

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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Mr Bill Hansen, secretary, Friends of the Prom.

The CHAIR — Thank you and welcome, Mr Bill Hansen, secretary of Friends of the Prom. Thanks for coming in to provide information to this public hearing today. Just before we go to your presentation, there are just a couple of formalities. First, just to let you know, in accordance with the parliamentary committees legislation, what you say here today within the public hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, anything you say outside the hearing is not protected by parliamentary privilege. A copy of the draft transcript will be sent to you so that you can have a look at it prior to it being made publicly available and for you to correct any inaccuracies that may be there. So thank you again. I think the secretariat probably spoke to you in terms of how we work. If you could maybe present for about 10 minutes or so, and then that gives us the opportunity to ask all our questions. Thank you.

Mr HANSEN — First of all, thanks for the opportunity for Friends of the Prom to present their submission to you this morning. We are a group of volunteers. We have about 120 members. We undertake a number of activities associated with the Prom. We are really there to support Parks Victoria in managing and conserving Wilsons Promontory National Park. As Friends of the Prom we run six weekends a year where we work together with Parks Victoria. We also do a number of other tree-planting events such as this one, which is National Tree Day planting. We also walk along the beaches and pick up rubbish. We also do monitoring activities such as on grass, trees and various shorebirds. So our activities are varied.

One of our main activities is that we operate a nursery at Tidal River. Again it is the same Friends of the Prom, but a smaller group of volunteers comes down every second Thursday and works in the nursery. Our main activity is obviously associated with revegetation of the Prom, and we propagate plants using seeds and cuttings from within areas of the Prom to plant within those same areas to ensure that there is correct continuity of the species. So it is a fairly active little side group.

This brings me to our submission because we reckon 80 per cent of our revegetation activity is associated with the Tidal River area. It is about 40 hectares or so, of which about a third is actually camping ground and the rest is offices, roads, workshops and so on. We wanted to make a submission on what we saw as the impact of hog deer on our activities. We have not come from a science background. This is very much how we think hog deer affect our activities.

The CHAIR — And we appreciate that because often we can access the scientific information. It is really good to hear from people that have seen it and are a part of it.

Mr HANSEN — Yes. So we are very much on the ground in that respect. We come in and pick up after the hog deer.

The revegetation we do we cannot ascribe 100 per cent to hog deer. There is also wind damage, human damage, damage by campers and also native animals — mostly wombats and wallabies — but we reckon, and we had a bit of a think about this, that about 60 per cent of our revegetation activity at Tidal River was due to hog deer. The reasons for that are various. I have really only been involved the last four years, but people who have been around much longer — over 20 years — say that our activities have changed markedly in the last four years.

We are finding that a lot of the plantings we are doing around Tidal River are damaged. It is like painting the harbour bridge. You go out there, you plant seedlings, you protect them with plant guards, you come out six months later to have a look at them and they are knocked over, damaged or whatever. This sort of damage that we are getting — this is a typical deer run down a dune face within a camp site. You can see their hard hoofs have an impact on the dune system. Another one that is not as clear is behind the group lodges at Tidal River, but that is a big deer run. It would be a couple of hundred millimetres — 20 centimetres — deep, affecting the roots and wiping away all the plants. You can see why Tidal River is attractive to hog deer. There is a large amount of grass, and the rangers tell me they do not really need to mow very much. It is not all, as I said, ascribed to hog deer, but they are a significant contributor.

These are young she-oaks, which are probably about a year old. They have been guarded by plastic mesh plant guards that are 90 centimetres high. Even then the hog deer freely graze around the tops and they

retard the growth. You can see in the background there are a number of mature she-oaks, and they have been planted and have been able to grow unfettered. They would be between 5 and 10 years old, so they have been able to grow relatively freely, but even then there is a problem there on the juvenile trees. This tree would be several years old, and we have just started to notice that they are being effectively ringbarked by hog deer rubbing their antlers around the bark. It has something to do with a tree of that diameter, with the bark of that juvenile tree. They do not seem to bother the older trees, but it is the young she-oaks and banksias in particular which they seem to find very attractive. So we have had to come along retrospectively and guard these trees, which once upon a time we would not have needed to guard.

For people that have been there longer than me, or even when I started, the practice was to use the clear plastic guards — the green plastic guards, 450 millimetres high or 18 inches high. That was the standard protection from rabbits and even wombats to a lesser extent. Now we have had to graduate to these much more robust plastic mesh guards. Even they are problematic because the hog deer will get over the top, also burrow their snouts underneath if it is grass or just demolish the thing and poke a hole in it. So it is costing us a lot more time and effort.

So why do we know it is hog deer? Well, we know there has been an explosion in population over the last four or five years. This fits in with the sort of anecdotal rule of thumb that some of the experienced rangers will say, which is that five to seven years after a severe fire the population of hog deer will increase exponentially. That fits in with the fires we had in I think it was 2006 and then 2009. There were really large fires down at the Prom.

I suppose I should correct a bit of information — I do not know whether ‘correct’ is the right word, but maybe qualify a bit of information we gave you in our submission. I think we said that the emergence of hog deer as a pest at Tidal River has occurred within the last four or five years. The submission stated that prior to that they:

... were occasionally sighted around the stockyards camp site at the park entrance ... but not at Tidal River.

People who know more than I do have said, well, that may be true to the casual observer but hog deer have been around for a long, long time and they were introduced into Victoria in 1865. There were 13 hog deer introduced by an acclimatisation society, the same group that introduced foxes and rabbits and blackberries and the rest.

The CHAIR — Yes, they have got a lot to answer for, have they not?

Mr HANSEN — These 13 individuals were released around Port Welshpool. They like that low, scrubby coastal area, and they have moved around the coast. They are now sort of between I think it is the lower Tarwin and Gippsland Lakes, that area there. Even as early as 1913 they were observed in the Prom. There is a lovely little story that when the Queen came to visit in 1954 the venison for her table came from Oberon Bay, so they have been around quite a while. But certainly the numbers are such that they have increased markedly in the last few years and they seem to be encroaching around Tidal River. They love places like Tidal River because of the grass and the young plants that we plant, and also they can hide during the day in the coastal scrub around the area, so it is a perfect habitat for them.

You also find them at Oberon Bay and up on the Yanakie isthmus. Their impact is not just confined to Tidal River, obviously; they are everywhere else. Everywhere else there is regeneration you can extrapolate their impact into those areas as well. So after the fires there was all this new growth coming up, which is perfect for their feed. That is another example of an boobialla tree which has been heavily grazed.

So hog deer do cause significant damage to young plants at Tidal River and, we can extrapolate, elsewhere in the park. There is significant cost in volunteer and ranger hours, and I have set that out in our submission. We just came up with some estimates, and we tried to be realistic and not to embroider the case against hog deer because there are other things out there. So we tried to be realistic, and we asked rangers and so on to get estimates on which our costs in man hours were based. As I said before, damage to regrowth, both planted and natural, can be extrapolated to areas throughout the park. Friends of the

Prom supports the continuation of Parks Victoria's deer culling program at the Prom and would certainly like to see it extended.

We would not like to see uncontrolled access to the park by recreational shooters, but we certainly do not have any problem — —

The CHAIR — I was going to ask a question based on your submission, but I think that clarifies it a bit. In your submission you say that you do not support recreational hunting in national parks but you do support the Parks Victoria trial. So you are happy with the recreational hunters so long as it is in an organised and regulated way. Is that what you are saying?

Mr HANSEN — Yes, that is correct. I have got no problem with professional hunters teaming up with the Game Management Authority and Parks Victoria to do what they do. They do a great job. One thing I should say is that we do not really know how many deer are in the Prom. There does not seem to be any scientific data on that at all. We just know there is a heck of a lot and it has increased a heck of a lot lately. The feeling of some of the rangers that have been around for many years is that the current culling program is a start, but it is really not going to have a lot of impact. For example, I think it was last year in the culling program 42 deer were shot, and this year it is 44, numbers like that. I must say we did not notice any difference in plant damage after last year's cull. This year's is probably a bit early; I think it was only the last few months. It will take some months to see whether they are still around in similar numbers.

The CHAIR — And it is just shooting — there are no other types of things being used to get rid of the deer?

Mr HANSEN — No. I think this is a very sensitive area. First of all we do not have the scientific information which says where the deer are within the park.

The CHAIR — Yes. So that is a gap. We need the research.

Mr HANSEN — We know the hog deer are in areas below 100 metres elevation, but apart from that we do not really know exactly where they are. We do not know the numbers. We know that they are contributing to damage, and there are scientific programs in place on the Yanakie isthmus, which are being carried out by Parks staff in conjunction with universities. I do not know any more about it. They are finding they have to fence off areas, and they are finding that plants in the fenced-off areas are really responding to their program, because they are trying to recreate the coastal grassy woodlands that used to exist at the isthmus.

The problem has been those two really intensive fires, one after the other, have encouraged the growth of tea-tree, so tea-tree seems to be invading those beautiful areas, which are a series of sand-dune swales and sand dunes, grassy areas between the sand dunes and she-oaks and banksias on the crests of the sand dunes. They are trying to recreate that, and they are doing some controlled burning programs. But they are finding that the grazing animals — it is not just deer; wallabies and wombats seem to be exploding in number — are coming in to thwart their efforts.

So if you were going to completely rid the Prom of invasive overgrazing animals, then because it is a large area connected by an isthmus to the mainland you could build a fence across it somewhere. You might never totally get rid of every animal, but you would certainly be able to make inroads and then know that it was not going to be repopulated from outside areas.

The CHAIR — Is it okay if we ask you some questions now?

Mr HANSEN — I think they were the main points I wanted to make, but maybe some others will come out.

Ms WARD — Can I say thank you first of all for the work you do down at the Prom. It is one of my favourite places on the planet. I was only down there a few weeks ago, and I have camped many times at Tidal River. So thank you for all you do, because it is a beautiful environment.

You say that with the culls of the deer over the last two years it is hard to gauge exactly how successful it has been this year, and last year you did not see a lot of evidence towards how successful it had been. Do you have any comment, though, on how it was managed and how it worked in terms of the relationship with you and with other stakeholders at the park?

Mr HANSEN — I did not really get involved a lot in the way it was managed and run, but I know the park was shut for a week.

Ms WARD — And how did your members feel about that?

Mr HANSEN — We could see the greater good. I think one time it clashed with our Thursday at the nursery, but we just altered that, so it was not a problem. It is a bit disconcerting to see these paramilitary types running around in vehicles down there. Before I knew who they were I was wondering what was going on, but I am fully in support of what Parks Victoria is doing. As I said, wiser heads than mine have said that it is a start, and it is a start in the areas that are accessible to hunters, but there are heaps of areas out there which we do not know about and which are not so accessible.

Ms WARD — So have you any views on what would be the best way to control deer, both at the Prom and in other environments?

Mr HANSEN — If you are going to go to maximum effect, you would implement some sort of scientific research that tries to put a better estimate of population and location on hog deer as well as other invasive animals, including the native ones. That would take time. There is actually a research station set up at Tidal River, but it has run into disrepair because of lack of funds and it is rarely used — it is not properly used, I should say. You almost need a full-time scientific coordinator, because you can get a lot of good information out of PhD studies. People are doing PhDs down there into the various little ground marsupials and various flora and fauna. I am told there are 858 scientific papers and theses associated with Wilson's Prom, but no-one has had the time to put them all together and make them available to the wider world. It is a little project we are looking at. So that is the first part.

The second part would be a fence across the isthmus somewhere, and then you would systematically start culling deer to take the invasive animals out. That would include all the invasive animals, and obviously foxes and cats would fall into that category. Again the advice I have had is that this culling by shooting is relatively humane and is a start, but it is not necessarily the most effective. A much more effective method would be baiting, but that has got problems. Community acceptance is the problem.

Mr YOUNG — I have one further question, and it is more a point of clarification. You stated before that you do not support recreational hunting at the Prom, in that national park. Your submission — —

Mr HANSEN — Uncontrolled.

Mr YOUNG — Yes. In your submission it says that the FOTP does not support recreational hunting in national parks. You sort of clarified it in your statement before when you said you do not support uncontrolled recreational hunting at the Prom. Does that position expand to other national parks?

Mr HANSEN — Ideally, yes, but I am really talking about the Prom. I do not have enough information on those other parks — the Alpine National Park, for instance. I have bushwalked in the Alpine National Park and been run over just about by dogs, hunters and rampaging deer, and I know it goes on, but I do not know the effect, so I would not be qualified to talk about that.

Mr YOUNG — And just in terms of the volunteer hours that you mentioned before — I think you said 750 volunteer hours — is that worked out on what you are doing to mitigate the damage by deer or the actual control and trying to reduce the effect of deer?

Mr HANSEN — No, we do not put all the damage down to deer. So what we said was 80 per cent of Friends of the Prom activity was to do with revegetation. Of our revegetation efforts, 60 per cent of that we reckon is hog deer.

Mr YOUNG — There are two ways of doing it. You stop the deer from doing the damage, or you fix the damage after it. So as for your volunteer hours, how much is to stop the deer doing the damage and how much is to fix the damage afterwards? That is what I am asking.

Mr HANSEN — It is hard to distinguish between the two, because we are not a large enough group and we do not have enough people to, say, run through the whole of Tidal River and fix all the deer damage up and then sit back and see what happens 12 months later and go back again and do it. What we are doing now is only scratching the surface. We are going into areas which have been degraded for some years, probably before hog deer were a major issue, so it is hard to pull those two apart.

Mr YOUNG — No worries. That is fine, thanks.

The CHAIR — You obviously answered all our questions in your presentation. Thank you very much for coming today. As Vicki said, it is so important that volunteer organisations such as Friends of the Prom look after us all, so thank you.

Witness withdrew.