inhibit our ability to raise that bar and do not inhibit the control and eradication-type programs we might want to undertake — I do not have any hard and fast, locked-in point of view.

Mr YOUNG — And the changes more recently about farmers being able to spotlight and cull on their own properties have been a great step towards that.

Mr ATKINS — They are helping, but as I said, if you go back to my little place, the number of deer that have been taken off there over the last five or six weeks with the return of cold weather and the number of deer that are still continuing to come down would suggest to me that unless we have something much more than just the odd shoot out, we are not going to control the problem that way.

The CHAIR — Just a quick question from Simon, because we are mindful that we have the public forum so we do not want to keep people waiting.

Mr RAMSAY — My very quick question is you referenced New Zealand in relation to their control methods. What is working well in New Zealand that you believe could be used here in Australia or in Victoria specifically?

Mr ATKINS — In New Zealand they try and isolate deer when they have moved into a new environment, so that is the first thing — and they go in for eradication. If deer all of a sudden appear — I heard previous people talking about Wodonga and how they were not there a few years ago, and if you are already in action, then you really go in hard to get that population either under control or totally rid of. There are some environments that are much easier to target because the amount of forest or protection they have is limited. In New Zealand they then work back into these big areas with more controlled shooting programs, and that is where they work with their professional shooters and their own shooters to go in and take large numbers of the population out. New Zealand is still not winning the fight, but that is what they are working towards. It would seem to me that we have also got to try and limit the spread of deer, because everywhere I go I am hearing stories — from Euroa all the way down — that deer are invading areas that they did not exist in a few years ago.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming in and presenting today.

Mr ATKINS — Thank you for having us.

Witnesses withdrew.