

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Melbourne—Tuesday, 20 April 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Sarah Connolly—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

WITNESSES

Mr Lawrence Pope, President, and

Dr Megan Davidson, Secretary, Friends of Bats & Bushcare.

The CHAIR: I advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website and rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with Legislative Assembly standing order 234. Thank you, Megan and Lawrence, very much for joining us today at this public hearing for the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations. Before we begin I would like to point out that all evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. What this means is that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to any comments you make outside this hearing even if you are just simply restating what you said during the hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so to check and to approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you again for taking the time out on this miserable afternoon—I think it is still raining outside—to talk to us about what matters to you as part of this inquiry. My name is Sarah Connolly, and I am the Chair of this committee. I am also the Member for Tarneit out in Melbourne's outer western suburbs. I will get my colleagues to introduce themselves.

Mr FOWLES: I am Will Fowles. I am the Member for Burwood.

Dr DAVIDSON: Hi, Will.

Mr POPE: Hi, Will.

Mr HAMER: And I am Paul Hamer. I am the Member for Box Hill.

Dr DAVIDSON: Hi, Paul.

Mr POPE: Hi, Paul.

The CHAIR: Megan and Lawrence, I might get you to introduce yourselves and just explain to the committee who you are speaking on behalf of today, the group that you are representing. If you have prepared a 5-minute presentation, if you have got slides, great. If you do not, no worries; plenty of people are doing statements. And then what we will do is I will throw to members of the committee to ask you questions. It is all a little bit like having a big discussion.

Mr POPE: Thank you very much. Thanks for the opportunity of being able to present to the inquiry. My name is Lawrence Pope. I am the President of the Friends of Bats & Bushcare group. We are a Parks Victoria 'friends of' group, and we work with the Grey headed flying fox colony at Yarra Bend Park. We have been working with the bats down there for about 17 years. Megan, are you going to introduce yourself?

Dr DAVIDSON: Yes, Megan Davidson. I am the Secretary of Friends of Bats and Bushcare, and, ditto, that is my main focus these days, although I am the immediate past CEO of Wildlife Victoria. In fact I did make a submission to this committee as the CEO, but because I am no longer there I am not speaking to that submission obviously. I am here just for Friends of Bats and Bushcare.

Mr POPE: Our principal interest in being here today is to represent the interests of wildlife in the development of environmental infrastructure and parks and recreational facilities and that kind of thing going forward with Melbourne's increasing population. I guess the several points we would like to make, very quickly, are that the more humans we have in parks and around wildlife the more the incursion we have into the wildlife refuges and that in order to have a balance of wildlife and human activity there need to be places where the wildlife can actually escape from humans. We have lots of humans in Yarra Bend Park, but we have had to exclude areas by fencing and with good signage from human incursion because humans, being what they are, naturally want to go into every nook and cranny of the park, which effectively means that you have wildlife disturbance and they are unable to sleep and rest and raise their young and so forth—the very things that people like to see—if humans are allowed unfettered access into every particular corner. The way we have combined

the challenges of enabling people to enjoy a colony of flying foxes and the other animals—the snakes and lizards and birds that live in and around the colony—is to have good lookouts. We have very effective lookouts. We have good paths and fencing and good signage. It is very clear where people are allowed to be and where they are not allowed to be and what constitutes a wildlife refuge and protected species refuge and where they can go. We find that that works very well.

In the early days where there were dogs off lead, we found that our wildlife, our young joeys and wallabies, were killed in a matter of months. They did not survive very long. So there was an absence of those native species in the park due to dog attack, and that is the experience of wildlife groups right across Victoria. Where you have dogs off lead you have no ground-dwelling native species to speak of. They simply get either mauled to death or chased onto the road and hit by cars. Now, people love dogs and that is great. It underscores the need to have really good off-lead zones for dogs that are separate from wildlife areas—areas where there is wildlife and listed species like greater flying fox colonies.

Other areas where you have a conflict—I guess we are talking mainly about a lot of conflict resolution here in our experience—is that fishing, for example, is very popular, but where you have fishing you have lines and hooks in trees. Birds fly beneath the lines over rivers. Lines get caught in trees above rivers. Hooks hang down. Birds fly through and get hooked on the hooks or a flying fox will fly through. We did three rescues in a matter of days from fishing line and hooks suspended below trees over rivers, and these are dangerous rescues, difficult rescues. They were too dangerous for me, and I had to send my wife, Megan, in to do the rescues.

Dr DAVIDSON: I went in.

Mr POPE: Megan went into the river—

Dr DAVIDSON: Into the Yarra.

Mr POPE: and managed to successfully retrieve two of those bats. They required extensive surgery—lots of veterinary costs and so forth. So I think with fishing if you are wanting to set up public parks and so forth and you plan to have fishing there, restrict it to a fishing zone where the activity is allowed but the damage is minimised and where you can have regular clean-ups of fishing line and hooks and so forth. That enables the existence of both the activity and wildlife welfare. To minimise that impact is very important.

We support CCTV. We think with CCTV it does not only create a sense of safety for the diverse population of men and women and children and so forth and discourage antisocial behaviour, it also protects wildlife. It protects animals. It tends to have a dampening down effect on people who want to use those parks—how can I put it—for purposes other than enjoyment of the general population, let us put it that way.

Dr DAVIDSON: It discourages rubbish dumping as well.

Mr POPE: It discourages rubbish dumping.

Dr DAVIDSON: Which is a huge problem in the parks.

Mr POPE: We really encourage the idea of heritage to include indigenous heritage, and by indigenous heritage we also mean the 3 million- and 4 million- and 5 million-year-old heritage of non-human indigenous species as well. They have lived here for a long time. They have built this country, the forests that we enjoy and that we live in and around, so we would like to see them included in the notion of what needs to be protected. Sometimes we have a situation where the welfare of one or two older European trees has been given extraordinary weight where the welfare of a whole bunch of indigenous plants and trees and species and mammals—living species—is accorded very little regard and little weight.

We have urged the inquiry to regard wildlife as not something to be gotten rid of, something to be excluded, but something to be appreciated and enjoyed and as providing an opportunity for education and the enjoyment and the experience of nature—that there is something other than playing fields and sporting facilities and that kind of thing. We do see this with the encouragement of Landcare groups and so forth, but young people are really getting involved in protecting areas of habitat and in establishing really good respectful relations between human presence and nature in a kind of David Attenborough sort of way that we did not grow up with. We grew up with the kind of John Wayne environment where nature was there to be used—it was for us and we had to use 100 per cent of it. Well, thankfully those days are gone and we have got people like Attenborough

and others like him in Australia who foster a more respectful and intelligent and educated relationship with nature. Megan, do you want to add a few words?

Dr DAVIDSON: Yes. There is a huge challenge with balancing what humans want to do with what is sustainable, and the issue of dogs is a real one. There has been an explosion of dog ownership over the last 12 months with the COVID lockdown. Dog ownership has soared, so there are a lot more dogs being taken by their humans out into the environment, and I would really like to see an effort being put into a reversal of the current belief among people that they can have their dog off-lead unless they see a sign saying otherwise. That seems to be the belief that most people we speak to have. When you ask them to put their dog on a lead, they actually believe that they are allowed to have their dog off-lead unless there is a sign that says they cannot. We would like to see a reversal, where we change that norm in the community so that people understand their dog has to be on a lead unless they see a sign that says it can be off-lead—so it completely reverses the current belief in the community. Because if we have unregulated, unleashed dogs, we cannot have any space for wildlife, at least wildlife that lives on the ground that cannot get away from dogs. Indeed a lot of wildlife you cannot have even if there are dogs on-lead. If wildlife can smell and detect those animals, the wildlife will not be able to live in that area, so the impact of dogs on the environment is considerable. That is not even thinking about the impact of the huge amount of dog excrement that gets washed into Port Phillip Bay. It is a huge problem. The problem of disposing of dog waste, even that picked up in plastic bags, is a big environmental problem that needs a bit more consideration about this as being a sustainable activity.

Mr POPE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is actually very interesting, and I think it is one of the first times we have heard about it—not about the dogs, because we have heard from a very wonderful woman today, Megan, that I think took over from you and your role.

Dr DAVIDSON: Oh, good.

The CHAIR: Yes. And we have had a couple of conversations this afternoon about dogs, dog ownership, dog attacks, but the dog excrement that is being washed away into the rivers and things like that, that is a really good point. As someone who owns a dog—and I have got only one beagle now—we are the type of dog owners where, if you let a beagle off its lead, it will never come back. You will not be a dog owner.

Dr DAVIDSON: Dogs are lovely animals.

Mr POPE: We love dogs.

Dr DAVIDSON: I really have nothing against dogs.

The CHAIR: It is a very interesting point that you raise about dog ownership. We know people are, particularly during the pandemic, going out and buying new puppies and things like that. It has been really great for people's mental health, particularly those people that have been isolating at home alone. But I just want to dig in a bit deeper about the dog attacks on wildlife. How would you describe the level of compliance by dog owners with the measures that are currently in place? You say that you want to see the reverse happen. Do you think it is suburb specific? Is it particular areas? Are dog owners in some areas more compliant than others?

Dr DAVIDSON: It is a good question, and I do not really know the answer. But I guess you tend to notice the people who are not compliant more than the people who are. We do try and say to people, 'Thank you for having your dog on a lead' so that we are reinforcing the good behaviour. But there is an enormous sense of entitlement that we find amongst the people who do not have their dogs on-lead.

Mr POPE: We have got paths running both sides of the river, 500 metres, basically the extent of the flying fox colony. It is about 500 metres either side of the Yarra River. On one side we have dogs on-lead, strictly dogs on-lead. It is a conservation zone. Both sides are conservation zones clearly marked with fencing. On one side of the river we get really good dogs-on-lead compliance. But it is quite visible, so the person with the dog is fairly continually encountering other people who are aware that they are in a conservation zone that is strictly dogs on-lead. So we get good compliance on that side of the river. On the other side of the river it is more secluded and more bushy, and we had in the past very poor compliance—we had about 20 per cent compliance—to the extent that after over 2½ years of trying to encourage compliance we abandoned that and we have now a no-dog zone. It is a no-dog zone at all on that side of the river. It is very close to areas where

people can have their dogs, the Fairlea ovals, which are dogs off-lead. And opposite the Parks Victoria office is a whole area, an oval, that is dogs off-lead, and it has bins and good facilities. So people do have that good option, but having those 500 metres of no-dog zone has really worked for the wildlife and for our revegetation zones.

Dr DAVIDSON: We still get people coming through—

Mr POPE: We still get a couple of people, but it is about 10 per cent rather than 90 per cent. So it depends. I think visibility and good signage have a lot to do with it.

The CHAIR: Do you think it is fair to say that where there are more off-leash dog exercise areas the habitat in the surrounding area is left in a better condition, that you have less attacks? Is that a fair statement to make?

Mr POPE: I think so. I think people will tend to gravitate towards areas where it is socially acceptable for them to be in. We also underscore with signage the presence of snakes and ticks, the downside of letting your dog wander into the bush and be in the bush. I think it is a good idea. If people can take their dogs to somewhere safe, I think they are going to generally use those areas more frequently.

Dr DAVIDSON: I think unfortunately it only takes a very small number of people who do not do the right thing to have a big negative impact.

Mr POPE: And there is the creation of new parks or gardens, but we have also encouraged the establishment of island habitats mid water—so places like Sale and Tatura have got good islands where birds and flying foxes can roost unmolested and where wildlife can seek refuge away from dogs—as well as good onshore fencing around areas of wildlife refuge. But, yes, people love to look at the wildlife. The overwhelming majority of the public love the idea that wildlife are being protected and in any kind of way.

The CHAIR: Just one last question—just a comment. I noticed during COVID on my walks I was more inclined to see wildlife such as birds that I did not think that I had seen before, because it was so quiet and not many people around. But my last comment is around education. Out in Tarneit we have a lot of grasslands and we have some endangered species, some very special little creatures—I will not say cuddly creatures—the sorts of things that might give you a little bit of a scare if you came across them. I am just wondering: is there any role in state government in schools creating more awareness around the types of endangered species in the local area? Like I said, in Tarneit, Truganina and Williams Landing it is not so much the cuddly, lovely creatures that we see on billboards. There are things like, I think it is, the little growling frog and—I feel like I have forgotten the name—it is a squeaky lizard. I cannot remember what its actual term is—the sort of thing you would sort of go, ‘Oh, it’s really in there’. But children in the local community I do not feel receive a lot of information about it and therefore they are not aware of why grasslands are so important to the local area and have been for decades, even before houses were built—what is actually in there and worth protecting. Whose role do you think that is?

Dr DAVIDSON: Australians are incredibly unknowledgeable and ignorant about the environment and about the Australian species. It is incredible how little Australians know or have an interest in Indigenous animals. Even the big ones, even the big cuddly ones, they really know very little about. So we do have a cultural problem and a knowledge problem, and, look, I think educationally I would like to see a lot more emphasis at primary level, getting kids interested in the local environment and what is in it and what is endangered and what has been lost. I mean, let us face it, there have been a lot of extinctions, and there will be more extinctions over the next 50 to 100 years. So yes, education, and starting with kids is always a good place to start.

Mr POPE: I find that when I say to the kids and the adults, ‘What you’re looking at now’—when we look at the bats and they are all asleep or they are chatting to each other—‘is you are looking at Australia as the megafauna saw it. You’re in a time machine. You’re looking back in time: when the megafauna, wombats the size of Volkswagens, looked up that’s what they saw too’. And they find that a kind of spellbinding notion—that they are actually looking directly at ancient Australia. This is the Australia of a million years ago or Australia as the Aboriginal people experienced it for 50 000 years. It does not matter what kind of creature you are talking about, they can be celebrated, and the more you learn, the more questions you have and the more interesting they become, be it a skink or a grassland and what kind of animals call this home. You are really looking at the real Australia as home, and what is your relationship there? How can we help them? How special

are they? How long have they been here? And how can we actually help them and celebrate them? We now have a role. Perhaps we do have a role in the environment as protectors of what is left and celebrating what is left and making sure it does not come to harm. And I find especially young people are really enlivened by this idea of they are not nothing; they actually have a role in protecting the world around them and they can use their voice and their writing and physically get on the ground and plant trees and help—what can we do? And it is a great conversation to have.

The CHAIR: I like that, as a mum of two small kids. I am going to throw to Paul.

Mr HAMER: Thanks, Sarah. Just a brief clarification on allowing off-leash dog areas by exception rather than perhaps as a general rule: were you talking about just within a certain distance of creek land settings or were you talking more generally so if you had a local government area you would be recommending or suggesting that a much more detailed approach be taken to the areas in which dog off-leash areas might be provided?

Dr DAVIDSON: I think the current situation is very confusing for people. I think it would be much clearer for people if they had a very simple rule: if you are outside your own property, your dog must be on a lead unless you are in a location where there is signage that says you can have it off lead. That would apply to beaches and parks and streets. This would also see a reduction in the episodes of dog-on-dog attacks and dog-on-children attacks. You know, dog attacks send a lot of people to the accident and emergency department every year. These are dogs-off-lead problems. So yes, I would like to see a broad reform across the community that makes dogs on lead the norm and dogs off lead the exception, and that happens in designated areas.

Mr HAMER: Thank you. Just a very quick one: I think in your submission you also talked about fishing zones, which we did hear about slightly earlier in the day as well. I was just wondering how you would see that actually operating in practice given that I expect that where the fishing is occurring and where some of this impact on wildlife is occurring is also where the fish to catch generally are. So in terms of trying to balance the different demands, how would you actually see that working?

Mr POPE: There are a couple of ways. I was a mad keen young fisherperson myself so I have some experience of fishing. Sometimes in fishing you have natural focus points—for example, on the shoreline you will have jetties. Fishing from jetties can be a fishing zone. That way you restrict the amount of fishing detritus to a 100-metre or 200-metre area around the jetty. Another way to reduce the impact of fishing would be to exclude the use of lures in freshwater systems. You all know what a fishing lure is? You cast it out and then you reel it in. It mimics the behaviour of a fish. A wild fish comes up and grabs that lure, and then you reel it in. Now, fishing lures can have nine hooks on them, and when they get hung from a tree there is very little chance of any animal coming into contact with them without being hooked—and there is just the sheer frequency of casting out on a trip. So eliminating fishing by lures can be even by itself can be of help. Even not allowing lure fishing in areas of river freshwater systems would be one way of reducing the impact of fishing. If you had a large park with overhanging trees on a river you could say, ‘We don’t allow it. There is no lure fishing, there is only bait fishing from here in this zoned area or fishing with floats and so forth’. But any way of reducing the presence of or the spread of fishing lines and hooks in water systems and entangled and hanging over rivers would be useful. I do not know if that is any help to you.

Mr HAMER: Yes, that is good. Thanks, Lawrence. That is it for me.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Paul. I am going to throw to you, Will.

Mr FOWLES: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Megan and Lawrence, for your submission. It was really interesting to hear, I guess, some of these more general wildlife issues teased out but almost in a sense through the prism of the welfare of the bats. Tell me: bats have not been without controversy in the last 18 months. There are a few, I guess, pieces of fiction getting around. How would you characterise the reputation of bats at the minute?

Mr POPE: Look, it is interesting. We were expecting a tsunami of bad bat stories and queries and questions from people, but really people have been able to flesh out the truth from fiction. It really has not been any real problem, the COVID-19. There is no coronavirus in Australian wildlife, no COVID-19 in Australian wildlife. There are hundreds of bat carers down the east coast and south coast. We raise orphaned flying foxes ourselves

in our own homes, as do many other carers. If there was anything unusual to be caught from bats, the bat carers and rescuers would all get it first, and we are all in robust health.

Dr DAVIDSON: We are the sentinel chickens.

Mr POPE: We are the sentinel chickens. In fact I would say we have better health than the general population. It has been quite okay. Really bats are clean, healthy animals, and people understand that they have a critical role in the environment, particularly the megabats, which are the flying foxes. They only have one job, and that is to build forest, and they build it from Adelaide around to Brisbane. The grey-headed flying foxes, which is the species we work with here in Melbourne, are highly migratory. But there have been no real concerns from the general public, thankfully.

Mr FOWLES: The grey-headed flying fox of course has a storied history in Melbourne. The relocation of the camp from the botanic gardens to Yarra Bend—I guess it was five years ago or something, was it?

Dr DAVIDSON: Eighteen.

Mr POPE: Eighteen years ago.

Mr FOWLES: Wow. Okay, good. Eighteen years ago—it is obviously fresh in my mind. How has that been received, do you think, and would you term that process as a good process or a successful process?

Mr POPE: It has been a remarkably successful outcome. I was a bat move sceptic. I led the campaign to save the bats when they were in the botanic gardens and was very concerned about their welfare, and the history of relocating flying fox colonies was very poor—and it still is. Out of every 20 attempts, 18 fail. But the bats relocated to Yarra Bend Park. It is a really good natural setting for them. There is a big escarpment that protects them from the wind. They chose that location; we did not pick them up and put them there. There was a list of 16 locations where the bats could relocate themselves to that would be acceptable to the government, and they chose the second site on that list, so they are pretty politically astute animals. On one side of the river it is Labor; on the other side it is Liberal. When it gets too hot on one side they just move across the river.

Mr FOWLES: So the bats designate a leader to negotiate that preferred site—is that how it works?

Mr POPE: That is pretty much it, yes. They decide. There are a bunch of top bats, and they relocated the colonies to an acceptable location.

Mr FOWLES: Fat bats, perhaps.

Mr POPE: That is right, yes.

Mr FOWLES: Tell us, though: there was this suggestion put about last year, I think, that that camp would be relocated again.

Dr DAVIDSON: There was no serious suggestion, Will. As everybody knows, it was simply a particular politician trying to get some media attention. There was no serious suggestion that that would ever be on the table.

Mr POPE: No, the flying foxes' camp is in Yarra Bend Park. The other one is in Doveton, so there are two main flying fox camps in Melbourne. And remember, the camps act like big railway stations, so bats get on, bats get off, on their way east and then north to Sydney and Brisbane and vice versa. But it is a perfect location for the bats. It is the sort of camp that they have been roosting in for the last million years, so we expect them to be there for at least another thousand years or so, if we are still around.

Dr DAVIDSON: And do not forget you cannot actually relocate a camp. You can only disperse a camp, and then they end up where they choose.

Mr POPE: They would probably be back in the botanic gardens. They would choose to go back to the Royal Botanic Gardens if they were dispersed out of Yarra Bend, because it is the next nearest summer survivable site for the flying foxes. It has got, again, a nice deep gully, subtropical trees and plants with a lake that they can get a drink from. They need to drink every day, so it would be pretty much either Yarra Bend Park or the Royal Botanic Gardens. That would not suit the gardens' perspective and it would not suit ours either.

The situation they are in now is a culturally sustainable, socially sustainable natural setting, whereas in the gardens there was always this tension between, well, the impact on a lot of the exotic trees and so on and so forth.

Mr FOWLES: So as part of that discussion, I understand your characterisation of it, Megan, but I think incredibly it was taken as a serious suggestion by Channel 9. They ran it on their bulletin, it went in the *Age*, and you know, there was this genuine—

Dr DAVIDSON: ‘Put them in quarantine immediately’—it was very unsophisticated.

Mr FOWLES: Yes. So the further suggestion that was made as part of that conversation was to potentially cull that population. How would you characterise that suggestion?

Mr POPE: Well, it is ridiculous. The population falls to 3000 over winter and rises to 50 000 over summer, so bats are arriving and departing the entire time. There is no such thing as culling a camp, because the camp changes its membership all the time, so it would be like saying of the MCG, ‘Let’s cull the population of the MCG on grand final day’. Well, it would not make any difference because they are going to come back the next year for the next grand final, so the population of the MCG on grand final day is to do with what is happening there, for the bats it’s the flowering and fruiting of trees in Melbourne that provide critical food resources.. Also, culling an endangered species? What?!

Mr FOWLES: Presumably though if we culled it only for Collingwood games, then you could over a period of time—

Mr POPE: Well, very few people turn up. It is like Melbourne in winter for the flying foxes. There are very few flying foxes in the camp because there is nothing going on, like Collingwood—nothing going on in a game.

Mr FOWLES: Very good. Thank you for the discussion and for your time today. I will hand back to the Chair.

Dr DAVIDSON: Thanks, Will.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Will. Megan and Lawrence, I am just conscious of time. We have got 3 minutes left. It has been a fantastic discussion and you have raised things that no-one else has really talked about. In the last 3 minutes is there anything else that you want to raise and draw to the committee’s attention?

Dr DAVIDSON: Look, something that may not have come up, and I know it is something that we see a lot when infrastructure is being built, whether it is playground equipment or drainage systems in lakes and parks, is there seems to be a lack of thinking about whether what is being built is going to be wildlife safe. For example, we see playground equipment that ends up trapping birds and we see drainage systems put into lakes that also trap and kill aquatic birds and animals. So whoever is designing the system needs to stop and think, ‘What is the impact of what I am designing going to be on wildlife? Is it wildlife safe?’.

Mr POPE: And engineers are really good at fixing these problems, they just have to know there is a problem in the first place, and the good news is it usually does not cost any extra money to do. Tattoo it on their arm, ‘Is this wildlife safe?’, you know? Thank you.

The CHAIR: That is really interesting. That has not been raised. Thank you. That is a really good point. That is fantastic. I wish there were more of you. There has been a lot to learn from you today.

Committee adjourned.