

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Sale – Monday 26 June 2023

MEMBERS

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WITNESS

Mr Sean Dooley, Public Affairs Manager, BirdLife Australia.

The CHAIR: Mr Dooley, welcome.

Sean DOOLEY: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: I will read out my little script, and then we will get cracking. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by the privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

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For the Hansard record, could you please state your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes, certainly. Thank you. My name is Sean Dooley. I am the National Public Affairs Manager for BirdLife Australia.

The CHAIR: We will invite you now to make an opening statement of around 5 minutes. Then we will introduce the committee and commence our questions.

Sean DOOLEY: Certainly. Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today. I am speaking on behalf of BirdLife Australia, which is our only national bird conservation charity. Since 1901 BirdLife Australia and its predecessor organisations have fought to raise awareness of and to prevent the loss and extinction of Australia's native birds. We currently have a national staff of around 130 and a supporter base of more than 330,000 people around Australia who want a strong voice speaking up on behalf of Australia's birds. I personally have been a member of BirdLife Australia since I was 11 years old. Yes, I am officially a bird nerd – maybe that was the term you were looking for earlier. I have participated as a volunteer surveying threatened birds for over 30 years, and I have been working for the organisation since 2009.

Science is at the heart of everything that BirdLife Australia does, and today I would like to take you through some of the science involved in duck shooting in Victoria and look at its conservation impacts. Firstly, the science is basically now in. BirdLife Australia is actually not a radical partisan organisation. We have, as I said, hundreds of thousands of supporters from all walks of life, but loving birds is neither a conservative nor a radical position. We find that Australians love their birds, and as a result we have conservative supporters and we have more left-wing supporters.

When I first started working at BirdLife Australia, to be honest, duck shooting was not seen as one of our major issues, and in fact we had members who were duck shooters. Personally, even though I found the actual shooting of native birds abhorrent to what I believed in, I philosophically was not opposed to duck shooting – because who am I to impose my moral judgement on others' activities? I know that there certainly has been in the past some good conservation efforts put by some genuine, caring people in the shooting community who do care about protecting the habitats that protect the birds that they love. However, we just disagree on the way we show that love for our birds.

However, working for the past 15 years at BirdLife Australia and seeing the science that has come in and seeing what has happened in the field in Victoria for basically 15 duck seasons, my view and the view of the organisation has changed on the viability of a continued native duck-shooting season. We now have a far better picture of the state of Australia's waterbird populations than we ever have, and it is extremely alarming. More than 50 per cent of our waterbird species, including many of our game birds, have been in serious population decline since at least the 1980s, with some populations crashing by 90 per cent. Now, these conclusions are not based on anecdotal evidence. This is not just a couple of birdwatchers down at the pub saying, 'Well, I've seen

some birds at this particular swamp, and I haven't seen them at other swamps.' This is an analysis of decades of Australia-wide surveys and monitoring.

Two of the most comprehensive pieces of work in this area are the eastern Australian waterbird survey, which has been run by the University of New South Wales every year since 1984, and BirdLife Australia's own national waterbird index, where we analyse literally millions of waterbird surveys dating from the 1970s, drawing upon more than 25 different databases to analyse how our waterbirds are going – and the news is not good. The picture that the research paints is complex, but the overall theme is that the majority of our waterbirds are in decline and facing a crisis. This applies to individual threatened species like the Australasian bittern, also known as the bunyip bird – the source of the bunyip myth, as it hides in the reed beds and gives its booming call and is never seen – and also the Australian painted snipe. Both of these birds have been uplisted nationally as endangered within the last 10 years. But it is also occurring across formerly common species, including six of the eight game species that have traditionally been hunted in Victoria. These declines are happening with common waterbirds and they are happening with the birds that are already rare. We are right on the cusp of quite a crisis in our waterbird populations.

We are not saying at BirdLife Australia, and the research does not say, that duck shooting is the prime driver of waterbird declines. But what is happening, the main way really for waterbird losses in Australia, is the loss of habitat, which has been exacerbated by two factors in the last 20 years in particular. One is our poor use of water resources in this country for the environment, and the other is the increasing impacts of climate change in terms of our severity of droughts. But the trouble with having a duck season is that it has a multiplier effect on these events that are driving a decline in our waterbird species.

Basically the lead researcher on the eastern Australian waterbirds surveys, Professor Richard Kingsford from the University of New South Wales, sums it up really well in terms of waterbird populations and duck numbers. In a natural boom-and-bust system in Australia you would have at the peak time – he says it is like a bouncing ball. It used to be that it was like a super ball, one of those really high, bouncy rubber balls – that when you got a drought, when you got bad conditions, the population would crash; but it would bounce up to the same level in a good La Niña season. So you were constantly getting this super ball bounce, which was at the same height at its height.

What has happened since the 1980s is that we have had the millennium drought and the drought of the previous 10 years, and it is more like a tennis ball bounce. So every time the numbers go down, the ball does not bounce up as high. The first couple of times it almost gets there, but each resulting bounce is actually lower, and that is what is happening with our waterbirds. The impact that duck shooting is having is that every time that our waterbird populations are trying to get off the canvas after some bad years – we are talking in Victoria about how the average number of ducks that are declared to be shot each season has over the last 10 years averaged about 300,000. Taking that number of waterbirds out of the system as they are trying to recover is seeing a constant decline in our waterbird species.

This is most evident for some of our game species. As I said, our research has shown that six out of eight of the game species – which are the birds that are the most common; that is why shooters want to shoot them, because they are out there and they are able to get something to take home – those most common birds, none of them have shown growth in the last five years. All of them have shown downward trends, but over the long term six out of eight have had observable, really strong declines in their population. Two of those species, the hardhead and the Australasian blue-winged shoveler, have now been taken off the game list in Victoria. This was unthinkable 50 years ago. Those birds were very common, and they would turn up in good years in Victoria in massive flocks. One of our problems with the way that the system is regulated by the Game Management Authority – I will call them GMA from now on – is that despite BirdLife Australia giving this evidence to the GMA of the decline of Australasian shovelers, for a lot of the past few years the shoveler was still allowed to be shot, just in reduced bag numbers, so instead of the eight that was happening for the other species, it was only four per day. That did not work. The shovelers are now listed as vulnerable in Victoria, and they are now off the shooting list altogether.

And this is the second problem from our perspective at BirdLife Australia and why we recommend that we need to cease native duck shooting in Victoria: it is not only the science but it is the ways, the processes, by which we act on the science that are letting our ducks – and our supporters, to be honest – down. As I said, in the lead-up to every duck season, our waterbird researchers are taken from their invaluable work with

communities and other agencies in wetland restoration and monitoring, and we have to put them on actually assessing where threatened species are in Victorian wetlands and recommending to GMA which wetlands should be closed to protect those threatened species. This takes an inordinate amount of time, but we have to do it because it is not being done at a government level. Science is at the heart of everything that we do and all our researchers do, and it has been incredibly distressing and frustrating for them to go through this process, where they are in a room with people who want the duck season to go on no matter what, their credibility is always called into question and they are accused of bias when they have just been following what we always do, which is following the science.

The CHAIR: Mr Dooley, if you could finish up.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes. That has led to some really perverse outcomes and some really disastrous outcomes, such as in the lead-in to the 2017 duck season, when we alerted GMA that there were 168 blue-billed ducks at Round Lake near Kerang. Blue-billed ducks are a threatened species and they are on the non-shooting list. GMA said that no, the season was allowed to go ahead at Round Lake because according to them blue-billed ducks do not like to fly. They are not flightless birds; they do fly, but they generally do not like to fly, and they will dive underwater to avoid any danger. So the season went ahead. Twenty-one of those blue-billed ducks were shot in the opening weekend, and then the wetland was closed. That is 21 threatened birds that we cannot ever get back.

The processes have improved, I have to say. GMA have taken BirdLife Australia's input a lot more seriously in the last couple of years; however, they can still be very unsatisfactory, and this year on Anzac Day it was reported to us that there were over 100 freckled ducks at Lake Buloke. Anzac Day was the day before duck season opened. Freckled ducks are a threatened species and should be protected. We alerted GMA that there were freckled ducks potentially at this wetland; however, due to resource issues, or I am not sure why – also, BirdLife Australia experts are not seen as independent, so we cannot go out and verify those sightings – we had to wait 11 days before GMA were able to send out any officers to look at those birds. They found 195 freckled ducks there and also 650 protected blue-billed ducks and over 200 protected shovelers. Those wetlands were closed two days after that sighting, but that was 11 days of the season that this wetland with phenomenal numbers of birds was allowed to stay open, and shooters could theoretically have gone in and accidentally shot those birds.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you, Mr Dooley. We might introduce the committee and then get onto questions.

Sean DOOLEY: All right. Thank you. Sure.

Georgie PURCELL: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria.

Sheena WATT: Hello. Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Jeff BOURMAN: Jeff Bourman, Eastern Victoria Region.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Evan Mulholland, Northern Metropolitan Region.

Bev McARTHUR: Bev McArthur, Western Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: Ryan Batchelor, Southern Metropolitan, Chair of the committee. I am going to go first.

You talked a lot about boom-and-bust cycles, and we have heard that a lot over the course of the evidence the committee has heard. 2023 – where are we? Boom or bust?

Sean DOOLEY: In 2023, we should be dancing in the streets – those of us who love waterbirds. A triple La Niña is just a phenomenally good result for our waterbirds. It may not be so good for people who get flooded out, but for waterbirds and wetlands it replenishes things. We should be celebrating.

As far as we know – and this is what happened after the 2010–2011 La Niña events – we had not seen that bounce back in waterbird numbers. The most recent work that has been done on it is from 2022, so there is one

season still to assess the results, but the 2022 eastern Australian waterbird survey said there has been an increase in waterbird numbers but it is far lower than expected and in three major indices that included waterbird breeding, waterbird abundance and the actual extent of wetland habitat, compared to the long-term average, it is still below average. So this idea that La Niña is going to save us every 10 years or so and replenish our duck numbers is just not proving to be the case. And we have the evidence to show that the waterbird numbers across eastern Australia – and actually across all of Australia but let us concern ourselves with eastern Australia because that is where the birds come to Victoria and go out of Victoria, they are all connected – those numbers are not recovering in the way they should given the conditions.

The CHAIR: We obviously understand the impact that hunting has on game species. It is pretty self-explanatory. Do you have any evidence about what impact hunting has on non-game species?

Sean DOOLEY: Yes. There are two factors with hunting impacts, and one is the non-game species being shot. Unfortunately the trouble with the process, especially because there is just not adequate supervision out at a wetlands, is that very few wetlands are monitored and most shooting goes on out of sight. This is one of the reasons why my view on duck shooting has changed: year after year we see evidence of non-game species being shot. Often it is other species of ducks that should not be shot, and this is only at the very few wetlands that get monitored, whether it is by activists or by government officers. There is such a small percentage, and in each one of these, every year there are protected species that are shot. Whether that is through misidentification or because some shooters are just gung-ho and shoot at anything, we do not know. But it is very interesting that the process to get a duck-shooting licence is that you do have to sit an ID test where I believe you only have to get seven out of 10 or 70 per cent right. That is as I understood; it may have changed. But the other thing is there is no proficiency test on shooters, so anyone who gets a gun licence and passes that is able to go out there. I cannot think of any other activity where we can just go out and there is no evidence that you are a proficient shot. So what we see are non-target birds killed – protected birds – and it is not just that they are accidental, because we see birds shot on the water, like the blue-billed ducks, and we see birds that look nothing like ducks being killed every year. The animal rescuers find welcome swallows, eagles, native hens – those sorts of birds killed.

The CHAIR: So who is monitoring the wetlands?

Sean DOOLEY: Good question. The wetlands are really unregulated. As previous witnesses have said, a lot of shooting happens on private wetlands. But even on the state game reserves, what generally happens is there are very few compliance officers out there, and often the only areas where compliance officers or any sort of regulation happens are where the anti-duck-shooting protesters are, and they are there to monitor the protesters much more than the shooters. So we have to rely –

The CHAIR: So the inputs, the evidence that you are citing –

Sean DOOLEY: The evidence that I am citing is from those very few wetlands, and they are the ones that have been collected by the activists and also by the observers – when that happens, when there are actually observers there.

The CHAIR: I am just coming up to the end of my time, but –

Melina BATH: You are Chair – you can have as much as you want.

The CHAIR: I know, but I do like other people to have a go. At the back of the report on social and economic impacts, there are some references to some studies about the economic contribution that other forms of activity around birds – birdwatching in particular – make. Would you be able to furnish a copy of the report to the committee that you cited?

Sean DOOLEY: Yes, I can.

The CHAIR: I think there are two reports that are cited here, one on bird and nature tourism in Australia and the other on birdwatching and avitourism – there you go, a word I did not know existed. It would be useful if you could provide a copy of those to the committee on notice.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes, certainly. If I can just comment on that, the report that BirdLife Australia commissioned into avitourism – it is a fancy word for birdwatchers going out into the regions – shows that birdwatching tourism contributed \$283 million annually. This was figures taken pre-pandemic, and we have only seen a massive increase in the interest in birds and wildlife during the pandemic. BirdLife Australia's support base more than doubled over the course of the pandemic as people came to appreciate what was important to them, including the birds that kept them company during the interminable lockdowns here in Victoria. But \$283 million is contributed every year – that is through Tourism Australia's figures; it is not something that has just been concocted by an interest group – and most of that is spent in regional areas. And I just might add that those figures do not include things like the cost of the vehicle that they are using. A lot of previous studies in terms of the benefits of duck shooting included costs of shooters' vehicles, to inflate the actual process. So that is a genuine figure. I will provide that to the committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Dooley. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair, and thank you very much, Mr Dooley. Mr Dooley, are you a conservation group or an advocacy group?

Sean DOOLEY: As I said, we are a bird conservation group.

Melina BATH: Thank you. And does your conservation work include restoring habitat?

Sean DOOLEY: Yes.

Melina BATH: And give me an example, please, of that.

Sean DOOLEY: Well, we own several conservation properties that we protect. We do not have the resources –

Melina BATH: You protect them.

Sean DOOLEY: As in we have bought private land to restore it. The biggest one is in the South Australian Riverland, Gluepot Reserve, where we have actively managed the land to remove feral goats, foxes, cats and those sorts of things and removed weeds. Our strength is our volunteer base; we are not resource rich, so what we often do is provide the expertise for community groups and Landcare groups and NRMs to rehabilitate land. So there are places like the Capertee Valley in New South Wales; we have been involved with revegetation projects for woodland birds like the regent honeyeater – many, many examples like that.

Melina BATH: Could you please provide a list of the different lands that you own, the size of each one and any information around the updates of how you have transformed it or not? Just those, thank you, just because we are short on time on this one.

You talk a lot about the loss of habitat, and you even reference Klaassen and Kingsford. Now, we have had the professors in our hearings, as you would be aware, and Professor Klaassen said in relation to duck hunting – and I am quoting his testimony:

Yes. Well, I can refer here to a study that Richard did looking at the effects of various drivers in duck populations. He found the major effect was water and the landscape, and there was a tiny effect from hunting.

He went on to say:

Now, given the specific biology of ducks, it does not really put a dent in the population.

I am interested that in terms of habitat we have heard from Field and Game, and we have been out to Connewarre and we have been today out to Heart Morass. Does BirdLife Australia do any monitoring out there?

Sean DOOLEY: We definitely do at Lake Connewarre. I did check our bird data database. We have very few surveys from Heart Morass.

Melina BATH: Why?

Sean DOOLEY: I have no actual idea. I do not know whether it is that we have not had any of our volunteers out there or whether – I genuinely have no idea. I do not know if they are welcome out there or whether they just have not gone. I do not know.

Melina BATH: Is there any evidence that they would not be welcome out there?

Sean DOOLEY: I have no idea.

Melina BATH: Right. We have been out there and seen that from 2007 to today they have transformed a salt pan into a wetland, and not only that, it has had West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority working hand in glove with volunteers. I do not know if they are cash-strapped or not, but they have been working there for over 15 years. I am interested to understand why, when there is such a big area out there, BirdLife Australia would not take an interest in going out and assessing the change in bird population.

Sean DOOLEY: BirdLife Australia looks at the national scale, and we do that by taking surveys right around the country. Each survey is a pixel that creates a better picture. So we certainly do have records from Heart Morass. If I was connected to the internet, I could go and tell you how many.

Bev McARTHUR: You can provide them on notice.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes. But you must realise that Heart Morass is one wetland among hundreds of thousands around the country, so it is one pixel, and it is fantastic the work that is being done there. But BirdLife Australia is involved with many groups across Victoria: the Loddon catchment authority, wetlands in Kerang – we are doing monitoring there. We are doing monitoring with Melbourne Water through the wetlands in the central district. So we welcome input because the more data points we have – but I really have to say that Heart Morass is one wetland, and as Kingsford's own work showed in the 2022 report, the actual extent of habitable wetland in 2022 was actually below the long-term average. This is the thing we have to get our heads around. Individual sites might be good or might be bad, but the overall picture is if you add all those pixels together – there are so many of those pixels – if you are talking about lights, those lights are snuffing out for so many things.

Melina BATH: Thank you. One more question at least; I will see how my time goes. In areas where there is no recreational duck hunting, have you recorded scientific analysis that there have been population increases?

Sean DOOLEY: I would say yes.

Melina BATH: How can you prove that to this committee: 'I would say yes'?

Sean DOOLEY: Yes. As I said, the picture is complex, but undoubtedly the major waterbird refuge in Victoria is the Western Treatment Plant owned by Melbourne Water. There is no shooting allowed on that property and there never has been. Shooting used to be allowed along the coastline, but that is now a Parks Victoria area and that is no longer allowed. But that is by far and away the most important waterbird area in Victoria, particularly during drought. It is not the most important breeding area, but certainly in the drought years when there is hunting going on in other wetlands there are hundreds of thousands –

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: That is time, Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. You have said yes. Can you please provide some quantifiable evidence to this committee that would back up your comments, because there are a lot of comments made and unless you are able to provide that evidence –

Sean DOOLEY: Yes.

Melina BATH: The last comment I would put: you asked about what other proficiency – 'You've got your duck licence and then you're never tested again.' I got my licence when I was 18½ and no-one ever tested my driving skills again. I have never had to go and reconnect with a drivers licence –

The CHAIR: All right. Ms Purcell.

Sean DOOLEY: But hopefully you have not accidentally hit other cars.

Melina BATH: You will not know. I may have or may not.

The CHAIR: All right, Mr Dooley. Ms Purcell's questions, please.

Georgie PURCELL: Thanks, Mr Dooley. We have obviously heard a lot today and over the course of this inquiry from Field and Game about the conservation work at Heart Morass, and many shooters claim that if duck shooting was banned, this conservation work would not go on anymore. I am just wondering if you believe the conservation groups across Victoria that are not involved in the shooting of native birds would be happy to pick up this space if the shooters gave it up and also just more broadly about some of those groups and the work that they do, because they have us all thinking that they are the only ones doing the conservation work.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes. I do not dispute in any shape or form the good work that is going on at Heart Morass. But as I said, that is one wetland. There are a number of community groups right across Victoria, and I cannot speak on their behalf. But certainly BirdLife Australia, in terms of monitoring, we have hundreds if not thousands of our volunteers go out and monitor wetlands across Victoria to inform the land managers of the conditions of those wetlands and how the waterbirds are faring, and that informs management. While BirdLife Australia might not be doing that actual rehabilitation work, there are many other community groups. I would not want to single any out in particular, but there are many community groups, many conservation groups and many Landcare groups that are doing this work. I would actually be very disappointed if Field and Game would give up on Heart Morass if they were not allowed to shoot ducks anymore.

Georgie PURCELL: And if they did, you believe across your hundreds of thousands of bird-loving members they would take up that work?

Sean DOOLEY: We have a branch in East Gippsland; BirdLife East Gippsland is one of our branches. We have staff here who are involved in great community initiatives like the Great Pelican Count. We are fairly stretched, but our people are incredibly caring, passionate people who love to get involved in these sorts of hands-on projects. Those opportunities would exist, but I cannot predict whether that will happen or not.

Georgie PURCELL: BirdLife is obviously involved in a bit of citizen science, with all the birdos that you have out doing surveys. Could you tell us a little bit more about that process, how many people participate in it and also how you provide that advice to the authorities in terms of getting a wetland closed and maybe the success you have had in the past doing that.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes. It would be very difficult to quantify the numbers overall, but we have several projects. Our main data collection project is the bird data monitoring system. I would have to give you on notice how many people are currently involved, but that has essentially a couple of thousand people registered who do regular surveys in areas around the country. In terms of the surveys that we get done for the lead-up to duck season, it is combination of our waterbird team and our other staff members. Even though it is not technically in my job description, I have gone out to do some surveys when there have been gaps where we need to find out what exists. It is our waterbird team, but also it is often our local branch members. For instance, our Echuca branch and our Gippsland branch members go out in the lead-up to identify important congregation sites, important sites where threatened species are. Then we present that to GMA in the lead-up to the duck season for them to act on, and then we comment on their actions.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you. We have talked a little bit about other forms of tourism on water bodies throughout this inquiry. Could you just tell us a little bit more about birdwatching and I guess the popularity that it has across Victoria.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes. Certainly. As I mentioned before, the increase in interest in birdwatching has been phenomenal in my time at BirdLife Australia, but particularly in the last three or four years. Birdwatching is an all-year activity, and in fact in Victoria interestingly enough winter is often the best time for certain species. As I said in our report on avitourism, most financial benefit of birdwatching is to regional areas. Birders want to get out of the cities, they want to go to the areas that have natural areas intact, because that is where the birds are, be it wetland birds or forest birds. Sorry, there was –

Georgie PURCELL: No, that is all right. I have got one more question and 55 seconds to go: you spoke before about times in the past where Birdlife has provided advice on threatened species on wetlands and they were not closed and those threatened species were then shot. Could you just explain to us all, I guess, some of the concerns that Birdlife might have around the injuries and cruelty and suffering that goes on during the season?

Sean DOOLEY: Yes. Like I said, everything we do is based in science, but that does not mean we are emotionless. The people that work for us, the people that volunteer and donate to us, all care about birds. They are really passionate, so they find this stuff distressing. But from a scientific viewpoint, we have just as much of a problem with the disturbance to threatened species as we do with those being shot, and often when we advocate for wetlands to close – for instance the brolga in western Victoria is one bird that triggers a lot of closures, and we really sincerely hope that no shooter is going to mistake a brolga for a duck, but we are really concerned that the activity, the noise and the disturbance are going to really impact those threatened birds in Victoria, so that as much as the actual maiming and killing of birds is of concern to us.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you, Mr Dooley.

The CHAIR: Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you. Thanks for being here today. I have a few questions. One I will just start with: you mentioned the need to review the conservation targets of waterbird species. What should that look like?

Sean DOOLEY: Sorry, can you elaborate more on that question?

Sheena WATT: Well, we do have of course some conservation targets when it comes to waterbird species.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes.

Sheena WATT: And a range of different agencies and organisations are involved in that. Does BirdLife Australia have a view on conservation targets, where they are currently sitting and whether that may or may not need to change?

Sean DOOLEY: Well, in Victoria the main wildlife conservation Act is the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*, and under that the GMA is required to act for birds that are listed on that list – so birds like blue-billed ducks, freckled ducks, brolgas and those sorts of things. Where we see the inadequacy – and whether that is due to resources or whatever processes or just the admin task of having to do all of those surveys or process those surveys and actually make sure that it is compliant with the Act – is so much of that goes missing. So few of our wetlands are actually surveyed by the government in the lead-up. Often it tends to be the more controversial areas, where we know there is going to be conflict between protesters and shooters – they might get attention. Often the protesters decide where they are going to go because they have sent people out and they find out where the threatened birds are. But in terms of coverage, it has been woefully inadequate and not meeting the standard of the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*. There are threatening processes potentially for endangered birds that are not being checked out beforehand, and that is a constant source of frustration. It is one of the things where BirdLife Australia, which is a not-for-profit, have to actually put investment into staff and volunteers and processing and looking after those volunteers who go and do those surveys – and we do not get covered – but really we should not; that should be the role of the regulators.

Sheena WATT: Thank you. I want to ask about the interim harvest model and the abundance harvest model developed by the Victorian government's Arthur Rylah Institute, who we heard from last week, and the Game Management Authority. Does BirdLife Australia have a view on these models?

Sean DOOLEY: I would have to say we are not particularly happy with those models. We do not find them satisfactory –

Sheena WATT: Can you talk more about that?

Sean DOOLEY: partly because they do not deal with shifting baseline syndrome. So we do not really know under those models what the baseline is that we are trying to regard as sustainable. Are we looking at the 2022 population as the baseline, which we know for a lot of species is 90 per cent less than it was 40 years ago? If that is the case, it is very limited in vision. Are we trying to hold on to what we have got and saying that is

okay, or do we go back to a former baseline where waterbirds were far more abundant and saying that is what we want to reach? I think that was interesting – Ms Bath's comment about the Klaassen report and Kingsford report, saying the impact of hunting, the direct impact, may not be any greater in terms of number of birds than it was 40 years ago. But the pool of birds that are there available to be shot is infinitesimally smaller, so the impact of hunting has become proportionally greater. That is the thing that really concerns us. We are seeing this with other groups of birds, like the migratory shorebirds, which have reduced by 80 per cent in numbers on their migrations between Russia and Australia, and they still have hunting pressures. Fifty years ago those hunting pressures were not a problem because there were so many of them, but when you have so few, those one-off events can really do a lot of damage.

Sheena WATT: Given we are looking to go into El Niño this year, what do you think will happen to the possible population rebound? Do you have any projections on that? I am just thinking about the lag time between quite abundant years and then the lag required. Do you have any insights on that?

Sean DOOLEY: Yes. This is just speaking personally. I am concerned, given the data that we have already; the fact that this bounce back in the last two years has not been sufficiently high – like talking about that tennis ball bounce, you know how the first couple of bounces are fine and then it just tapers off to basically flatlining. I am really concerned and my colleagues are really concerned that we are on the precipice of that flatline happening. The problem is we know there was successful waterbird breeding last year and the year before, but you need that generation to be also able to breed. If we head into a prolonged El Niño – we know that the average age of waterfowl is around eight years; if we get an eight-year drought, even those juvenile birds that are here and that survive duck season, survive all the other vagaries, by the time the next La Niña comes they may be very old and not very productive birds. So we just see these effects being compounded. The whole thing about duck shooting is there is actually one lever that we have that can help to reduce the impacts that are driving these birds down, their populations down.

Sheena WATT: That is my time. Thank you very much, Mr Dooley.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Dooley, for appearing. You said that you are not seen as independent, so should we assume you have no credibility?

Sean DOOLEY: Nice one. No. Because the process is so bureaucratic and because it is so fraught, there are accusations of us presenting evidence, that we are therefore biased, because the evidence is not to the liking of people who want a shooting season every year. That is obviously GMA trying to just be the umpire and say, 'Well, okay, we have to make the decisions.' But it means that the opportunity for us to provide our expertise is going missing, and those gaps mean that these wetlands are not covered and these threatened birds are not noted. We see these dreadful things, where over a thousand threatened birds are sitting on a wetland allowed to be in the middle of shooters.

Bev McARTHUR: Do you receive any funding from state or federal governments, or semi-government authorities?

Sean DOOLEY: BirdLife Australia's main source of funding is from our donors, our fundraising. As far as I am aware, we do not receive any direct funding from government unless it is for the programs that we run on their behalf.

Bev McARTHUR: Which are?

Sean DOOLEY: For instance, our bushfire recovery program after the Black Summer bushfires, with some forest birds in eastern Australia having had 60 per cent of their range being burnt. The federal government and the state governments did not have the resources to send scientists out there, so we are coordinating a lot of those projects here in East Gippsland, including building nest boxes for glossy black cockatoos and things –

Bev McARTHUR: So you get paid to build nesting boxes.

Sean DOOLEY: We get paid to provide the training and the resources for our volunteers to build nesting boxes.

Bev McARTHUR: Whereas Field and Game do it all voluntarily, providing all their own resources, you get paid.

Sean DOOLEY: We fulfil the government contract. They will pay somebody.

Bev McARTHUR: Can you provide us with the evidence of the funding you get and what work you do as a result of that work you are required to do for the funding?

Sean DOOLEY: For which one? For bushfire recovery?

Bev McARTHUR: Well, whatever money you get from government – can you provide us with the evidence?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, if it is in line with the terms of reference of the inquiry, I am sure it would be okay, but I am not sure we are here to interrogate the finances of the organisation.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, if we are interviewing an organisation that is involved in protecting birdlife, we need to know what work they are doing and what funding they are getting from what sources to do that work. It is perfectly legitimate.

The CHAIR: I think if it is within the terms of reference of the inquiry, then yes. But if it is not, then no.

Bev McARTHUR: Good.

Sean DOOLEY: So you would like every bit of government funding, both state and federal, that BirdLife has had. Over what period?

The CHAIR: No, Mr Dooley, that is not in the terms of reference of the inquiry.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, the nesting box programs that you –

The CHAIR: If there are programs you are funded for in relation to native waterbirds in Australia, in line with the terms of reference of the inquiry, I am sure Mrs McArthur's request would be amenable. If it is broader than that, I am not sure it is relevant.

Sean DOOLEY: Our nesting box program, which I was talking about, is for cockatoos – forest cockatoos.

Bev McARTHUR: Oh, not for hunting species.

Sean DOOLEY: No.

Bev McARTHUR: No. Okay. You spoke before of the evidence you get from activists and so on of all the native birds that are being shot that are not on the shooting list: can you provide evidence of all these situations, where you have received this evidence?

Sean DOOLEY: It is all publicly available. I am sure you have seen the same evidence. It is the stuff that is presented by the shooters on their Facebook pages, on the steps of Parliament House – all of those things. We consume media just like everybody else, so we see –

Bev McARTHUR: So you are basing it on those media reports and Facebook pages.

Sean DOOLEY: And we work with Zoos Victoria. We work with –

Bev McARTHUR: Anyway, you cannot provide any evidence of the non-game species being shot – hard evidence that has been given to you.

Sean DOOLEY: I can provide all of those links.

Bev McARTHUR: You have talked about how the science is the most important thing. We have heard that the science is in and that the loss of habitat and urbanisation are the major reasons for declining bird numbers in

Australia. In New South Wales duck shooting does not happen. Can you provide any evidence of where the numbers of species have increased as a result of the abandonment of shooting?

Sean DOOLEY: Well, actually, shooting still does happen in New South Wales on private land. Large numbers of ducks are still shot on rice farms, so it is not quite accurate to say there is no shooting. In the report that we have tabled – in BirdLife’s submission – you can see a table in there that has the relative abundance of birds, and most of them are still in decline. BirdLife is not saying that banning shooting in Victoria will automatically reverse the fortunes of Australia’s waterbirds – Victoria is part of a bigger system – but it is the one thing that we can do that is actually going to make a positive difference, or certainly make things less negative for the birds. It is a really easy win.

The CHAIR: Alright, that is time. Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your presentation, Mr Dooley. I am going to go down a little path that you have been on already, but we are going to hopefully have a different question. In a joint media release on 30 May you are quoted as saying:

Waterbird populations continue to show significant long-term declines. If we are serious about recovering and restoring these beautiful species –

Which they are –

we must remove any additional pressures. That means an end to recreational hunting.

In the committee hearings last month we heard from both professors Kingsford and Klaassen, and also Dr Ramsey – and I am just going to skip through half of the question I have got here – who all supported duck hunting as a sustainable activity in the context of their interim harvest model moving into the adaptive harvest model. Do you agree with Professor Kingsford, Professor Klaassen and Dr Ramsey that recreational hunting conducted in line with an adaptive harvest model is sustainable?

Sean DOOLEY: I would have to read the full context of that –

Jeff BOURMAN: If I may, you have quoted what you wanted from them to suit your thing. This is in context. What they basically said, and it has been said a couple of times, is that there are additional pressures. No-one is disputing that; not one hunter will say that there are not additional pressures, but the take from recreational hunting is tiny, and as long as it is done in line – and some days or some years will be good and some years will be bad, hence the word ‘adaptive’ – all of them have said that it is sustainable. So either BirdLife Australia agrees with that or they do not.

Sean DOOLEY: I think that given the evidence that I have given here, we do not agree with it to the extent that – that is why I would have to look at the context. In terms of the multiplier effect of the impact of hunting each year on the new generation of birds, we think that that – I would have to know how adaptive that adaptive model is before I could say.

Jeff BOURMAN: Well, you can adapt from a full bag to zero bag if required. I guess what I am saying is: does BirdLife Australia think that their science is better than Professor Kingsford, Professor Klaassen and Dr Ramsey’s, because that is what it is getting down to. These three people are eminent scientists, peer-reviewed, from the Arthur Rylah Institute and University of Sydney. These are not citizen scientists; these are scientists, and to the best of my knowledge they have no vested interest in duck hunting. I could be right, I could be wrong. But I would like to hear how BirdLife Australia thinks that their citizen scientists outweigh two professors and a doctor in the relevant field.

Sean DOOLEY: Well, particularly Professor Kingsford, we work with him and we rely on and feel that the indices from his eastern Australian waterbird survey is such a vital dataset that is giving us a really good indication of what is really going on out there. We base a lot of our work – as I said, one of the key planks is the findings from Dr Kingsford’s work. So applying that to the analysis that we have had, then we certainly see that hunting, that duck shooting – it is not tiny numbers. To have an average of 300,000 ducks –

Jeff BOURMAN: You have got to take that in context of the entire population, and given that Dr Kingsford’s surveys go across an indices, and he says himself that his indices is not an actual count – every year there is a waterbird count done before the season is declared. Which, by the way, you said GMA are the

umpire. GMA do not actually make the decision. It ends up a political decision, which is how we ended up with the debacle of the season this year, which went against all the science. But I am still yet to hear whether you think the science that you are getting, that BirdLife Australia is getting, outweighs two professors and a doctor.

Sean DOOLEY: I do not think that we are in agreement with the science that they are doing. We follow this science, and Richard Kingsford's work for the Uni of New South Wales has shown this ongoing decline year on year.

Jeff BOURMAN: There is an ongoing decline, and I think –

Sean DOOLEY: And I agree that he is not saying that this ongoing decline has been caused by shooting, but as we say, when you analyse his analysis, having that number of birds taken out every year cannot help the populations recover.

Jeff BOURMAN: I am going to quote Professor Klaassen here, and I hope I have got the quote right, that 'it' – being hunting – 'does not really put a dent in the population'. Again, we are talking about people that have spent years and years and years, and they are using the facilities of a university to do this. The default position is the science is in. It seems to be everyone's science is different. I am pretty happy with two professors and a doctor in a relevant field over BirdLife Australia, and I am just asking you to tell me why I should not be.

Sean DOOLEY: I would be interested to know where Professor Klaassen – again, what his baseline was that he is talking about there.

Jeff BOURMAN: It is all public.

Sean DOOLEY: If we see these continual declines happening, I do find that an interesting take.

Jeff BOURMAN: It is evidence in the hearing, and I am sure if you spent a little bit of time on Google, you would find it published, because as universities do, that is how they do it.

The CHAIR: All right. That is time, Mr Bourman.

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Mulholland.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you. Do you see that there could be a way forward that could involve agreeing to disagree on hunting and shifting the focus from banning hunting to everyone concentrating purely on saving and increasing wetland habitat through all means available as the best option to pursue?

Sean DOOLEY: To be honest, that is the view that I had when I first started my role at BirdLife Australia. I was very unpopular with a lot of our supporters in that I was not willing to vilify shooters, because I have family from Gippsland who have been shooters for generations. I understood the motivation, which is very similar to the motivations that we have as bird lovers. There is an element of going out into nature, connecting with nature through those activities, and I would love, honestly, for that to happen. But in the 15 years in the role that I have had and seeing year after year breaches, of flagrant destruction of protected wildlife with no repercussions, with, you know, very, very few – the most flagrant example of course being the Box Flat massacre, where nobody was held to account for the slaughter of a lot of endangered birds, protected birds. Unfortunately I have just lost faith in the ability for what you are proposing to actually happen, because interestingly, in previous years' debates when I was debating on radio, somebody I think from Sporting Shooters, it was – I cannot remember who it was from –

Evan MULHOLLAND: I am just running out of time, so I am going to fly through my questions. I got most of your response there. But you said that people were not being held to account. Do you have proof of that?

Sean DOOLEY: Well, I would just ask to look at how many breaches actually go through to prosecution, how many breaches of the legislation.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I want to talk about the Australasian bittern, which you mentioned in your opening statement. If they are truly so susceptible to disturbance from hunters, why is it that the Connemara system, which has been so popular with hunters, is somewhere that they are found regularly and there are other systems with similar habitat but no hunting that do not have those bitterns?

Sean DOOLEY: Well, the Australasian bitterns had a catastrophic decline in numbers, and in areas that seemed suitable and were once suitable they are just not turning up anymore. Again, that is an issue to do with habitat availability. But there is good habitat that they do not turn up to anymore, so they have disappeared along the way. At Connemara the records tend to be outside the shooting season. They are generally a winter visitor to Victoria. You may be right. There may be some bitterns present, but they are in very low numbers anyway even when they are present in winter. They may be there during autumn. But at that wetland, at least as far as I am aware, there is not actually a lot of clash. Connemara also has a massive reed bed which the shooters do not go into.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I just want to move to the brolgas. You mentioned the brolgas are being disturbed by the shooting and the noise. Do you have any evidence of that? I just want to know why they are disturbed. Are they dying? Are they getting sick because of the noise? Are they getting confused or going elsewhere?

Sean DOOLEY: The key issue for disturbance of brolgas is the time of year when the shooting happens. Generally duck shooting is not disturbing breeding birds or anything like that, certainly not with the brolgas. But the brolgas are this amazing species that have a really complex social life, and for them to have successful breeding in the late winter, they actually congregate in flocks in autumn at these key wetlands across the western district, where they have these courtship rituals, the corroborees, as they are called. That is where they establish pairs and strengthen their pair bonds, and the pairs then go off to their own individual wetlands later in the winter to start breeding. The big concern for us is that the disturbance of the brolgas at that key time of their life cycle is what will have a great impact.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Would you accept that the population decline of brolgas has something to do with the increase in the fox population, as the foxes often dig underground to where they nest their eggs?

Sean DOOLEY: Certainly foxes are a major threat to brolgas, and fox control around nesting brolgas has been shown to actually increase the likelihood of success of juveniles. Foxes have been an issue for brolgas for 150 years. Really the population decline again for brolgas is habitat loss. Their numbers really seemed to take a big blow during the millennium drought.

Evan MULHOLLAND: So habitat loss rather than shooters?

Sean DOOLEY: Yes, habitat loss. But as I said, disturbance from shooting is just another thing they have to deal with.

Evan MULHOLLAND: But it is relatively small.

Sean DOOLEY: It is relatively small because –

Evan MULHOLLAND: compared to habitat loss.

Sean DOOLEY: it is relatively well regulated. That is one area the GMA have been very good at in the last few years.

Evan MULHOLLAND: You made a statement to this committee before that so many wetlands are not assessed by regulators. Do you have any quantifiable evidence to back up that claim – or could you take that on notice?

Sean DOOLEY: I can take that on notice, yes. I would have to check with the GMA actual stats.

Evan MULHOLLAND: We can probably ask the GMA that question.

Georgie PURCELL: They have put it out already – 1 per cent.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Given you made it, I wondered whether you had any evidence.

Sean DOOLEY: Sure.

The CHAIR: That is time, Mr Mulholland.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Dooley, thank you so much for appearing today. One last question from me: there is a graph you have got on page – unnumbered – of your report about population declines for the Australian wood duck.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes.

The CHAIR: It would be useful for us to get, if you were able to, the underlying data that has been used to make the graph.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes, certainly.

The CHAIR: And any other game species you have got.

Sean DOOLEY: Yes, I can. I must admit when I saw that – that is the thing; that is why I say we follow the science. I would never have predicted that that species was in decline.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for joining us today. You will shortly receive a transcript of today's proceedings to review before it is published. Take a good look.

The committee is going to take a break for lunch, and we will resume at 1 o'clock.

Sean DOOLEY: Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.