

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Mansfield — 20 October 2016

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Mr Michael Watson, Watson's Mountain Country Trail Rides.

The CHAIR — Our next witness today is Mr Michael Watson of Watson’s Mountain Country Trail Rides. First of all, welcome and thank you for agreeing to give evidence today at this inquiry into the control of invasive animals. Just to begin with the formalities, I will let you know that the evidence today is being recorded. You will be given a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy prior to it becoming public. Anything you say at the public hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, that is not necessarily the case outside of the public hearing. Would you like to start and tell us what you would like us to hear and then give us some time to ask you questions?

Mr WATSON — Sure. I am one of the six previously mentioned horseriding businesses in the shire. Our business has been going for 34 years. Our business contributes about 4000 bed nights to the area every year, so it is a significant driver of the economy. I am a gun owner, but I am not a hunter. I have private land that abuts the state forest, so I see a lot of invasive animals coming across my property as well as where I ride. I am supportive of hunters. In fact I have a number of hunters that seek my permission and come and hunt on my property on a regular basis. I am an advocate of hunting.

Where there is a little bit of a rising conflict that I think needs to be noted, whether or not it can be managed, is that I have noted over the last two years an increasing number of hunters in the region in which I operate my rides. The nature of hunting that I have observed is that it normally happens earlier in the morning or late in the evening. Our rides would travel through those areas between those hours, so it actually can work quite successfully together. But I have noticed a high number of hunters in the area where I am riding, and some of those hours are starting to change a little bit. I think they have the right to be there, of course, because we have all got access to public land, but there is a potential safety risk. It is not so much from the inaccuracy of the hunter — I would not be accusing them of that — but it is more from the noise of hunting. Usually when hunting deer a very loud gun is used. If you are on a horse, it can get a fright at something like that. Whilst we have managed that so far, that is one of the risks that I can foresee that could lead to a little bit of an accident in the future.

I have also noted that we are having a higher proportion of wild dogs coming into our area. I do have some local people who have put some cameras on my property, and we have noted that the wild dogs are actually following our horses within a 5-minute time frame on some occasions. Whilst we have not had an altercation, it is an area of concern. Whilst we have a person from DELWP that does monitor wild dog behaviour and trapping, it covers a large area and I am afraid it is always a case of who barks loudest — pardon the pun — in terms of where they set their traps and what area they monitor. That is an area of concern.

There are also larger numbers of deer than ever. They do not really directly affect the horseriding. They have not had any effect really on the tracks and trails that we use. We had one incident of deer actually charging out of the bush at one of our horses on a trail ride. I think that was a bit of an unusual situation. It was a young deer that I think was probably in hiding and just panicked. It must have thought it was trapped. That was a bit of an incident at the time. It only happened once.

We have also had what I would describe as a dingo. I know dingoes are under the classification of wild dogs. I actually brought some photos in. It followed my ride for a period of 20 minutes. I had mixed feelings about that one, to be honest, because the wild dogs that I have observed tend to be more aggressive travelling in packs, whereas the dingo that we had was on its own and was quite content just tagging along before it went off on its merry way.

The CHAIR — Do you want us to have a look at the photos?

Mr WATSON — Yes, if you like. I just thought it might be of interest. I caught it with the horses to show that I was actually on the ride at the time. I do not want to argue the case about whether it is a dingo or a wild dog, but I would just like to acknowledge that I think there are some dingoes out there. They are something that I broadly like to see, but I do not want wild dogs. I would leave it to those who have got more knowledge than I have to identify the best way to manage that.

My concern is the increasing numbers and increasing number of hunters, which I acknowledge need to be there, but I would like to think there might be some possible management processes that might be introduced to enable both the hunting and the existing activity to take place in a safe manner. Such proposals might be perhaps hunters giving prior notice to the areas where they might be hunting so other activities that are existing at the time might be notified or vice versa so they know we are in the area. That is the major area of concern for me.

Unfortunately we acknowledge that there are not always good hunters that leave carcasses behind; we do come across those. I have noticed this winter, being a wetter period of time, there is quite a lot of track damage from vehicles that have been driving into the bush. Particularly in the case of emergency now, you would not be able to get an emergency vehicle in there for an evacuation. Again, I think that is not reflective broadly of the hunting community. I come across a lot of hunting camps, and they are always very polite, as we are, so I think there is certainly a place.

I have two lodges located on either side of where I ride. Their purpose is accommodating hunters. I have friends that run those businesses, so again I would like to emphasise the point that I am broadly supportive of it, but I just need to be cautious in the running of our business, particularly with horses being involved that are animals that can get flighty if they get a fright. That is one of the issues that I think needs to be noted, and whether there can be management around that or not remains to be seen.

I think that is broadly all I really wanted to say. There is probably one other thing that again is outside the scope of this. With the hunting that exists, there are a number of hunters that do stray onto private land. That again is an area of concern. We certainly give people permission, but with these cameras that we have on our place from the hunters we do allow to be there, we have seen lots of faces of people we do not know, and that is of concern. We have had some livestock shot over time. That is a bit disappointing, but again it is not broadly representative. So, that is my submission.

The CHAIR — Thank you, and thanks for coming in and talking to us today, because all of this information is really helpful for us in terms of making recommendations. I understand you are not opposed to hunting, that it is fine, but you make sure that it is done in a safe and organised way so that everybody else that is not hunting can go about their business. In terms of regulation or managing, you would assume, if hunting is allowed in national parks and it is used to try to reduce deer numbers, that there would be an increase in the number of hunters. I know you are talking about letting people know who is going to be at the park and at what time. In terms of government, can you think of any particular suggestions, whether it is law or compliance or — —

Mr WATSON — As a commercial operator with a Parks Victoria licence, we submit our trip plans as to where we are riding. I am just suggesting that maybe a similar bit of information be supplied by a regulatory body, so it is Parks Victoria, because it is all public land in much the same way. It is really just user groups in the same area being aware of each other being there. It may not be something that turns out to be easy to apply, but it just seems like an obvious first-step solution knowing each party is in the area and being able to safely travel through it. We have incidents with motorbikes and four-wheel drives, but the difference is that hunters by their very nature are trying to creep along through the area quietly, and then all of a sudden there is a loud noise. That is just the potential risk I see out there. We have managed it so far, but I am just seeing larger numbers, and I think that if we are looking at a solution and a promotion, then that is a consideration that needs to be in there.

The CHAIR — In terms of some of the rogue hunters, or whatever we call them, there are certain practices — for example, people being on property they were not supposed to be on — that you have seen through cameras.

Mr WATSON — Yes, trespassing.

The CHAIR — Have you made any complaints? Have you tried to act on that to stop it?

Mr WATSON — No, I have not. I know other parties have in our area, so the police have been notified.

The CHAIR — I was just interested. What was the response? Was anything done about it?

Mr WATSON — Patrols of police continue to be into our area about trespass on private land. I think there could be examples in many different activity areas of people doing the wrong thing, so I think we just acknowledge it is there. Horseriding people can ride on tracks they should not ride on, motorbike riders can ride, so there is an element in every area.

The CHAIR — I guess we are not trying to put it down or whatever. It is more just to find out what it is and then what the response should be to try to stop it happening. That is all.

Mr WATSON — What I am suggesting is that if there was more acknowledgement of their presence there, perhaps through registering, perhaps through even signage in common areas they are coming into, then maybe that might put a higher onus of responsibility on them rather than thinking they are perhaps sneaking around and there is no monitoring. Once there is some acknowledgement that we know they are there and we are happy for them to be there, then perhaps some more responsibility might follow through from that, because they know that it is an acknowledged activity in that area.

Mr TILLEY — Thanks, Michael. How many licensed park operators are in the area here apart from you?

Mr WATSON — In terms of horseriding, there are six, but there are other activity providers as well, such as cycling and walking tours, I understand. I do not actually know the answer to that.

Mr TILLEY — No. That is fine.

Mr WATSON — But there are also lots of private horse groups that ride through there. In fact it is widely supported with the supply of horse yards in some of our park areas for people to come and camp and to ride their horses through the same region. I am just talking on the part of a commercial operator.

Mr TILLEY — Getting on to that, from other users — other horseriding groups and everything — you hear a bit of noise from other park users and everything about horseriders bringing feed and not taking their bale, their ties and leaving them strung around trees.

Mr WATSON — Absolutely. All areas can have people that do not do the right thing, yes.

Mr TILLEY — So it is still a small problem with that — leaving their feed ties, their hay ties, their bales?

Mr WATSON — I personally do not see that. I probably do not ride in some of the more common areas. I tend to take my rides into areas where there are not so many people. That is part of the experience we try to offer. Those common places for people to camp their horses, I would probably go through there once a year, so I am not as directly affected. Perhaps other operators might be able to give you better feedback than I can.

Mr TILLEY — Just on closing from me, Michael, thanks for your photographs. You have got a good, strong, close connection with the land, and you have probably seen significant amounts up there. But if you want to see an alpine dingo, you have got to go to Queensland and see the five that are up there. I reckon that bloke has got a bit of Alsatian in him, so I do not think he is a dingo.

Mr WATSON — Fair enough. Just the way that he moved across and jumped on the logs and so forth, you just sort of see more the characteristics. It just did not seem to have those aggressive tendencies.

Mr TILLEY — You make a good point on that too, which confused it.

Ms WARD — Were you here earlier for earlier witnesses?

Mr WATSON — I cannot remember who the first ones were. I have been here for about the prior two.

Ms WARD — No, that is all right. You have heard some of the themes that we are talking about, so you have seen that there is support for the emerging hunting industry as a tourism industry.

Mr WATSON — Yes, absolutely.

Ms WARD — Do you see that potential locally?

Mr WATSON — It currently exists. I have got two lodges that have supported hunting tours, so it currently exists, yes. I think they are the ones I have the least conflict with. It is the ones that are camping out in the bush and trying to get to their special spot. Perhaps some of the tracks have been damaged, but the ones from the lodges tend to walk their way in and walk their way out.

Ms WARD — Do you see that if there was a growth in the hunting industry locally, that would affect your business, or do you think you would still be able to work?

Mr WATSON — I think we just need to manage it. Hunting in my view is a niche sport. I think the hunters are going to find it because that is what they are seeking. I do not know that we need to do too much marketing. Talking about Tourism Victoria promoting it, I think a bit like horseriding it is a niche market; people tend to find you regardless of what you do if you offer the right product. It is certainly a very popular area, and it is increasing. I am certainly comfortable with that, but that comes with some challenges, and I think that perhaps just acknowledgement of those people being in the area and just some protocols, if you like — some processes around that — need to be considered. You have to consider the practicality if there are people. You might ask them to do a certain thing, but whether they do it — it needs to be balanced out with the practicality of doing it. That is where my area of concern is, that conflict.

Ms WARD — Do you see an active role for hunting organisations and clubs in helping to police and manage hunters, especially rogue hunters?

Mr WATSON — Absolutely. You know, it is in their interest to have the profile of their organisation as being as professional and organised as possible, so I am sure they are wanting to keep people under that umbrella, much the same as we meet with Parks Victoria every year as a horseriding commercial operator to make sure we have a good profile and a good responsibility — so, yes, absolutely.

Mr RAMSAY — Michael, I am just wondering whether you observe an increase in feral pests through the work that you do in riding through some of the state forests. I mean, can you do an audit yourself in the increase in particular pests?

Mr WATSON — Yes. In September 2014 our area had traps laid down for the wild dogs in an area where I ride. It would probably be an area of, say, 5 square kilometres. In that time frame of a month, they trapped and killed 20 wild dogs, so that was quite alarming. I had my son out exploring one day up the back of Three Chain Road — I live in an area south-east of here — and there was a pack of 12 dogs that he came across, and he quickly turned on his tail and got out of there. Anecdotally I would say there has been a big increase in the wild dog population, and certainly in the deer population.

I had the misfortune to cause \$4000 damage to my car driving along the Jamieson road with a deer coming up over the rise. You just see them all the time. They are not a direct threat to the safety of our horseriding, apart from that single incident of the deer charging out of the bush, but certainly on the roads and probably for our guests who often arrive on a Friday night quite late going to some of the areas, that is always at the back of your mind that they need to be quite cautious coming in, because it is getting quite notorious, the amount of deer crossing the road between, say, Piries through to Jamieson. There are quite a lot of deer.

Mr RAMSAY — Do Parks Victoria speak to you and other organisations like yours in relation to what you observe out in the state forest in relation to pests?

Mr WATSON — I speak more to the dog catcher and DELWP rather than Parks Victoria. I am very aware that Parks Victoria have a very limited budget, and we cannot really focus on the things that we do

not think are going to realistically be something they can do anything about. It is about your own self-management, really, so that would be the best way I could answer that.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks for coming in. Your business and perspective have been unique to this inquiry and something we have not had too much to do with yet, so it has been good to hear that from a different point of view. Just quickly on a couple of things that you mentioned, as for the hunters who like to sneak in, you said, and then all of a sudden there is a loud noise, would you support legalisation of suppressors to take away some of that noise factor?

Mr WATSON — That would be terrific.

Mr YOUNG — You mentioned damage done to tracks in some quite remote places because they are hard to get into. There are two things that I can think of that might aid that. There is better maintenance on tracks. Do you think there is a lacking of maintenance on some of those tracks that could be contributing to that?

Mr WATSON — I think there might be. From our perspective, we are allowed in there all months of the year, but we take it upon ourselves to not travel in there when we think it is unsuitable, too wet. So I think that is just a bit of a respect and awareness issue, rather than putting more money into it. There are so many roads and tracks that need to be fixed up. Some of these more remote ones, realistically you just need to have the common sense to not go on them, but sometimes in the pursuit of their sport they overlook that. It comes back to sort of a lacking acknowledgement. They are there in the first place. They feel like they are just sort of sneaking in and sneaking out, sometimes. It is in the nature of hunting, too, you know — you have to be quiet, move along there quietly.

Mr YOUNG — The other one is that there has been talk about ATVs and side-by-side vehicles. They cannot go on public land at the moment, because there is no recreational registration available to them, whereas you can get recreational registration for a motorbike. Would that be something that might be a great thing, to sort of allow lighter vehicles in there?

Mr WATSON — Yes, that would be terrific, absolutely. It makes sense.

Mr YOUNG — And that would not impact on you guys and what you do?

Mr WATSON — No. We have lots of motorbikes that come across, and they are a lot noisier than the other vehicles. We are happy to share the space. Really what I was alluding to is that it is the nature of not knowing you are there and then the sudden noise. That is really our only concern. Otherwise people camping and doing all sorts of things, they are perfectly entitled to be there. We are quite happy to go past and wave hello. That is the danger that we face in particular in our horseriding.

Mr YOUNG — You mentioned some carcasses that are left around. Do you think it might be easier for people to get carcasses out if they had access to ATVs and stuff, instead of having to walk in?

Mr WATSON — It may be the reason why they are not doing it. I think it just comes down to individual standards. There are plenty of people who load carcasses through difficult circumstances, because that is the way they respect their sport.

Mr YOUNG — What type of park are we talking about, the public land?

Mr WATSON — The state forest is where we have had these encounters.

Mr YOUNG — Do you operate in any national park?

Mr WATSON — We do touch on it in some of our rides, but not frequently enough to have had any encounters I could comment on.

Mr YOUNG — We sort of missed that all the way through. I was trying to pick up what type of — —

Mr WATSON — In the Howqua Hills area we have come across hunters with dogs and things, but again you hear the dogs. It is not a problem.

Mr YOUNG — In terms of increasing hunters in areas to try and bring down deer populations, which is the point of this inquiry, you mentioned hunting lodges as being places that encourage people to get further in, because you have got a point to lodge at, but also they tend to be the more well-behaved ones. Would increased opportunities in terms of hunting lodges and things like that be a good thing, and would that also benefit your business? I do not know how it would.

Mr WATSON — I use one of the lodges as accommodation for my horseriding guests, so, yes, I certainly support that. I just think the behaviour of people who tend to use the commercial accommodation — and who are probably of more economic benefit to us, anyway — tend to be less of an impact. I am not sure if that really answers your question.

Mr YOUNG — That is fine. No worries.

Mr WATSON — I certainly see hunting as a good tourism product, but it just can conflict with what we do and perhaps in the perception of others, but I think there are tools with which to minimise that.

Mr TILLEY — On your business, do you offer packhorse rides and overnight camping as well as the trail?

Mr WATSON — Yes. We go from 1 hour through to seven days, but we mainly use lodge accommodation — so we cross over into private land — and one trip a year where we do the pack out.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for coming in and taking time away from your business.

Mr WATSON — A pleasure.

Witness withdrew.