

# ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

## Inquiry into the control of invasive animals on Crown land

Melbourne — 5 September 2016

### Members

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny — Chair

Mr Tim McCurdy — Deputy Chair

Mr Simon Ramsay

Mr Tim Richardson

Mr Bill Tilley

Ms Vicki Ward

Mr Daniel Young

### Staff

Executive officer: Dr Christopher Gribbin

### Witness

Ms Mhairi Roberts, Animal Welfare Policy Manager, RSPCA Victoria.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Ms Roberts, for coming in today on behalf of RSPCA. I will go through a few of the formalities prior to your starting. First of all, I need to let you know, as is obvious, that this public hearing is being recorded. A copy of the transcript will be provided to you to check for accuracy prior to it being made public. Also, anything you say at the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, once the hearing is complete, anything said outside the hearing is not covered by parliamentary privilege. I think the secretary would have spoken to you about the format. I invite you to provide a 10-minute presentation, then that gives us plenty of time to ask questions of you.

### **Visual presentation.**

**Ms ROBERTS** — No worries. Thank you very much for having me. My name is Mhairi Roberts. I am the Animal Welfare Policy Manager at RSPCA Victoria. The RSPCA believes that government policy on the management of wild animals must maintain a balance between the need to ensure the welfare of the invasive animals and the need to reduce the negative impacts of invasive animals on biodiversity and the community. So any measures taken to manage wild animals must recognise that whether the animal is native, introduced or viewed as a pest does not affect its capacity to experience pain, suffering or distress.

The RSPCA acknowledges that in some circumstances it is necessary to manage populations of wild animals, native or introduced. In most cases these problems have arisen as the result of human activities or interventions. Programs and strategies which prescribe the management of wild animals must be justified, be supported by scientific evidence and have clearly stated aims. These programs should be subjected to public consultation, ethical approval and review.

When management activities are undertaken, the RSPCA believes any methods that are used must be justified, effective and humane: so, justified — there must be evidence of attributable impact to the target species and that control methods will be effective; effective — monitoring must be done not just on the numbers but on the impact; and humane — to minimise suffering the most humane techniques should be used that will cause the least amount of pain and suffering to the target animal with the least harm or risk to non-target animals, people and the environment. The technique must also be effective in the situation where it will be used. It is important to remember that the humaneness of a technique is highly dependent on whether or not it is correctly employed. In selecting a technique, it is therefore important to consider whether sufficient resources are available to fully implement that technique.

The RSPCA is concerned that some methods, such as leg-hold trapping, involve considerable suffering even when carried out according to best practice. However, while these methods remain in use, it is important that operators are informed about how to apply them in the most humane and effective way. The humaneness of a given control method is influenced by its application and the skill of the operator. Control methods must be applied in the best possible way by trained and competent operators. As mentioned in our submission, deer are currently listed as a protected game species, which means the long-term aim is to conserve them. However, they are also now the subject of control because they are having an impact on biodiversity. This conflict should be reviewed to ensure effective and holistic management of this species.

The RSPCA has the following recommendations. A model for assessing the relative humaneness of pest animal control methods has been developed under the *Australian Animal Welfare Strategy*. This model has been used by an independent expert panel to assess the humaneness of a variety of methods used to control invasive animal species in Australia, and these assessments are also publicly available on the PestSmart website. This model should be utilised for control of all invasive animals to ensure the most humane methods are used.

As mentioned, there also needs to be consideration of whether or not deer should be listed as a game species, and there should be ongoing research into more effective and humane options for control of invasive species. This could include replacement of lethal methods with humane and effective non-lethal methods such as reproductive control.

**Mr YOUNG** — Thank you for that presentation and for coming in and giving us your time to present here. In the RSPCA's view, what is the most humane control method for deer in Victoria?

**Ms ROBERTS** — We would utilise the PestSmart model. I believe it would be shooting with a head shot, but we would refer to that website because an independent panel assess a variety of different control methods, and they are actually graded on a scale in terms of the pain and suffering the animal would experience.

**Mr YOUNG** — We have had evidence to suggest that shooting can be improved as far as its humaneness with the use of suppressant as an additional tool. Would the RSPCA support that if it results in a more humane and clean kill for the animal?

**Ms ROBERTS** — If there was evidence to show that the humaneness of a specific method was greater — relatively more humane — than another method, then we would support it, obviously ensuring that it was utilised by someone that was competent to use that method for control of that species.

**Mr YOUNG** — You mentioned that deer are a protected game species. Can you please explain to me how they are protected?

**Ms ROBERTS** — Sorry, could you rephrase your question?

**Mr YOUNG** — You mentioned that the deer species are a protected game species. What did you mean by the use of the word ‘protected’?

**Ms ROBERTS** — I just meant they were listed as a game species under the wildlife regulations. The long-term aim for deer is for them to be conserved so they can be hunted in future, whereas I know that control is being undertaken at the same time because their numbers have increased. So it seems like a conflict to be trying to conserve them on the one hand for a recreational purpose and on the other hand using management programs to control them as well. So it is just our suggestion that that is actually reviewed and to determine what is the best method to ensure that they are effectively managed to reduce the impact they are having on the environment.

**Mr YOUNG** — So what evidence have you got to suggest that they are being conserved or preserved as a population and that the operations performed by recreational shooters are not simply reducing them to the point of eradication?

**Ms ROBERTS** — Well, I do not have any specific data that I would be able to share on that. It is more what we have been informed by, say, Parks Victoria, that their numbers have been increasing. I would suggest that if Parks Victoria are controlling them, then the recreational shooters obviously are not managing them to a point where they are being eradicated.

**Mr YOUNG** — It has been suggested that deer populations in Victoria are to the point where we will never eradicate them anyway, so a combined effort by recreational shooters and management of parks control methods might be appropriate. Would you agree with that?

**Ms ROBERTS** — If Parks Victoria were to employ recreational shooters as part of their management program, I think that potentially could be one avenue for control, but I think it needs to be under a government-supervised program and I think recreational shooters should also be subject to a competency test to ensure their shooting accuracy. That is for the humane outcome for the animals being controlled, whether it is deer or otherwise.

**Mr RAMSAY** — So if I can get this right, the RSPCA, I always thought, had a philosophical policy of not supporting recreational hunting of animals per se.

**Ms ROBERTS** — Correct.

**Mr RAMSAY** — That seems to be part of your mission statement. Yet you have given evidence to this committee that you would support deer, and given it is still unclear — and we will use deer as an example — being categorised as a game animal or pest animal. We have heard plenty of evidence today to suggest that they are reaching plague proportions where they are in fact having a significant impact on the environment. So there might need to be a classification to pest rather than game. That is only what we have heard from some witnesses. We have also heard that there seems to be some support for an amalgam of recreational hunters and professional shooters to enable the management and perhaps a shift from control to eradication. The point I am getting to — and I see the Chair looking at me wondering when the hell is he going to — is: would the RSPCA be comfortable in having an amalgam of recreational shooters that meet the requirements that you have identified in relation to skill and professional shooters as part of an eradication program, if in fact sambar deer needed to be reclassified to enable that control to eradication program?

**Ms ROBERTS** — I think we need to be clear here about the difference between a recreational shooter going out to shoot deer as a hobby on the weekend in daylight hours, which I believe is what is required, versus a direct supervision by Parks Victoria with several shooters going out that are in a targeted area to try and reduce numbers and to try to shoot as many deer as possible. I believe from my understanding that they may use different methods. I am not sure what they are. I think if it is direct supervision, it is a different scenario to recreational shooting, and as I said, they would need to have some form of competency test to ensure that they would meet the same standards as a professional shooter, which are generally accredited by an accreditation scheme to ensure they are efficient at having shot accuracy. Sorry, with some caveat.

**Ms WARD** — What other methods does the RSPCA support in terms of pest or invasive animal eradication, such as rabbits, foxes, pigs?

**Ms ROBERTS** — There are quite a variety of methods that are used for each species. We would obviously expect them to be target specific, and we do comment on our knowledge-base on the variety of methods, but we would often refer to the PestSmart website because that actually has them all in one place and they are all rated on the humaneness matrix scale. I do appreciate that with many species, to be effective, you do need to use several methods in an area and that one method might not always be effective. And they should be used to ensure that they are effective.

We would obviously want the most humane methods to be used, and that is why we would definitely support research to continue to find more humane methods to control animals, so that, if you need to use several methods and some might be less humane, that can start to change and we can actually be a lot more targeted and humane in our approach.

**Ms WARD** — Thank you. What research has the RSPCA done regarding invasive animals? Do you have any?

**Ms ROBERTS** — I do not believe we have done any specific research ourselves, but we would support research that is done.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Thank you very much for coming in today. I just wanted to get a sense of the tension that the RSPCA has between the eradication of animals and its charter regarding cruelty, and get a little bit more, extrapolating out Simon's point about invasive animals. Particularly for the RSPCA, is the focus on the maintaining of native flora and fauna, particularly our native animals, and do you as an organisation see a place for recreational hunting in Victoria?

**Ms ROBERTS** — Our remit is to prevent cruelty to all animals, so we do acknowledge that some animals under legislation are required to be controlled because they do have an impact on biodiversity. We would not say that we were just focused on native fauna. Our concern is all animals, but while we acknowledge that some animals might be subject to control, we would expect the most humane methods to be utilised. The RSPCA opposes recreational shooting because we do think that it is cruel because of all of the components that are within that, so it is not something that we would support.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Say you have got an endangered species that has substantially lower numbers than the sambar deer, which could on estimates today number close to a million in Victoria, if not more. How does the RSPCA deal with that opportunity cost of having potentially a few thousand animals — even less — that are in grave risk of having their habitat destroyed by, say, sambar deer, for example, as opposed to then the million deer that are an emerging invasive species and that all experts, including Agriculture Victoria and Parks Victoria, say that we have to make drastic inroads with to eradicate hundreds of thousands of their numbers if we are to seriously change that? How do you deal with that conflict and that challenge?

**Ms ROBERTS** — Well, we are not land managers, so I suppose we are not dealing with that kind of conflict. So our concern is for the individual welfare of the animals. We do understand that land managers need to make those decisions and determine how they are going to manage species that are threatened as well as species that are having an impact on biodiversity. We are an animal welfare organisation, so we do not have the ethical standpoint of whether or not an animal might need to be controlled. We would just expect that if it is controlled it is done in the most humane manner possible. So it is not a decision that we would comment on.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — I just thought I would tease it out, because I mean obviously if it is for all animals there is not a prejudice then towards native animals — —

**Ms ROBERTS** — There is not prejudice at all.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — So then if the RSPCA is looking at an opportunity cost there would be an adherence then to try to protect the main amount of animals rather than the native species, which we are most focused on, being the non-introduced species that have been there for some time and been pressured by these, particularly cats as well as foxes and the like. But I am just trying to get that sense as well.

The one final point I would just like to make is obviously duck shooters go through an extensive session where there is effectively a course they have to do. My understanding is deer hunters do not have to do those accreditations or courses. Is there a middle ground for the RSPCA on that front, or is it that greater skills training that might get them up to a professional standard is still not a threshold that the RSPCA is willing to consider or accept?

**Ms ROBERTS** — Are you talking about the waterfowl identification test?

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Yes. I will just go into that PowerPoint. If the test is one for the head shot and a recreational hunter can undertake that — and I take the point about Parks Victoria supervising, but Parks Victoria is now supervising recreational hunters and supporting hunters to undertake that role. We had the professional association in today saying that they would like the revenue to go to them rather than it being the deer association or the sports. But if the outcome is the humane eradication of that animal, does it matter if it is professional or recreational, if it has that supervision or has that skill set?

**Ms ROBERTS** — No, and I think that is what I did say earlier, that I think if a recreational shooter was part of this management program and they could demonstrate competency — that they could cleanly kill an animal that they were being asked to kill — and they were supervised as part of the program, I think that that would be okay. But it is all about competency and the skill of the operator and their ability to humanely kill an animal as part of a management program that has really specific aims and that is monitored and measured to ensure that an impact is being reduced, which I think is a different question to recreational shooting.

**The CHAIR** — Could I just ask: does the RSPCA get many complaints about cruelty to animals against hunters — people complaining that animals are being treated cruelly or inhumanely?

**Ms ROBERTS** — As in if an animal has been shot and it perhaps has not been taken by the hunter and has bled out; is that kind of what you are going for?

**The CHAIR** — I guess. I suppose I am just asking the question generally: do hunters, as far as you understand, treat animals in an inhumane way?

**Ms ROBERTS** — It is probably a question I would need to take on notice to go back and have a look at our cruelty stats, and I am sure we could provide them in terms of the number of game species that have a complaint against them — whether or not that person is a hunter. I do not think our statistics would tell us that specifically, but it would more be looking at whether a game species has been shot and then we have had a cruelty complaint. I know that bows and arrows often do quite a lot of damage. We often get a lot of reports about kangaroos, for example, that have been illegally shot with bows and arrows. I know that is something that we do get a lot of complaints about, but it would be something that I have to take on notice and go and find the figures for you and have a look.

**Mr YOUNG** — You said that the most humane method, you believe, is shooting via a single shot to the head. How did you reach that conclusion, as in the single shot to the head component of that?

**Ms ROBERTS** — That was just off the top of my head from the PestSmart website, but I would obviously need to go back and refer to that specifically. As I said, we would utilise the PestSmart website to determine what the most humane method is. I might have spoken out of turn by saying one shot. I think it is ground shooting with a head shot. Whether it is that or not, you would hope that one shot that was cleanly shot would be effective at rendering that animal instantly unconscious, which is what we would expect.

**Mr YOUNG** — It is just that when you are shooting deer, I have been taught from a young age that the main way to shoot them is with a chest shot because you want to hit a vital organ. That is the only way to guarantee that they will go down and you have got more vital organs in the chest and a larger target is easier to have a clean kill, whereas a head shot is actually a smaller target, so you are more at risk of injuring the animal without cleanly killing it.

**Ms ROBERTS** — Yes, and that I think comes back to the competency of the operator. Obviously if it is a head shot and it is done effectively it is going to render the animal instantly unconscious, whereas a chest shot might take a little bit longer because obviously the animal will need to bleed out to a certain point before unconsciousness will supervene.

**Mr YOUNG** — I would have to look back through the professional set of guidelines, but I would imagine they would go for chest shots with deer as well as being the most effective way of actually having a clean kill.

**Ms ROBERTS** — I am not sure if that one is for deer, but if you look at the PestSmart model, you can see that they actually rank them there in terms of less to more suffering, and then they will be listed down the bottom in terms of judging how long it takes for that animal to become unconscious. I can give you the website details. You can actually go and have a look at the matrix and it will show you what method is more humane — whether it is a chest shot or a head shot — and that has been a set used by independent experts, so I think you will find that quite useful.

**Mr YOUNG** — No worries. You mentioned other methods like sterilisation. Has the RSPCA done any work on the costing of what that would look like and what percentage of the target species we would have to actually have an impact on before they started reducing the population?

**Ms ROBERTS** — We have not specifically, but I know there is a lot of research being undertaken into fertility control. I know at the moment it might not be cost effective, but I think it is something that they are looking at as to how it can be made more effective. I think that is just one method that can be utilised; I think there are many others that potentially can be looked into, species dependent. I know that they are developing baits that may be more humane than 1080 is at the moment, which is yet to go through this matrix model, but I think that is in progress.

I think it comes back to using a variety of factors. I think fertility control would be very hard to implement on a really large number of animals over a really large area. However, it might be effective when used in conjunction with other methods — for example, I know with kangaroos, which I know are outside of scope, but they might do an initial cull and then use fertility control on the remaining populations to keep them at a more sustainable level. So I think there is research being done, not by the RSPCA but by scientists who are experts in the field that are looking into whether or not they can make that more viable in the future.

**Mr YOUNG** — With these fertility controls specifically I have heard it mentioned quite a lot with feral cats. What are the RSPCA's views on that, because a cat is not like a deer that does not go around killing native birds and other animals; a cat if you use fertility control is still alive for the remainder of its life and has an impact on the rest of the environment and ecosystem from that point. So what are your views on that as far as shooting a cat dead and stopping the impact that it has from that point or using fertility control?

**Ms ROBERTS** — I think again it comes back to using the appropriate controls in the appropriate areas, and I think that is up to land managers to determine what is appropriate. I know we advocate for people to desex their pet cats because we know that that has an impact on the stray and feral populations, so it is something we are aware of, and we really encourage people to be responsible pet owners to try to reduce the impact their cat might be having. We do also support cat curfews so that owned cats are not having an impact on native wildlife. But I think in terms of the feral population, the most humane method should be used, and the most effective method within that area should be used to control the animals.

**Mr YOUNG** — Along the same lines of cost and effectiveness versus cost, you talk about hunters being out there hunting under supervision of a controlled program by Parks or another department that is relevant. Have you done any work on the costing of that, considering that we have figures that recreational hunters take up to 50 000 plus deer per year? That is a lot of hours spent out in the bush and a lot of time, and it quite simply would not be possible for a department to manage or supervise that.

**Ms ROBERTS** — I think there is an example in New South Wales of the difference in numbers that was taken between recreational hunters and those under a government-supervised program. I think in a six-year period recreational hunters took as much as under a management program that they were able to cull in six weeks, so I think it really does depend, I guess, on how much effort you put into a management program and the resources available. I cannot comment on costs specifically. I think it would come down to efficacy as well and how many animals could be controlled within a certain period of time, but I think cost is outside of our remit; it is not something we could comment on.

**Mr YOUNG** — But as far as New South Wales is concerned they have a very different situation up there as far as the legal requirements and what hunting opportunities there are, as well as populations of deer. We had evidence provided today that they are only taking in the order of 500 a year for recreational hunters, so it is vastly different. It is kind of apples and oranges as far as Victorian hunters within the realm of 50 000, so that might be a bit difficult to compare.

One last question, if I may, Chair: you talked about the reclassification of deer as a pest, and it was brought up when speaking to Mr Ramsay. What would be the ramifications of that reclassification, and how is that reclassification actually going to benefit the reduction of deer as a pest?

**Ms ROBERTS** — I do not know if we could really comment on the ramifications. We were more raising the point that we just do not think that a long-term aim can be to conserve them for future hunting opportunities when there is also a need to control them because there has been evidence that they are having an impact on biodiversity. I think it is more something that needs to be reviewed in terms of legislation to determine what is the most effective way to manage that species, depending on the impact that they are having. So we just wanted to raise that there seems to be a conflict within that legislation.

**Mr YOUNG** — We have talked about it a couple of times today — if the hunter attitude changed and we started taking more females as a ratio to males and were reducing the population and were more interested in bringing it back down to some sort of manageable level, but there were no gains to be made by declaring them pest species rather than game species, why would you support that change?

**Ms ROBERTS** — Sorry, are you saying that recreational shooters are going to change their kinds of methods and you would think that would have an impact in terms of management? Sorry, could you rephrase your question?

**Mr YOUNG** — There are definitely things recreational shooters can learn from and implement to try to reduce the numbers of deer. If those things are being done and it is a benefit as far as that goes to have deer as a game species, and we are being effective in controlling their numbers — whereas if we switch over to pest species and we are not actually doing any more to reduce deer numbers or to solve the problem — then what is the point of the change?

**Ms ROBERTS** — Do you think that recreational shooters would actually change their practices and would actually be having an enough of an impact and would they be measuring the numbers of animals that they are shooting? Are there going to be direct correlations shown between the impact of deer and this change in behaviour? I just wonder how that would roll out. I do not know that I can comment on your question specifically, sorry, because I think it has got too many ifs in it to really comment on. I think there is a conflict at the moment because Parks are trying to control them, so I think it is just something we wanted to bring up to review. It is ensuring effective and holistic management if you remove their game classification, and I suppose what you are saying is that it might not have a difference in terms of hunting because they are not going to be protected in any form, even as game with open seasons in that type of thing.

**Mr YOUNG** — Well, they are not protected now except for in national parks, whereas as a pest species they would actually be protected in more areas than they are as a game species.

**Ms ROBERTS** — As a pest species, though, would there not be an onus on land managers to control them?

**Mr YOUNG** — There may be as far as private land, but we do not have those kinds of controls already. We know that deer are a problem. The fact that they are game species is not stopping those kinds of controls, and as you said, Parks Victoria are doing some controls, so that is not impacting it, whereas if they become a pest species, there will actually be less land that we can go and hunt deer on.

**Ms ROBERTS** — Yes, it is not something I can comment on, sorry. It is not in my expertise.

**Mr YOUNG** — That is all right. Thank you.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Very briefly, just a couple more things. Just quickly, Ms Roberts, thanks for coming in. Is cruelty measured by the RSPCA also from the degradation of an animal's habitat and, in the case of cats and foxes, the destruction of numerous different species that if unabated and challenged will see the eradication of those species? As one of the policy jurors at the RSPCA, is there a consideration of cruelty from that side to the degradation of those habitats of native animals?

**Ms ROBERTS** — Yes, I suppose it depends on the context in which you are looking at it. From our inspectorate side we work within the prevention of cruelty to animals legislation, and that tends to look at aggravated cruelty from a human perspective. In terms of what animals might inflict on other animals or habitat degradation, I think it is probably a little bit outside of our remit. We would expect that where habitat is being fragmented, provisions are made for animals. Either animals might be translocated to suitable habitat or there are some provisions put in place to try to stop that degradation to protect those animals. In terms of predation it is probably a little bit hard for us to comment on that, I suppose.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Do you think the Victorian government should significantly intervene to eradicate foxes, cats and deer? Does the RSPCA support that as a policy standpoint?

**Ms ROBERTS** — No, I think we acknowledge that in certain circumstances control needs to occur. I do not think as a policy standpoint that is something that we would support. That is not what we are about.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your time. We might take you up if you can provide the information that we asked about.

**Ms ROBERTS** — The cruelty statistics.

**The CHAIR** — It may be that during the course of this inquiry we may have other questions, so I hope you do not mind if we write to you and perhaps seek some further information or clarification.

**Ms ROBERTS** — Yes, that would be fine.

**The CHAIR** — This concludes the hearings for today.

**Committee adjourned.**