

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Dunkeld — 29 November 2016

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Mr Daryl Panther, Victorian Wildlife Management.

The ACTING CHAIR (Mr Young) — Daryl, welcome to the inquiry. Thank you for coming in to give your evidence to the inquiry into invasive animals on Crown land. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Today's evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript within the next week. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted to the committee's website. Mr Panther, if you could kick off with an introduction of who you are and where you are from and give your presentation, we will follow with some questions later.

Mr PANTHER — Thanks very much for having me here. I suppose I have to keep you guys awake at this time of night anyway. It has been a long day.

Ms WARD — Oh no; we are all fired up!

Mr PANTHER — It was really hard for me to write what I am and what I have been doing because I do not want to pat myself on the back, but in one way I hold so many hats. I have been a member of Australian Deer Association for 40 years around about. I am also a commercial operator for pest animal control, and I have been doing that for around about 10 years. I used to have a wildlife park and zoo for about 10 years. We had an animal shelter licence for some 18 years, which protects native wildlife when it has been injured. I am a keen photographer, including writing a book *Seasons of the Red Deer*, which shows that I have had a lot of history to do with deer. It shows habitats and habits and what the deer do during their year, so I have sort of been fairly highly involved with deer for all my life.

On my business side I have operated Victorian Wildlife Management as a commercial operator for the past 10 years, like I said, with 80 per cent of my work being involved with pest animals from national and state parks. The remaining business of that — to make up the 100 per cent — is on private land including farms and that sort of thing.

The type of animals I remove from parks have been pigs, foxes, rabbits and goats. I have helped supervise programs that have been conducted with Parks Vic and the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia to remove goats from a park fairly locally here, south of Hamilton. Also in the last week I have been involved with a program with the Sporting Shooters Association, the Australian Deer Association and Parks Victoria on a red deer reduction cull in the Grampians, where they are trying to get rid of deer out of certain vegetated areas — not the whole of the Grampians, just certain areas. That is probably me in a nutshell.

I think the biggest thing we have to look at is whether it is either eradication or control. That is really what is going to be talked about in future. If you are going to be able to eradicate something, it has to be in a confined area. Control can be done right across the state with any pest animals. Some animals will never be eradicated. Foxes will never be eradicated. Rabbits will never be eradicated. In isolated pockets deer could be eradicated, but larger areas of deer I would say would never be eradicated. They could only be controlled.

What else can I talk about? There is one little thing I would like to bring up. I know my talk was to be on deer and using organisations such as the ADA and Sporting Shooters to do controls in Parks land. Also in the back of my mind I think, 'If I talk much about that, I'm doing myself out of money as a commercial operator as well', so I have to think of both sides of that. Right down the far corner, if we have a couple of minutes to spare, I would like to talk about feral cats as well.

Ms WARD — Please do.

Mr PANTHER — That is a little pet thing.

The ACTING CHAIR — We have got plenty of time, so you just go for it. Talk about whatever you like.

Ms WARD — It would be good to hear about feral cats, because we have not heard too much at all.

Mr PANTHER — Okay, that is good.

Mr RAMSAY — Particularly with a name like Panther.

Mr PANTHER — Yes, with a name like Panther, you are right. I am the only Panther in the Grampians. That is up to you guys.

The ACTING CHAIR — Actually I did find it quite funny that the submission from the group that we have just heard from had a little bit of a joke in it that they have not seen a panther down there, and we get one popping up right in front of us.

Ms WARD — They have heard of it but not seen it.

Mr PANTHER — With the last control that we did in the Grampians I helped out as a volunteer under Parks Victoria control. There were going to be several areas in the Grampians in which certain vegetation was targeted, and they were going to take the deer from those areas so that the different vegetation will improve. They did a trial last week just to see how it all worked. The guys who were actually hunting had trackers on them to see where they went, along with all the safety procedures and everything. It was probably overboard, but it has to be done. It was done really well. It worked spot-on in terms of how it was supposed to work.

I better say that I did work as a park ranger, as in a seasonal ranger, for a while, so I have had Parks Victoria experience as well. I do know how most of the wheels work. As a volunteer with them, it worked fine. There was only one deer taken out of that particular area, but the other groups organised their own hunters and so forth, such as ADA and Sporting Shooters. They had all gone through accreditation and that sort of thing. I cannot say any more, only that it worked perfectly.

The one that we did down at Napier, which is south of Hamilton, was on feral goats. In two different types of shoots there, with the Sporting Shooters I did that and sort of controlled the guys. They shot over 20 goats each time. Removal of 40 goats was great. Then the guy from Parks actually got a shift, and the program has not kept going. They have probably all bred up again by now, and there are probably more.

That is probably a little thing that should be looked at so that when a program starts, it follows on. When there are staff changes or funding changes, it would be ideal to keep that going because it did work well. We had tracking collars in there on the goats. We would just follow the goat with the tracker, the Judas goat. The Sporting Shooters would shoot the goats, and the goat with the tracking collar would go and find some more boyfriends or girlfriends, and it would all happen again. It worked perfectly. I believe that is actually happening in the Grampians as well this week while we are doing this today as another trial, but it is going to be ongoing.

What else can I say? Before you guys ask me, I will just go on to that little bit about the cats. I do a lot of fox trapping in the Grampians. It is with soft-jaw traps. It is not legal to catch cats with those, but sometimes as a by-product I believe I can get away with it. Looking at the rules and regulations, we have to take a cat to a vet or to the local pound or whatever. If you get a feral cat that is quite a large cat in a soft-jaw trap and you have to take it into town, it does not work. It just does not happen. It turns into an OHS situation, because a feral cat will rip you to pieces.

Mr RAMSAY — You would have to euthanase it, I assume, rather than just shoot it on the spot.

Mr PANTHER — Yes, but you cannot.

Mr RAMSAY — That is what I am saying. You would have to take it to town to euthanase it.

Mr PANTHER — Exactly, yes. Looking through the rules and regulations I find that what is currently there is for a small park in Melbourne where someone's cat goes over the back fence and gets caught, which is fine. But in a situation like a national park it should have something like from the boundary — say 500 metres inside — it is classed as a feral cat, or something like that. It should be a certain area instead of treating it as a domestic cat. A cat could be 15 kilometres into a national park, and it is a problem.

Because of the Grampians situation, where we have been baiting for the last eight years to get rid of foxes, the foxes are down to billyo. There are still foxes there, like I said, and you will never get rid of them, but the cat population has risen like that because the foxes are not there taking out the little kittens. I do trapping, and I have a girl who works for me as well. She does trapping, and she catches a cat nearly every week. I am glad that I can speak under this privilege, because we have a bit of a problem with that situation from then on. If you are 15 kilometres inside a national park, it is not going to be a domestic cat, I am sure. I have suggested ideas to parks, but they are pretty handicapped because of the rules that are written. So what do you do with it? No-one will tell me, because the rules have been written, like I said, for a small park in an urban situation. It is not on.

The ACTING CHAIR — That is something that came up when we spoke with parks. Are you aware of exactly where that rule is? Is it a regulation, or are we in legislation? The rules around cats, that is.

Mr PANTHER — Yes, I have got it here.

The ACTING CHAIR — Because they are not declared a pest on a certain list, which means they cannot be treated as such for the purpose of controlling them.

Mr PANTHER — No, I have only got the regulation here that says about how any cat that is caught has to be taken to a vet or a pound, I presume to get microchip tested in case it is a domestic cat. It needs some sort of clarification to say what is a feral cat and what is a domestic cat. I own a domestic cat myself, so I can see both sides of it as far as that goes.

Mr RAMSAY — If you go 500 metres in, how big are the cats that you have caught in the traps?

Mr PANTHER — They are quite large. You can get small ones too. You can get runts that have not been eating properly. You will get mainly tabbies, because they convert back to their colour, or blacks. You do not very often get coloured ones, but it does occasionally happen. You cannot say one particular colour or one particular size is classed as a feral cat. It has to be a guideline: ‘so far off private land’ or something like that.

Ms WARD — Would it be unreasonable to expect a domestic cat to have gone that far in?

Mr PANTHER — It should not have, put it that way. That is right. I know they are not allowed out a lot of times, but it does happen. If a cat escapes, you do not want to put it down on sight if it is someone’s cat. What else have you guys got for me?

The ACTING CHAIR — I will try to draw a bit out of you on your book and just generally. Why did you write the book? Give us a rough summary of what it is about and what is in it.

Mr PANTHER — The book itself was to commemorate 150 years of red deer in Australia. That shows my passion for the deer as well. They are not a pest altogether for me. The other reason was that I put all my photos in there so my wife does not sell them on eBay when I die. That was the idea of it. There had been no book written on red deer in Australia. All it was doing was showing what they do at different times of the year and their history.

I have taken a lot of photos over the years of pest animals, and they are used by a lot of shires and parks and land managers right across Australia. They use a lot of my photos, but they say to me the biggest problem is that my photos make the pest animal look so nice. They should be ugly, eating something and that sort of thing. That is one of the biggest problems with my photos. But it also shows the passion that I have for pest animals. I feel no more satisfaction than going around a corner in the national park and there is an adult fox in my trap. It means I have done everything right. I have got rid of it. It is out of the park; there is no problem there. That is what it is all about.

The deer — again, I think they should be controlled. You will never get rid of them. They are here. When deer farming started 30 years ago, I was involved with deer farming. Every deer had to be listed. It had to be shown on a sheet, a return. That stopped after about three years, from whichever department was in control at the time. Then when the market went out so many years ago, and they were getting sold for \$10 or \$20, people did open the gate. They sold them for \$10 or \$20 each. Hunters put them in the bush to

create their own herd. You will never get rid of those ones, the ones in the High Country — sambar, all that. You cannot use the word poison, because if you went to poison deer you are going to poison other things. They have used it in New Zealand, but they have not got the mammals we have over here compared to over there.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you have much knowledge of what has happened in New Zealand over the history of their using poisons?

Mr PANTHER — I have read a few things, but, no, I could not tell you what they do.

The ACTING CHAIR — That is all right. You use the word commemoration, which is interesting, and you talk about how you value deer. Can you just elaborate more on why you value them, and what is the value in them? We have heard a lot about them being pests, and obviously there are purists who want them gone completely. That is a great notion to have, but you understand they will never be gone completely, so just explain to us what is the value of them.

Mr PANTHER — When I started deer hunting some 30 or 40 years ago, I knew every deer hunter in Victoria either by name or by sight. Now I believe there are something like 28 000 licensed deer hunters in Victoria. It shows how that is a recreation sport in itself. I will not go into a bit about how much value it makes and how much money is spent and all that sort of thing, but it is an attraction. The deer now to me does not mean as much as it did back then, because there are so many of them around.

I am also involved in South Australia as far as controlling deer on properties goes, with the ADA, where the farmer allows us to have a certain number of deer on his property. We manage those deer to the fact that we do counts — spotlights, all that — and control them down to that number, and he allows us to hunt there. That is an attraction. I think we have 200 members over there. So that guy at no expense has his deer controlled to the amount that he wants on his property, and we get to go hunting them as well, as an attraction. So that is probably what it is, I would say.

The ACTING CHAIR — In terms of the programs that are being done between government bodies — Parks and organisations — do you think that relationship is good? Do you think it is getting better? Where do you see it going?

Mr PANTHER — It is getting better, and there are more. I have not been involved with all the ones on the other side of Melbourne. All I can see is that there has to be incentive for the people to do it for nothing. On the recent control in the Grampians the game management unit I think put restrictions on it. No antlers were to be taken, because it was not allowed to be seen as a trophy shoot; it had to be as a cull shoot. It is all right if someone wants some meat to use and utilise, but out of our 200 members in South Australia, probably 60 members are meat hunters only. The other around about 120 would be trophy shooters that like antlers. So to me it should still have the incentive for people to be able to take antlers, which would mean that you would get more people to apply for it and you would be able to go into it.

For people to do it for nothing in those sorts of programs, it is costing them for fuel. In the last week I did a rough figure. If I did it as a pest animal control and spent the same hours, I would have charged them \$5000. In other words, they had deer removed for virtually nothing. It was a win-win for all situations.

The ACTING CHAIR — Something that has been a theme of this inquiry has been the argument about deer being a game species or a pest species. It is a very interesting one, given that as a game species we have a mechanism to control who is hunting them — with a game licence. But the argument is that if we are going to take them seriously as a pest, they should be a pest species. When you are talking about the value in them, do you think that by changing them from a game species to a pest species we would somewhat diminish the value to hunters?

Mr PANTHER — I am afraid so, yes, very much so. That is my own personal thing on that.

The ACTING CHAIR — What do you think the result of that would be?

Mr PANTHER — It would probably bring it back. I know it is a long way back, but you would put the stage of a deer in the same category as a pig. There are certain people who hunt deer and other people who

go pig hunting. I should not feel bad about people who go pig hunting, because that is their thing, that is what they do, but they are a different type of people altogether.

The ACTING CHAIR — And certainly the numbers are not parallel.

Mr PANTHER — That is right. Exactly.

The ACTING CHAIR — There are a hell of a lot more deer hunters than pig hunters around.

Mr PANTHER — Yes, and increasing every year.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you think that the government or even this committee through its recommendations should be doing things to increase deer hunter numbers and providing more opportunities for people to hunt deer?

Mr PANTHER — Probably in some areas. Although we are using it in the national park now, there are other parks in the state that could be utilised for deer hunting and controlling animals, which would not reflect on other users of the park. There probably would be.

The ACTING CHAIR — Would you agree that any park that does not have a safety issue or a high visitation that you are currently not allowed to shoot in, if there is no other reason than the type of park it is, it should be open to shooting?

Mr PANTHER — Most certainly. Yes, for sure.

The ACTING CHAIR — And what do you think about changing land tenure so that it does prohibit shooting? There is a lot of talk about increasing the amount of national parks we have and changing some state forests to national parks. Regardless of your opinion on that, do you think it actually should change the rules and restrict more areas that are being hunted in?

Mr PANTHER — That is a mouthful. As long as the designated parks have got designated names so that people know where they are going and know what is happening, I do not think it is a problem either way. At the moment there are too many different parks — like you say, different names for parks — and people do not know which ones they can hunt in and which ones they cannot. As far as having the hunting of a deer as availability in those parks, yes, for sure. That is good. And again, it is controlling. You will not get rid of them; it is controlling.

The ACTING CHAIR — Something else that has been talked about is that we do not know how many there are. I have not read your book. I am actually planning to after today. It sounds like it is a good read.

Mr PANTHER — Thanks.

The ACTING CHAIR — Did you do any work on populations? I would imagine that if you did it might be localised and specific to red deer, but what are your thoughts on our knowledge of populations of deer in the state as a whole?

Mr PANTHER — The only way in America that they do population tallying on deer is by having feed stations to attract deer to come to certain areas. You are not allowed to do that in Victoria. You are not allowed to attract deer. So there is no positive — without doing spotlight counts or monitoring you cannot really get close to it.

With the deer in the Grampians, I was in a small group, which is still going, called the South West Victoria Deer Advisory Group. They did road counts, in which they counted the footprints for 10 separate kilometres for 15 years about three times a year round about, and that is how we sort of came up with those numbers. They were pretty devoted guys, and they are probably all as old as me now anyway, but that was the idea of it, to try to get an idea.

Trail cameras: like was mentioned before, I run 24 cameras all the time. You get an idea of population increase and decrease, but it is not exact. In South Australia, where the fallow deer are, over there we run

28 cameras all the time, so it gives a bit of an idea as well. I have sympathy for the photos you get — 24 by roughly 1500 each time, three times a year, is a lot of photos.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you reckon there would be value in the government doing a bit of work on trying to estimate the population of deer in the state?

Mr PANTHER — There would be. I have looked everywhere to find out a way to do it without having feed blocks and you identify different animals. ‘Quality deer management’ it is called in America, and they know how to do it. If you could do it, for sure, but otherwise I have got no idea.

The ACTING CHAIR — And the quality deer management in America has actually changed the culture of hunting spectacularly.

Mr PANTHER — Yes.

Ms WARD — You talked about the deer culling that you have been involved in in South Australia on these properties. Do you know how effective it has been in terms of reducing deer numbers?

Mr PANTHER — It is not reducing deer numbers, because we usually take about 400 to 500 off these properties every year to retain that population that the farmer can handle or will tell us that he can handle. Because there is a game ranch next door, we believe some of them come from there; others are bred on adjoining properties and all that sort of thing. So it is only talking about those particular properties we manage. Believe me, the farmer lets us know if he sees too many on his crop. To do that culling in particular we allow spotlight culling. We make sure that all members shoot X amount of deer a year before they can actually go looking for trophies and all that sort of thing. So it is fairly well planned.

Ms WARD — So is spotlighting the most effective way you have found to shoot the deer?

Mr PANTHER — Shoot them quick. Yes, it is in certain situations. Because in South Australia it is open paddocks and little bits of bush, it is fine. If you had the same situation in Woods Point or somewhere in the High Country, it would not work. You would get a few, but it would not work.

Ms WARD — Quite different terrain. That is good to know, thank you. I am interested in what you said around the antlers and how they have got to hunt a certain amount before they are able to then take antlers as trophies. This is one thing that has come up a number of times with our committee — how to stop recreational hunters from focusing on big bucks, which are the trophies, and actually going for the does, who are the ones who are breeding and creating more deer. So has that been an effective way to encourage that?

Mr PANTHER — Parks Victoria have already done that with the hog deer in different years, because they estimate how many hog deer and the places you are allowed to hunt down there. Sometimes they will have it that you have to shoot — which I did go in the ballot for and got a ballot in that particular year — a hind before you shoot a stag.

Ms WARD — This was at Snake Island?

Mr PANTHER — Blond Bay and Boole Poole. Anyway, I saw five stags that week. I never saw a female at all, so I never got to have a shoot. I could have taken one of those stags, and it still would have been one deer out of the equation, wouldn't it? I do not think they have had that for a while.

Ms WARD — But taking that into account, more or less that is an effective way of — —

Mr PANTHER — For sure. It could be. In South Australia we do the opposite. We do one doe and one fawn before we are allowed to look for a trophy — of any of the members. So that keeps the numbers down without having to do the spotlighting every year.

Ms WARD — Okay. I know you are not wanting to blow your own trumpet, but you have obviously got extensive experience and knowledge. What do you think is the most effective way of managing deer populations — the most effective methods?

Mr PANTHER — The cheapest way is going to be hunters.

Ms WARD — As in recreational hunters?

Mr PANTHER — Yes, because they are the ones with the interest and passion for it. If they get a program, they will do it because of their passion to keep going with it. If you get somebody like me, we try to get as much done as we can, quicker, but it is going to cost a lot more money.

Ms WARD — So that is a cheaper way of doing it, but across the board of all the different methods that are around for reducing deer populations, do you still think that recreational hunting is the most effective, rather than baiting?

Mr PANTHER — I think it is, yes, in most areas.

Ms WARD — Deer you cannot bait, sorry.

Mr PANTHER — There are areas, like I said before, where there is a confined area. If there were 100 deer at Alice Springs, you could get rid of those 100 deer because you are not going to get them coming from other places or springing out. But if you are talking about the High Country from Bendigo to the border up the other way, you might take X amount out of Buckland Valley and they are going to come back in again. I do not think it would work that way.

Mr RAMSAY — I am sort of drawn back to the reference, because we have covered a fair bit of country so far in this inquiry on the management of invasive pests and we always come back to the fact that one of the better tools is the use of sporting clubs and recreational shooters to help control. The terms of reference ask us to investigate the benefits of Parks Victoria and other agencies such as the Game Management Authority's use of community hunting organisations and individuals in the control of invasive pests.

The first term of reference is specifically on the control of deer populations. Vicki has just asked your opinion about which are the tools that are perhaps best applicable for, if not eradication, certainly control of deer anyway, and you said hunting organisations really, so we have ticked that box as being your view in relation to that. But I was wondering if you have any other comments in relation to the role of Parks Victoria and the Game Management Authority in the use of hunting organisations and/or other control methods, because at the end of the day we can hardly just write after six months of inquiry, 'Yes, the views of the witnesses are that hunting organisations are a great asset to the Game Management Authority and Parks Victoria in the control of invasive pests'. I know that is the one you want to hear.

Mr PANTHER — There are probably numerous things. To get back to Parks Victoria, from what I can find out they have not got the money to employ people to do it, so by having volunteers it is going to tick that box to start off with. You are going to have people who are interested and passionate in that particular animal or having people from Sporting Shooters, ADA — I think they are the two that are mainly interested in the deer. So you are going to have the knowledge of those people as well.

Parks Victoria from what I can see, besides the Blond Bay, Boole Poole hog deer, has virtually had no deer management done up to the last couple of years. It is the old story. Unless someone has done it before, it will not get done. Now, if it gets done and it works fine, it will keep getting done. If you come across a hiccup, people will say, 'I don't want to be involved with it'.

I can see that by having people from the private sector or from ADA, the Sporting Shooters or organisations like that, they are going to bring people to join with Parks Victoria or the sorts of organisations to control. Like I say, you will not be able to eradicate and they would not be able to eradicate, even those guys or people, but having passionate people doing a passionate job I think is the biggest thing for it.

If you had pig hunters in the situation to do deer in the Grampians, it would not work. They would not know what they were doing, the same as many of the Parks Victoria staff, because that is not what they have been brought up for. But by having organisations like ADA, the Sporting Shooters and that sort of thing, that is their passion and they will get it done properly. I know I am going to get a kick because of the

pest animal group I am in, but rather than saying that contractors will be able to do it all and that sort of thing, it is going to be organisations like that doing it for nothing. That is the way it is going to happen, I am sure.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you.

Mr PANTHER — If you want anything else, by all means yell at any time.

The ACTING CHAIR — No worries. I dare say there might be a few questions that we come up with later, but thank you very much for your time today. That was brilliant.

Ms WARD — Yes, terrific.

Mr PANTHER — Thanks for having me.

Committee adjourned.