

**REPORT OF A PUBLIC FORUM BEFORE**

**GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 5**

**INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT**

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**At Deniliquin on Thursday 2 August 2012**

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**The public forum commenced at 9.00 a.m.**

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**PRESENT**

The Hon. R. L. Brown (Chair)  
The Hon. R. H. Colless (Deputy Chair)  
The Hon. C. M. Faehrmann  
The Hon. L. Foley  
The Hon. S. MacDonald  
The Hon. Dr P. R. Phelps  
The Hon. P. T. Primrose

**CHAIR:** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the second public hearing of the inquiry by General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5 into the management of public land in New South Wales. This inquiry is examining the operational, economic, social and environmental impacts of converted Crown land, State forests and agricultural land into national parks estate. Before I commence I acknowledge the Wemba Wemba and Baraba Baraba Peoples, who are the traditional custodians of this land. I also pay respect to the Elders, past and present, of the Wemba Wemba and Baraba Baraba Nations and extend that respect to other Aboriginal persons present.

Today's hearing will begin with evidence from several local councils. Others will include Birdlife Australia, the Australian Environment Foundation and Riverina Regional Tourism. We also will take evidence from the former forest manager of Yanga Station as well as local Indigenous community groups. In addition to today's hearings, the Committee will hold other hearings in Bourke, Coonabarabran, Port Macquarie and Armidale and at Parliament House in Sydney.

Before we commence, I will briefly explain the procedures for this morning's hearing. For the information of any media representatives present, copies of the Committee's broadcasting guidelines are available from the Committee staff. Under the guidelines, while members of the media may film or record Committee members and witnesses, people in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photography. I also remind media representatives that you must take responsibility for what you publish about Committee proceedings.

It is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to what witnesses may say outside of their evidence at the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about any comments you may make to the media or to others after you conclude or before you give your evidence, as such comments would not be protected by parliamentary privilege if another person decided to take action, say, for defamation.

Witnesses are advised that any messages that they wish to deliver should be delivered to Committee members through the Committee staff. The staff will keep an eye on things. If you wish to table any documents, they will take them from you. A full transcript of what has been said during today's hearings will be prepared by our Hansard reporters. The transcript will be available on the Committee's website in the next few days. I ask witnesses to speak clearly. Finally, I ask everybody—Committee members, witnesses and those in the public gallery—to please switch off mobile phones. I welcome our first witnesses.

**ALAN GEOFFREY PURTILL**, Mayor, Balranald Shire Council,

**DESMOND JOHN BILSKE**, General Manager, Deniliquin Shire Council,

**PHILIP DOUGLAS O'NEILL**, Councillor, Wakool Shire Council,

**BRUCE DAVID GRAHAM**, General Manager, Wakool Shire Council, and

**GREGORY JOHN MURDOCH**, General Manager, Murray Shire Council, sworn and examined:

**CHRISTOPHER DAVID LITTLEMORE**, General Manager, Balranald Shire Council, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** I notice that none of the shire councils, except for the Murray Shire Council, has yet put in a submission to the inquiry. The Committee has decided to extend the closing date for receipt of submissions until 31 August. Any shire councils, organisations or individuals who wish to make a submission are urged to do so. We have an hour for the local government panel so I will ask you to make brief opening statements.

**Mr PURTILL:** First, I would like to say that we have probably received a lot of gain without a lot of pain with the national parks, so we do not have a lot of issues with them, but we have things that we think can be improved with the running of the parks. We believe that the marketing of the parks is inadequate. It seems to me that the marketing is being left to the councils to do rather than the parks themselves. We have other issues with being unable to obtain gravel in the parks to be able to upgrade the roads and to make them accessible during wet weather, but really we do not have a lot of issues. I am assuming that later on we will be able to go through some of our other points. We do not have a lot of problems, but we have some minor ones.

**CHAIR:** Just elucidate your points now, just by dot points, and we can ask questions later.

**Mr PURTILL:** We think there should be ratings on parks, especially if there is some activity in the parks that is bringing in money to the park. We believe the regulations in the park are a bit tough, especially relating to fire and allowing dogs into the parks. We think they should be looked at in certain circumstances. We believe that a business plan for the park should have been carried out. It seems to us that they bought the park, paid a lot of money for the park, and there has been no business plan, so the park has not progressed the way it should have. I think if any private person borrowed \$30 million, the banks would make sure they would make a fairly good success of it.

**CHAIR:** I assume you are talking about Yanga?

**Mr PURTILL:** Yes. With the economic activities in the park, Balranald people traditionally have been able to gather firewood in the parks and that is not allowed to happen now. There is wood there that we think could be of economic value to the park, if people were allowed to gather it. They are most of our points, unless Chris wants to add something.

**CHAIR:** Mr Littlemore, would you like to add anything to that?

**Mr LITTLEMORE:** I think the mayor has covered it. We are particularly concerned not so much with Yanga because you cannot rewind and go back to the past but with the ongoing basis for new parks—there are some on the drawing board now and some near Balranald—if the mistakes of the past of not having business cases and ongoing funding for capital improvement, simple maintenance of the parks and their promotion, we feel it really will be a travesty and a waste of the public purse to have these in some wonderful areas that could be national parks. But to have to have that light hidden under a bushel is not fair to the community.

I would also add that our experience, in the time that Yanga has been a national park, is that very little economic benefit has flowed back to our community in terms of tourism. That falls back to the fact that our light is well and truly hidden under a bushel and our council does not have the capacity or the responsibility to promote those parks and get the best out of them for our community. There is value there, but it is potential only. Without that potential being exposed, we are behind as a community well and truly.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Bilske, would you like to put forward an opening statement, sir?

**Mr BILSKE:** Thank you. The statement from Deniliquin is that the management of the parks is potentially leading to what we see as being a crisis situation in the not-too-distant future in the sense that there has been a lack of maintenance of practices within the parks and the ongoing thinning of the forests. That will create significant fire loads in the future, which will be incapable of being fought not only by the parks management crews but also the Rural Fire Service groups because the access tracks are overgrown. The forests themselves have been grown to such an extent that in lots of areas with new growth it will create restrictions on growth in the future, from what has been told to us by foresters from the past.

The impact generally back into Deniliquin council from the parks is the fact that the supposed increased in tourism just has not occurred. In fact, we have had significant loss of employment because of the loss of the timber industry. We have lost population and at the moment we have had no increases in tourism whatsoever, yet we have spent significant amounts of money trying to attract additional tourists into the area.

**CHAIR:** Councillor O'Neill, would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mr O'NEILL:** Yes. The Wakool shire is particularly affected by the national parks. I think we have some 10 national parks now in the Wakool shire. Many of those are small isolated pockets of river red gums or red gums that have been managed by surrounding landholders over many years. There is very limited access to those pockets. If allowed to be locked up and left, they will be a tinder box and a harbour for all manner of pests and vermin without control being allowed by neighbours.

These forests have changed over time. The Aboriginals managed them at one particular time. Forestry managed them at one particular time for a different reason, and now we have a changed environment. We have 200 to 300 stems to the hectare or acre as opposed to four or five that were originally there. Ongoing management is critical for these forests. We need to continue to manage them in a way that looks after the environment and benefits the locals as far as work and wood are concerned.

**CHAIR:** Mr Graham, do you have anything you would like to add to that?

**Mr GRAHAM:** Yes, I do. Certainly the council will be making a formal submission as well to the inquiry.

**CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr GRAHAM:** Thank you for the extension of time, which will give us more time to finalise things. Just in brief—to put this into context, Wakool shire is 7,500 square kilometres with a population of approximately 4,500 people. That will put things into the context of changes over the last few years in terms of the creation of national parks in our part of the world. We have been adversely affected by a number of these government decisions over the last few years, including the decision to close the river red gum industry that Councillor O'Neill mentioned just a minute or two ago.

There are a number of State forests that became national parks within the Wakool Shire Council back in 2010: there were Niemur, Noorong, Wetuppa and Whymoul. They are the sorts of areas that Councillor O'Neill was talking about a moment or two ago. That does not include the purchase of Yanga Station, which I will come to in more detail in a minute or two on behalf of the shire. That, in particular, resulted in significant loss of rating income for the Wakool shire.

Just to talk about Yanga for a minute: It is in the northern part of Wakool shire; it is about 9.5 kilometres south east of Balranald but lies almost completely within Wakool Shire. It was the largest freehold property in the southern hemisphere at the time it was converted to national park. It was primarily a sheep, cattle and cereal cropping station but included rice and a large timber harvesting operation. The Committee would be aware of the history of the purchase of the property back in 2005 by the New South Wales Government and at that time there were submissions made by the Wakool, Balranald and Hay councils in relation to seeking some support from the Government about that transfer. Unfortunately, other than a small amount of use by national parks of some of our outdoor staff in terms of fire activities very little of that occurred. In fact, Yanga station comprises about 10 per cent of the whole of Wakool shire. It is a significant piece of the shire.

The shire runs from the Murray River at Barham in the south to the Murrumbidgee at Yanga station, essentially spanning two river valleys. The shire itself is primarily focussed on agricultural production,

including grazing, rice and cereal crops. A significant part of the area has access to irrigation water as well. Prior to the sale council provided a range of services in the Yanga area. Primarily that was in terms of road and related infrastructure, and that continues today. There is a significant burden on council in terms of maintaining the Waugorah Road and the seven bridges along that road. There are other roads in the vicinity as well that council has maintained. I mentioned before there has been a significant loss of income, and it is of concern to council.

There was a lot of talk at the time that Yanga was converted to national park that there would be a boom in tourism. As Balranald shire has indicated, there have been tourism impacts in that area. We would agree with Balranald that there ought to be more done in terms of marketing the tourism potential out of Yanga. We did have a presentation by people from national parks to our council a couple of months ago and they did indicate there has been an increase in the level of tourism for Yanga. Our understanding is that that has tended to focus pretty much around the Yanga homestead rather than a lot of activity into the park itself. The parks conduct bus tours from Yanga station up into the park itself.

We have also had some advice in relation to activities in relation to a range of land management activities, including pest control. We understand that in 2011 some 700 pigs, deer, foxes and rabbits, and those sorts of things, were destroyed. Given the conditions of the season it has become a problem not only for Yanga but for the surrounding properties where those feral animals are coming out. Both native and feral animals are starting to encroach on surrounding territory and that is starting to impact on stock water on surrounding properties.

We have had a concern in relation to fire management coming out of Yanga. The council considered that matter in April and wrote to the Minister for the Environment talking about that particular issue. In fact this came to our attention because the Rural Fire Service has been asking us for equipment and it turns out there is a proposal that we purchase a Cat 6 fire truck which is a higher level of vehicle than we would normally need. That is primarily to assist if there is an outbreak at Yanga. That is a burden on the ratepayers of Wakool shire.

**CHAIR:** You mentioned the population of the shire, what is your ratepayer base? How many rate payers do you have?

**Mr GRAHAM:** Off the top of my head it is probably around about a couple of thousand, I would say. That is all I was going to say about Yanga. There is a proposal for 11 properties adjacent to an area called Nimmie-Caira which takes water from Maude and irrigates through the flood country coming into the back of Yanga. There is a proposal in front of the State and national governments to purchase that land and take water entitlements and infrastructure. One of the options coming out of that is conversion of that property to national park. We would be concerned if that was the case that the lessons from Yanga are learnt and we have a better outcome moving forward. There could be potential loss of income for us of another \$35,000 per annum from that land and I understand it will have a similar impact on Hay shire as well.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Can you say that figure again?

**Mr GRAHAM:** About \$35,000 for Wakool shire and the same for Hay.

**CHAIR:** I may ask you to wind up your opening address.

**Mr GRAHAM:** We have concerns about river red gum forests, which will be in our submission. Councillor O'Neill touched upon that matter. As a final statement, council is of the view that our national parks, State parks and forests should be managed for multiple benefits and uses, including timber production, conservation, tourism and recreation.

**Mr MURDOCH:** Murray Shire Council covers an area of 4,328 square kilometres. In our area we have the Perricoota and Millewa group of forests. The background for us in the process has been serious. You have a submission from us which covers most of the issues. Briefly addressing your terms of reference, we participated in the process originally in good faith but we were disappointed with the end result. The change of State forest to national parks was not a palatable process for our community and I have provided documentation on that. Our prime concerns are the economic and social effects that the process had for our area.

Regionally the figures have been quoted at \$80 million to \$100 million in terms of injection into the economy that basically has been lost. In the smaller town of Mathoura, the gateway to the national park, we

counted a loss of 25 direct jobs in a town of 600 residents, which is a significant number. There are flow-on effects as a result of the loss of those jobs. There were some funds allocated under the regional employment and community development fund but they are going nowhere near replacing that industry. We are a supporter of tourism—particularly in Moama and Echuca in Victoria—it is a huge chunk of our economy. To change the face of tourism in the forest is a very hard ask. We made some suggestions along the way that have in part been taken on board.

Anything that happens with tourism is incremental at best. It will go nowhere near replacement of the red gum timber industry and the direct jobs, industries and businesses that were created out of that. There are so many national parks across Australia and they are all competing. We had a traditional tourism sector that used our national parks and that has been reduced with the limitations on taking dogs into the parks as well as some of the restrictions on direct access to the river. One of the issues for us has been firewood for our local people. There is no natural gas in our area so firewood has been the fuel of choice. We have some figures in there that show that since the national park was implemented prices for firewood have risen from \$120 to \$170 to \$280 per tonne. In an area with low socioeconomic status that becomes a big number for those people in the area. The alternative is electricity and we all know what is happening to that. It is something that has been high on the agenda of the local people.

In terms of fire, weed and pest management we cannot talk with authority, we can only talk about how the local population are talking about that. Our local volunteers have said they are reluctant to go into the park when there is a fire. We have not had to worry about that so far because it has been flooded most of the time, but that is a concern. There is an opportunity for the national park to be a multi-use facility. We are aware of the thinning trials and the Committee has been out to the park in recent days to look at those. A lot of people do not understand what a red gum forest is. There are opportunities for commercial operations to put some income and industries back into the local economy by having a multi-use forest.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Thank you gentlemen for coming along today. Mr Bilske, you advised us that Deniliquin has lost population and tourism since the additions to the reserve system in 2010. Are you able to shed some further light on that with analysis or numbers?

**Mr BILSKE:** Thank you for the question. The loss of population is probably slightly twofold: one is the final impact of a 10 year drought and two is the loss of the timber industry on top of that. Deniliquin has as many as 250 people employed in the timber industry and a number of those people have relocated out of Deniliquin because there is no chance of employment in other industries. The 2011 census showed a decline in population in Deniliquin of 730 people. We have declined from 8,300 to some 7,500-odd people.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** That is since the previous census?

**Mr BILSKE:** Yes.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Five years earlier?

**Mr BILSKE:** Yes.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Given the drought lasted about 15 years, was that on top of a decline shown in the previous couple of census or is the decline a new development in this census? What is the trend over the last couple of decades?

**Mr BILSKE:** The decline increased significantly in the last census. It has been specifically related to that. At the end of the drought the rice mill here in Deniliquin was reopened. It is one of the major employers. It employs around 250 people as well. There was a significant boom in employment through that. The impacts of the drought were minimised through the rice mill opening.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** It was suggested to us in evidence yesterday that the reopening of the rice mill soaked up a lot of the unemployment in town. What is your view of that?

**Mr BILSKE:** The rice mill does employ the greater majority of unskilled labour and a number of tradespeople but the specialist skills within the timber industry, quite a number of those people have headed into the mining area. Their skills and trades tended to fit better into the mining industry than into the rice mill.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Were there 250 people employed in the timber industry prior to the 2010 decision or is that the number now?

**Mr BILSKE:** That is prior to the 2010 decision.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Do you know what the number is now?

**Mr BILSKE:** Something less than 50 people are employed at the moment.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Mr Murdoch, what has been the population trend in your shire in the last census and over the last couple of decades?

**Mr MURDOCH:** Our shire is very fortunate that it has had positive growth. The growth just exceeds the national average across the shire. It must be recognised that most of our growth is in Moama. Between censuses it has been about 14.5 per cent positive in Moama and the total shire growth has been 8.3 to 8.4 per cent. That shows we have a two-paced economy. Mathoura is a traditional timber town and most of the operations have declined. We are seeing the local football club and the local netball club struggle this year to fill teams. Part of that is related to sponsorship. Because some of the timber industry businesses have gone out of the area they are not able to provide that sponsorship. Things like that are just starting to pop up. Obviously there is a lead time between the declaration and these effects but the signs are there. Mathoura has been holding over the years but I think it is on the slide. You cannot really tell that from the census figures because they take in a district rather than—the information is not really available at the town level from the Australian Bureau of Statistics at the moment.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** It is impossible not to notice the new housing developments in Moama. Where have those people come from?

**Mr MURDOCH:** It is mostly built on the back of tourism and business, so people come to Echuca and Moama and like the area and decide to return and bring their business or retire.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Have there been jobs locally to employ those new residents?

**Mr MURDOCH:** Generally there has been but in the last three or four years Moama's growth has slowed. I think that is a combination of factors with the global financial crisis. We had a shortage of residential land to develop and there was less choice than previously for new residents because of that. I think that trend is in most of the towns that were growing. It is a match-up: If the jobs are there, people come. The facility at Byford Fabrications has the potential for 100 jobs, so when a facility like that comes it gives another spur to opportunities. That is in Moama; Mathoura is really hurting because of the red gum industry changes.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** You told us an \$80 million to \$100 million injection into the economy from the red gum timber industry has been lost. We were trying to grapple with this yesterday. Could you shed some further light on those figures? What is the reduction in dollar terms from that \$80 million to \$100 million industry? Would you be able to help us with that? Does the \$80 million to \$100 million you cite include the timber industry across State forests and private lands or does it simply refer to public forestry, that is, in State forests and former State forests.

**Mr MURDOCH:** Those were basically the figures I recall came out of the assessment that was done by John Williams' committee. We have utilised those figures. My figure in our submission was \$80 million but I have heard \$100 million mentioned in the last few days. I could not quantify that. All I can give you is anecdotal evidence. It would be an interesting exercise for somebody with the ability to quantify it to give you the real numbers. We had four or five operations in Mathoura alone and there is one left. That becomes significant. That figure is across the region, not just in Murray Shire. You see the mills that were operational in Wakool and Deniliquin and they are no longer operating. Somebody with the skills to do a real analysis would provide the answer to your question. I can only give you anecdotal evidence that we have.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Thank you for your submission and the attachments detailing your correspondence with the Natural Resources Commission and the Government on this issue. It was very helpful. Continuing with the line of questioning from the Hon. Luke Foley about the wood in the area, we heard yesterday and during our field trip as well about the firewood issue for the local community and you have mentioned it yourself. The red gum integrated forestry operations approval [IFOA] for the industry now

produces, as I understand it, around 37.5 tonnes of firewood. This does not get to the local community. Is that the problem?

**Mr MURDOCH:** You can get a permit to harvest firewood through National Parks. It is limited in terms of the amount of the resources you can take out but it is also limited to individuals, so there are no commercial operations harvesting red gum out of national parks. For willing and able-bodied people who can do their own harvesting or collection that is fine, but other people who may not have that ability or resource have traditionally bought it from commercial operators. For those people the problem with accessing red gum for firewood is that the cartage from other sources is increasing the cost of red gum. That is the problem. I believe there could be an opportunity in the national park for commercial operators. I think the Act needs to be changed or the rules relating to national parks changed to allow that to happen so that commercial operators can gather and harvest red gum for firewood to service the local community. The main increase in cost is the cartage from other sources where commercial operators can operate.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** As I understand it, those commercial operators who are getting firewood out of State forests and are continuing to operate their mills are sending the vast majority—85 per cent to 90 per cent—to Melbourne. Is that correct?

**Mr MURDOCH:** I could not answer that. I am certain Melbourne would be a market but the problem is that the local market has been affected by the inability of commercial operators to go locally into what were working forests, which are now national parks that they do not have access to. The local people are suffering as a result of that unavailability.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** But locally there are still 35,000 hectares opening in the Koondrook-Perricoota State Forest.

**Mr MURDOCH:** That is correct, but for people from Mathoura and Deniliquin to get access to that they have to pay the commercial rate, which includes the cartage from that forest, whereas in the past it was at their doorstep.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** In your submission you have attached a letter to the Natural Resources Commission dated 7 September 2009. In that correspondence you suggest that it is understood that at least one Aboriginal person has a wood supply agreement in his own right. Can you name that person?

**Mr MURDOCH:** I cannot at the moment. It is a fair while since I did that submission. I believe the person was based at Cummeragunja.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Would you be able to supply that on notice to the Committee?

**Mr MURDOCH:** I will endeavour to do that.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Councillor Purtill, some media reported on 12 March this year that you suggested that some of the businesses in town have done very well out of the national parks in the region. Could you elaborate on what types of businesses they are and how some businesses have benefited?

**Mr PURTILL:** The main business would be the local hardware store because when Yanga was a private enterprise they bought most of their products in Melbourne or elsewhere. National Parks is buying locally and the hardware store is providing them with all the building materials and fencing materials. They have really benefited as well as some of the grocer shops because National Parks is buying everything it can in town. It has been a benefit, maybe slight, but a benefit.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** I will start with the representatives from Wakool. Following up your statement, Mr Graham, about the Nimmie-Caira area being proposed for resumption as a national park, was the \$35,000 in rates you mentioned from the Nimmie-Caira area alone?

**Mr GRAHAM:** That is correct, yes.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What was the rate loss to Wakool Shire when Yanga station was converted?



**Mr GRAHAM:** At the time it was about \$50,000.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** So a total of \$80,000 in revenue has been lost by Wakool Shire. What percentage of your total rate base is that?

**Mr GRAHAM:** It would be well over 10 per cent of the total rate base.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** You talked about the Waugorah Road and the seven bridges on it and we went up that road the other day, so we are familiar with it. Does National Parks assist in maintenance of those seven bridges given you have now lost \$50,000 in rates from Yanga station?

**Mr GRAHAM:** No.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Mr Murdoch, in the proposal that was put to you during that process were you given any estimates of the potential tourism numbers that might be coming into the region? In your submission you talk about \$80 million being lost to the regional economy not just to Mathoura's economy. Were you given any idea of how many tourists you could expect to replace the \$80 million lost income from the red gum industry?

**Mr MURDOCH:** I could not quote any figures but it was held up, particularly by Mr Sartor, as the saviour for our area. We continually maintained in our discussions with National Parks that anything that happened would be incremental at best unless there was some transformational change to the park that made it so much more competitive than all the others. Whilst we have a good relationship with National Parks and they are doing some good work, nothing transformational has happened. To answer your question, I cannot recall any specific figures but it was certainly indicated that tourism would be the answer. To answer your question, I cannot recall any specific figures, but it certainly indicated that tourism would be the answer.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** So with the reduction in the industry, that \$80 million industry now would be expected to be what? Is it \$40 million or \$20 million?

**Mr MURDOCH:** I was asked that question earlier and I do not think that I could give you a specific figure. I think some real analysis needs to be carried out to see the effects.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Thank you. Could I ask you some further questions in regard to the submission, which you attached to your submission to this Committee, that went to the Government, the Natural Resources Commission, during this time. Did you ever receive a response to any of those submissions?

**Mr MURDOCH:** Not specifically answering all our issues. I think we might have got acknowledgements, and we did certainly have the opportunity to discuss some of our points at meetings along the way in the process; but in relation to the specific issues we raised, no.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** As to the submission you sent to the Natural Resources Commission, did you or the council feel as though any of those quite extensive points in that submission were taken into account in the final decision?

**Mr MURDOCH:** In the final decision, no, I do not think so. I think John Williams' committee welcomed our comments and I think that was taken on board; but, in the ultimate final decision, I do not think so.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Councillor Purtill, what has been your shire's loss in rates as a result of the conversion of Yanga Station?

**Mr PURTILL:** It has not been that great because most of Yanga was not in Balranald. I think around about \$10,000.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Were you given any indication of how many visitors you could expect in your shire as a result of the national park?

**Mr PURTILL:** Yes. Mungo Park would have 50,000 visitors a year and they indicated that that would be matched at Yanga—they thought it would be.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** So those figures, the Mungo figures, are real figures?

**Mr PURTILL:** The Mungo figures were real figures. Yanga at the moment would be around about 7,000.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Just quickly down the line, I will ask each of you: Do any of you believe that tourism will replace the lost money and jobs from the timber industry? Councillor Purtill?

**Mr PURTILL:** No, absolutely not.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Mr Bilske?

**Mr BILSKE:** No.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Councillor O'Neill?

**Mr O'NEILL:** No, because the tourists were already coming anyway.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Mr Murdoch?

**Mr MURDOCH:** No.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Thank you. If you had the ability to change the past or do things over again, would any of you have recommended that these areas be converted to national park from the existing State forests? Councillor Purtill?

**Mr PURTILL:** No, probably not.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Mr Bilske?

**Mr BILSKE:** If there is more freedom of access and possibility of the continuation of harvesting timber within national parks, perhaps it may have been agreeable, but without that ability, no.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Councillor O'Neill?

**Mr O'NEILL:** No. It was just a change in management.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Mr Murdoch?

**Mr MURDOCH:** No, certainly not. But the only thing I will say is that National Parks has far more resources in terms of tourism development than State Forests ever did. If we could have had that part as a working forest, that would have been a solution.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** But they have many, many, many more parks to administer than they did 10 or 15 years ago, each of which is competing for tourism dollars. Is there any particular reason you believe why National Parks should be spending more money on your particular national parks?

**Mr MURDOCH:** Well, I guess—

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** I take it you were promised large numbers of tourists who have not arrived.

**Mr MURDOCH:** Taking your first question aside, I think they are certainly spending a lot more funds in this park because of the issues that arose in the wash-up of the declaration.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** There is just one final thing I wanted to mention and that is in relation to firewood. We heard evidence yesterday that up to 95 per cent of domestic heating is done by firewood. Would those figures be comparable across your various councils and shires?

**Mr PURTILL:** Yes, they would be.

**Mr BILSKE:** Yes, definitely.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** So if there is any restriction in the supply of wood available, that is naturally going to have an effect on the price because there is not going to be any reduction in demand, especially if there is no complementary alternative: you cannot move to gas, you cannot move to electricity without large-scale capital cost. So basically the demand for wood is inelastic, other than deciding to freeze during the middle of winter. The demand is inelastic, but the supply has been massively reduced. So, of course, there will be a massive increase in price, will there not? That is right. For example, a pensioner who is on a fixed income will have a hard time paying the higher price whereas some trendy green from inner-city Melbourne who has a nice fat government job earning six figures will be able to afford to pay a higher price for that limited supply of firewood. In the end, what it has done—

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** What is the question?

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** I am asking them a question.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** You are answering it, too.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** All it has done is made poor people in your shires suffer through colder winters or they have to pay more of their disposable income to stay warm. Is that correct?

**Mr BILSKE:** That is correct because the cost of firewood in Deniliquin has gone from \$80 a tonne to around about \$280 a tonne.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Thank you. I have no further questions.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Can I explore a little more what the Hon. Rick Colless was asking about when you take out \$50,000 or roughly 10 per cent out of a shire's income. I have seen the departmental responses to questions in Parliament. Both before and after the change of government the answer was, "Well, it's not a problem. The shires will spread the load among the remaining ratepayers." That is essentially the answer the department gives to the Minister of the day. It did not with the change of government. Can you elaborate what you do? Do you lift the rates, as the department suggested it was not an issue, or do you cut services? How do you handle that?

**Mr GRAHAM:** Fundamentally, the issue for the council is that these are set priorities. We are effectively limited in terms of lifting the rates because there is a rate-capping regime in New South Wales. Certainly we could run a case of going over and above it, but I guess there is a question of fairness and equity too. Is it fair to raise the rates across the shire to offset the reduction in rates because—

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Of the government's decision.

**Mr GRAHAM:** —of a government decision.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Just say it: It was a bad government decision.

**Mr GRAHAM:** As a result of a government decision.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** It was a dirty deal done between Labor and The Greens. Say it: there was a dirty deal.

**CHAIR:** I call the Hon. Dr Peter Phelps to order. He will allow the witness to answer.

**Mr GRAHAM:** The answer to the question is probably threefold: The council sets priorities. One of the priorities might be to reduce services, for example. We have limited opportunity to raise the rates.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Have you prosecuted the case of local government to make up that reduction in revenue? Has that been a strategy?

**Mr GRAHAM:** It had been in previous years. It has not been in more recent years.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** So you take it off services?

**Mr GRAHAM:** That is essentially what has happened.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** So \$55,000 in Wakool?

**Mr GRAHAM:** That is right, yes, which is compounded, of course, because rates and costs and so forth have gone up quite significantly since 2005.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** I know this is difficult to answer but would you be able to identify one program or point to some specific reduction in services that you can say that the causation was that reduction in rates?

**Mr GRAHAM:** I really could not do that.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** It is more general?

**Mr GRAHAM:** It is a general thing across the board. That is exactly right. But I guess the other thing it does is limit the council's ability to go into areas that it might otherwise go into.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** What do your ratepayers think of that reduction in services? Are they aware of the reduction in services because of the loss of rateable income?

**Mr GRAHAM:** They bring it to our attention from time to time. When roads are not being graded or other services are not being provided they let us know.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** What would you say to the Office of Environment and Heritage [OEH] departmental officer who gives that advice to the Minister—both before and after the change of government—that it is not a problem? What would you say to that?

**Mr GRAHAM:** I would say it is pretty glib and it is putting significant pressure on local communities and that is right across the board.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Could I ask each of the four councils about the New South Wales River Red Gum Nature Tourism Action Plan? I understand that the New South Wales Environment Minister, Robyn Parker, was here at least in the Millewa Forest to launch this document a couple of months ago. Could I ask each of the council representatives in turn: Have you been afforded the opportunity to meet with the Environment Minister and discuss your tourism priorities? Secondly, we are told that this Government aims to double tourism expenditure in New South Wales by 2020. What would be your top priority for your shire if the Government was to double tourism expenditure in your part of the world?

**Mr PURTILL:** Well, we have not met with the Environment Minister. I do not think we have been given the opportunity; anyway, I have not. Our priority would definitely be Yanga National Park. If they could double or triple the spending in the park, we would be very pleased. We know that we cannot go back to what it was, so we have to try to make the best of what we have got. The council is spending \$1 million on an Akubra Centre in the town to try to attract visitors to go to the parks, so that would be our money. We would like to see the money spent there, if it was spent in our region.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Thanks. Deniliquin?

**Mr BILSKE:** We did have the opportunity to discuss the tourism action plan with the department before it was published by the Minister and we did have a meeting prior to the launch of that particular plan. But with regard to the doubling of the expenditure, we do not see that that is necessarily going to attract more people. What it will do is probably provide facilities for the people who are now coming into the national parks. A figure that was put around was that around 500,000 people who visit the national parks in the region generally. Now, that is not just Deniliquin, of course, but all of the national parks in the region.

Priorities for us? Because we do not have the forests necessarily or the major parts of the forests there, one of the priorities for us in national parks is our local island sanctuary. If we could create a destination—to be effective, tourism dollars have to create a destination that is attractive to a new range of people—and I am not too sure that just doubling the expenditure would necessarily create a suitable destination.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Thank you. Wakool?

**Mr O'NEILL:** We never met with the Minister, but if they would double spending, that would at least give us something in Wakool shire. At the moment we get very little spent on tourism. We have the Koondrook-Perricoota flood enhancement program that we will try and create an industry around in the future. That would be something we will look at. We will look to have our own interpretive centre because we are in the heart of red gum country and I believe it would be a good opportunity to show working red gum forests and the relationship with conservation outcomes in our area—if they were to give us some sort of money.

**Mr GRAHAM:** The other conversation we would have with the New South Wales parks people if additional funds were available is perhaps linking some of these facilities together in a marketing exercise. It would include Koondrook-Perricoota, as Councillor O'Neill was talking about, but through to Yanga and Mungo as well. The focus of attention ought to be broader and as Greg Murdoch mentioned before there are strong linkages in this part of the world into Victoria. The marketing of that particular nature-tourism activity ought to be in that direction as well.

**Mr MURDOCH:** We had an opportunity to work with National Parks along the way in development of their strategy. We are not absolutely convinced that it is going to achieve its objective. We did have the opportunity to meet with Robyn Parker after the launch. But for other circumstances we would have been at the launch. In January 2010 we wrote to Frank Sartor—you have a copy of the letter—and we named a number of issues that should be addressed in relation to visitors. Whilst National Parks are working away with some of those, you have to understand that we have had a traditional tourism base here and there is a long history of that. That base has been changed by restrictions with pets and access direct to the river. That needs to go back to the way it was to keep the numbers at least the same and be incremental. All the way along I was saying to Frank Sartor and Sally Barnes that any transformational change in our area needed to include some iconic infrastructure that is "must see".

If National Parks are going to run it then you say; this is going to happen, you run it, you do the tours and be the operators. That is not National Parks' practice. They licence operators to come in so they do not take the risk of those ventures failing. All the promises that were made about tourism and increases are shallow unless the real on-the-ground work happens with local activities run by the National Parks. That has not happened. National Parks have said, "We will licence operators". I made a suggestion for a high-ropes course. They are looking at that but again they are going to licence an operator and it will be up to that operator to make it work. Unless they do that activity themselves they are relying on new business. Just so you know, within our national parks—State forests before national parks—there is accommodation but there are no tourist operators. There have never been any tourist operators except for one facility on the Barmah forest site. To transform the face of tourism those operators need to come in.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Mr Bilske, in October last year your mayor said that you had not seen the influx of visitors that you were told you would see to the parks when you lost the red gum industry. He did say that it is ironic that the reason they closed the forest was because of a lack of water and it is now too wet for visitors. Is it fair to say that one of the reasons that the increase of tourism has not been seen in the area is because of parks and forests being too wet for visitors and camping?

**Mr BILSKE:** That would have an impact on the numbers of visitors into the national parks but there has also been a drop in tourism generally as well. The drop in tourists to the parks is on a pro rata with the drop in tourism generally.

**CHAIR:** I would like to thank the councils for putting forward their points of view. I would encourage all of you who have not put in submissions to do so. If any of the Committee members would like to put questions to you that they were not able to put in the time allocated, would you accept questions on notice? We decided 21 days for replies to any questions on notice. Thank you for giving us your time.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**NEVILLE GEORGE ATKINSON**, Chair, Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation, and

**RAY WATSON AHMAT**, representative, Yorta Yorta nation, sworn and examined;

**CHAIR:** Would either or both of you like to make an opening statement?

**Mr ATKINSON:** I will make a brief opening statement. I pay respect to the traditional owners and thank you for the opportunity to come and present and speak today. This does not happen very often. I am hoping that we can put our perspective clearly of what we see as the vision for supporting the region socially and economically.

**Mr AHMAT:** I am here to support another countryman in his aspirations for our community's economic development.

**CHAIR:** We have not received a submission from you yet but the Committee has decided to extend the closing date for written submissions to 31 August. We would encourage you to make a written submission even though you are giving evidence. Would you give us your ideas and recommendations on how your people and your organisation see the situation here and what you would like to see done?

**Mr ATKINSON:** I want to make it clear from the Yorta Yorta nation's perspective we see the national parks that have been established as providing common ground and an avenue for the Yorta Yorta people and other traditional owners to have a role in the joint management of the national parks. It will provide the impetus for those groups and the wider community, councils and so forth, to work together on social and economic issues. I think that in the past there has not been a common-ground perspective where that has occurred. I know that the whole debate around whether the national parks are a good thing or not has continued. For us there had not been a mechanism to have a regional locally based situation to stimulate or address the issues of the past. We are all part of this nation and we should be able to work together for the benefit of ourselves as a total population towards a better future. That is our basic view.

**CHAIR:** Do you now have a formal role with national parks in these areas?

**Mr ATKINSON:** We have had ongoing discussions that are still going on. We do not want to push it along to the extent that we just get a little bit of the outcome. It has to be able to be a meaningful arrangement that stops us from being the poor cousins in the local situation or being seen as welfare recipients. If you have this type of arrangement you need to do it properly. If we rush it we could inadvertently miss some things we need to pick up and not get the right arrangements in place for the best outcome.

**CHAIR:** If you had the opportunity to wave a magic wand, how would you go about achieving that goal of making sure that you were at the table in a meaningful way?

**Mr ATKINSON:** I would like to be sitting down with the current New South Wales Government and having those good in-depth and genuine discussions.

**CHAIR:** Do you have any mechanisms currently available to you for having those discussions with local government?

**Mr ATKINSON:** Yes, we are working with some of the local governments. We would have brought it to the other local governments and brought them in to be involved as part of it but we are punching above our weight as well. We are a small funded organisation. We have some good skills and capacity in our ranks in terms of knowledge base but it still takes a bit of money to do this.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** In Queensland the new Government is winding back the Wild Rivers National Park or wilderness declarations in the main for Aboriginal and Indigenous opportunity and economic development. Would you say that is something that this Government should consider for the red gums? Is the river red gum national park a brake on Indigenous opportunity and development? Was there more opportunity when there were State forests or some other reserve category?

**Mr ATKINSON:** It is a fair point for consideration. There has never been a serious enough process in support of the traditional owners to be able to do that sort of analysis and come up with that type of locally based demographic conclusion. If that is a position to be looked at, some in-depth research needs to be done to come to a position to form an opinion on it.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** You would not rule it out?

**Mr ATKINSON:** Best practice is that you do not rule out everything. You go and do a good analysis first and you get an informed opinion.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** I am not sure whether you are aware of the Wreck Bay community.

**Mr ATKINSON:** I am.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Would you see a comparable model whereby the national parks in this region remain national parks but are open to limited economic opportunities being run by and employing local Aboriginal people?

**Mr ATKINSON:** I have had the opportunity to visit and talk to the Wreck Bay people. It is a great outcome that has been achieved up there and hats off to the New South Wales Government and the Federal Government for supporting it. There are different dynamics in different regions that need to be considered. It is a good model and something we should be looking at to consider. I know that the traditional owners at Wreck Bay strongly emphasise the value they had with the national park being established and being able to put their environmental values clearly on the table up-front before they talked about the economic development that was to come out of it. As I said, Aboriginal people in general have major social issues, such as high unemployment rates and low economic bases, that we as a community have to deal with. These types of arrangements give us the ability to address those socioeconomic issues that affect us. It is a model worth looking at.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** There are two schools of thought in relation to what national parks should be: There are the parks—the recreation and human use and acceptable commercial operations and cultural tours—and there are the "arks", which is to create them, keep humans out and preserve them as a pristine wilderness environment. Which of those two camps do you fall into?

**Mr ATKINSON:** We have varying degrees of interest in both camps. To get an informed position on it we would like to do some really detailed and in-depth research.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What is the extent of your traditional Yorta Yorta country?

**Mr ATKINSON:** This is hard to describe. Our country is traditionally in both New South Wales and Victoria. I will try to pick out some townships near the traditional boundary lines. This far north of the Murray, the junction just south of us of the Edward and the Murray is probably close to the northernmost boundary of the Yorta Yorta. To the east it is around Finley and Jerilderie and as far over as Howlong, on the Victorian side. From Deniliquin to the boundary I mentioned earlier to the south-west near Cohuna. To the south into Victoria it probably falls a little short of a town called Nagambie. That gives you a rough idea of the region.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What is your traditional use of and connection with the area known now as the Barmah-Millewa forest?

**Mr ATKINSON:** We still try to maintain our traditional relationships through customs. It is all associated with our belief and our traditional usage of land, animals, and plant species for medicinal and ceremonial reasons. Even though we exist in the modern world we try to keep that up and pass it on to our children. It is necessary that the Australian community supports us in maintaining our identity. We still try to maintain that and these areas give us the opportunity to continue to do that, which is very important. I do not think anyone in Australia would want to see anybody lose their customary relationships or religious relationships.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What is your relationship with the Bangarang people?

**Mr ATKINSON:** I was raised as part of the Bangarang people. It is a clan group of the Yorta Yorta nation. It is just one of the clans. Our governance model is that we are under our traditional nation description

and all our clans speak the same language, which is Yorta Yorta. We have an arrangement that all the family representatives from each of those clan groups have a position on our governance body, on the elders council and on our youth council. Just like the Australian democratic society we are not without our differing opinions about how we do business amongst our own clans and families. We have those issues as well, but we have a governance model that we believe in and that allows people and families to have an opinion at the table when decisions are made.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** I am assuming that you both have knowledge of your nation's history with the river red gum forests.

**Mr ATKINSON:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Yesterday we had a tour around some of the areas and one of the people providing the tour described the river red gums as "white man's weed". What are your views on that terminology? It would be wonderful for the Committee to hear about the pre-European connection of your nation with the river red gum forests and what they looked like and what your stories passed down through the generations tell you about what the forests were like before the Europeans came. First, what is your response to "white man's weed"?

**Mr AHMAT:** It is just terminology. The diversity of the landscape has changed quite frequently through land clearing and logging and so forth. In regard to it being analysed by the broader community and the Aboriginal connection and identity and the journey that we have made in the last 45 years, a lot of our customary practice has been limited through the demise of the landscape and the land use agreements. In regard to the pristine environment, the diversity of a lot of our medicine plants and bush tucker plants along with the ecology, insects and animals has dramatically changed. People using that terminology mean that the landscape has changed. We have always been told that a lot of red gums do not grow to the edge of the banks because of periodic flooding through the upper Murray system. The melting snow creates a floodland which then limits the species re-adapting in the landscape.

Through the drying and wetting there have been lots of diversity changes. Because eucalyptus is such a hardy plant that reproduces out of its natural environment is why it is so prolific within the State forests and national parks. I think that is where that terminology comes from. There are too many red gums in a sense. In the floodplain area we used to have a lot of yam daisies and stuff that used to come out in the spring and summer. Then there were more wattles and then there were red gums. Because of the dry periods and the hardiness and flood residue there have been a lot more red gums coming towards the banks and stabilisation areas and that is why you get more of the local fauna in the back river systems. The terminology of red gums being weeds is probably because in a lot of cases it has outgrown many of our natural resources in an area.

**Mr ATKINSON:** Going back to the first part of the question about a traditional knowledge base, I can remember part of my teachings that my grandfather and my great-grandmother spoke about. There are two descriptions in our traditional language for the red gum—bala and dharnya, which describe the red gum in two different states of its existence.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** When you referred to the river red gum in two different states—

**Mr ATKINSON:** Not States like Victoria but states of existence.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Yes, I understand that but what are the two different states?

**Mr ATKINSON:** One word describes probably the inner colour of the red gum wood, which we all know is red, and bala is the tree itself on the landscape. The point I am trying to make is that my grandfather said that when dhungala—our word for the Murray River or the creation spirit of the river—did its thing and replenished, as it always does, and great floodwaters came down, the waters were so high that you could stand and look across the top of bala. There is a description of red gum because that is a creation story. You are talking about some of the science—and this is a point I will make later—but you are trying to work with Western science to pinpoint actual time factors without creation stories. But our creation stories come from facts, and we are trying to do that. We are trying to rethink that sort of traditional knowledge base of red gum being on country, and the flood is associated with it. The flood brought it back. So there is an answer to that in traditional knowledge, I suppose.



**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Thank you.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** We are trying to grapple with this issue of the history of the forest. Some of the creation story you have just shared with us would be at odds with some of the other evidence we received yesterday. It is claimed in a number of submissions that the white man grew these forests. As traditional owners of Barmah-Millewa Forest, would you agree or disagree with that claim that the forests were not here until the white man came and grew them?

**Mr AHMAT:** No.

**Mr ATKINSON:** No. Red gum? That would go against all of us. We all agree. We are all pretty switched-on people and we understand the way in which the populated system of this country formed. Scientific evidence also says, and even Aboriginal knowledge says that just from the story I gave you, the forests are 10,000 to 15,000 years old. There is a description of red gum being in the landscape and being associated with the wetland. That is a natural tree for that type of environment.

The other thing is that I know in recent years of activities of European presence on the landscape to have a changing effect through those activities on the landscape, it did do some of those deliberate seeding plantation of different areas. If there has been an increase, I have heard some sort of evidence that it does say that and European activity has created more red gum out there. The tree itself, the red gum, it is a natural element of this country. It is there. It has been there for many thousands of years.

Some of the activities of logging and so forth have had an effect, as it does with any other plants that are taken out of their natural environment. When you play with its natural environment, it will cause plants and other things to behave outside its own natural context. It has had that type of effect.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** In terms of the conflict between the European and the Indigenous creation stories, you mentioned scientific evidence. Could you please supply us afterwards with some references on that so we can follow up?

**Mr ATKINSON:** Yes.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** The other question is in relation to scar trees. If we went out into the forest, would it be possible for you to show us evidence of some of those trees?

**Mr ATKINSON:** Yes.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** So we can also use those as some evidence in coming to a decision in terms of age?

**Mr ATKINSON:** Yes. That would be a pleasure.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** We have run out of time, unfortunately. Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming here and giving us your time. If you have the opportunity, we encourage you to make a written submission to follow up some of the things you have said.

**Mr ATKINSON:** We are going to.

**CHAIR:** Committee members may have some questions they would like to put to you, which they have not been able to put because of the shortness of time. Are you happy to answer questions put to you?

**Mr ATKINSON:** Yes. Again, it would be a pleasure.

**CHAIR:** When they are put to you, about 21 days is the normal time for reply. Once again, thank you very much for coming here today.

**Mr ATKINSON:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**Mr AHMAT:** Thank you.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**DAVID ROBERT JOHN CREW**, Manager, Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre Aboriginal Corporation, and

**DEBBIE KAY FLOWER**, Member and Traditional Owner, Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre Aboriginal Corporation, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** Before the Committee commences to ask questions and because you have not yet put in a submission—we hope you will—would you like to make an opening statement?

**Ms FLOWER:** Yes.

**Mr CREW:** My name is David Crew. I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wamba Wamba and Perrepa Perrepa Nations, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and future. I am the manager of the Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre Aboriginal Corporation, which was established in 2003 to hold and maintain traditional knowledge relating to culture and heritage, family and kinship information and to provide a basis of community development.

We have maintained a role in that as well as managing the local area through funding from various sources, including the New South Wales Environmental Trust and consultancy services. In 2009 we began negotiations with the New South Wales State Forests and the Federal Government for the Indigenous Protected Area Program to consider new management options for part of the Werai group of forests. As part of the Government's review of the red gum forests, we prepared a submission based on our experience as an organisation and the knowledge of our members and their families.

For this inquiry, our information relates to the Werai reserve and to the Murray Valley Regional Park. Both areas contain important cultural and environmental resources with over 200 cultural locations found in the Werai reserve, including six major burial grounds. Throughout the process, Yarkuwa has advocated for a partnership approach that continues the process of community strength building and community development. We maintain that the health of the environment has a direct connection to the health and wellbeing of our community. Access to resources, including food and medicine, are critical in working to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

With relation to our experiences since the transfer of Werai and the Murray Valley Regional Park, I would like to mention the important work being undertaken by both the New South Wales and Federal Governments to achieve a positive result for our community, which includes the support for the Werai Aboriginal Negotiating Team, the partnership work with the Murray Catchment Management Authority and the continuing support of the Commonwealth Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities through the Indigenous Protected Area Program.

However there are points that we feel should be recognised by this inquiry. The process of engagement with traditional owners largely has been in response to initiatives from the community and not from government. There does not seem to be a priority process for the development of comprehensive management plans that fully engage with local traditional owners. While traditional owners through the negotiating team endorsed a general work plan for Werai presented by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, there has been no involvement of community members in the implementation of this work plan to date.

There are a number of current initiatives that have been identified, including the establishment of an Indigenous Green Team that could work on public and private lands in the Deniliquin area. This initiative aligns with the current 2021 State Plan. This initiative is also supported by the Murray Catchment Management Authority through investment and through the Caring for Our Country for seed funding. However, until we get tangible support from New South Wales National Parks and TAFE NSW we cannot proceed to establish the team. There is also an issue regarding compliance, particularly in relation to the illegal collection of firewood. Our members do not know if this is being effectively monitored.

We continue to believe that while the main issues surrounding river red gums and their management can be identified, we should not do this without identifying the opportunities that can be developed. As an Aboriginal corporation, we are necessarily primarily concerned with the benefits that can come to our members. While we acknowledge the values of these areas to other members of the community, we believe that the

traditional owners of the local area are yet to see any benefits from the current management system. I quote from one traditional owner:

These forests were our economic base for thousands of years and now provide no economic return for my people, while at the same time making many non-Aboriginal people wealthy. My people's spiritual and religious connection to country is directly linked to, and cannot be separated from, the environment.

Those words were spoken almost three years ago, and we continue to wait for them to be heard. However, we remain convinced that benefits can come, if we find a way to work collaboratively and in partnership. There are two final matters. The Australian National Audit Office 2012 report on Indigenous Protected Areas [IPA] stated:

The Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) program was implemented in 1997 as a vehicle to support Indigenous land management and to increase the size of the [national reserve system] ... and improve its comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness. As at June 2011, the IPA program had contributed 25.95 million hectares [of land]—more than half the contribution to the [national reserve system] in this period.

In 2010 Dr Janet Hunt from the Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy in her research highlighted the challenges facing Aboriginal people working in this area. She states:

... achieving benefits for Aboriginal people involves a close relationship between cultural and natural resources management and conservation agencies, education authorities and employment policy and programs. All these have to work together to gain the most from available resources and opportunities. At present, it is Aboriginal people on the ground who have to make these things come together, rather than a concerted government coordination strategy.

In New South Wales, there is not a total lack of support from other State departments. The issue is that coordination of all the necessary arrangements has to be done by the Aboriginal organisations themselves, and this can be complex. Furthermore, there has to be capacity for partnership development and maintenance in each of the partners. At this point, this seems very dependent on the commitment, skills and qualities of particular individuals, both in the Aboriginal organisations and the agencies with whom they partner. In conclusion, Yarkuwa remains committed to working with all levels of government to improve outcomes for our community.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Flower, would you like to add anything to that?

**Ms FLOWER:** Yes, I have a statement. I am a traditional owner and identify as a Wamba Wamba woman. I am a member of Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre Aboriginal Corporation. My family comes from the Werai Forest and also lived on the flats on the northern side of the Edward River in Deniliquin. When I heard the decision that the Werai groups of forests were going to be handed back to my people, I held high hopes that I would see justice done and that my community could once again take responsibility for looking after country. I would like to present to you a map that we call the "hodgepodge map". This is a collection of more than 10,000 locations identified by my community as places where they practise their culture in the Werai Forest today.

It took some time, but in May 2011 we were able to bring together almost 150 traditional owners with connection to the Werai area. This was an amazing experience and may have been the first time for generations that such a gathering had taken place. From that meeting, a negotiating team was created to work with the New South Wales Government to work out how to transfer ownership to an Aboriginal title-holding body. Since that time the committee has met only four times.

I believe that we have raised the expectations for our community. We can see the benefits that this transfer can bring. We can see that it will be part of our children's future. What we cannot see yet is a commitment from our government agencies to really invest in making this happen. I believe that a strong commitment could be shown by a strong partnership approach that builds connections between government and community. Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Before we proceed to questions, the main advantage you have is that you can talk about a specific area and a specific set of expectations. When you make your submission to the Committee, the most valuable part of any submission is the recommendations. Could you ensure that you make clear and concise recommendations as to what and how you would suggest those things occur? It looks like you already have made your comment on when they should have occurred, and that should have been two years ago, but anyway we will get over that.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Thank you for coming along today. Ms Flower, we are grappling with the history of these forests and we were told yesterday, and it is in numerous submissions to us, that the forests in this region were grown by the white man. As a traditional owner, how would you respond to that statement?

**Ms FLOWER:** I would respond by saying that the stories that have been passed down from the Elders for generations tell us otherwise. We have burial grounds that are thousands of years old and midden sites that are at least 10,000 years old. The evidence is there.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Are there scar trees that you could show the Committee?

**Ms FLOWER:** Yes, lots of scar trees.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** In 2010 your centre supported the addition of the Werai forest to the reserve system, not as a national park but as an Indigenous Protected Area. Could you tell us the difference in your vision for the forest as an Indigenous Protected Area? We will hear in this inquiry from the conservation movement and we have heard from the timber industry. What is it about an Indigenous Protected Area that you see as affording your people the opportunity to retain culture and keep your oral histories alive in that forest? Could you tell us about that vision?

**Ms FLOWER:** Along with it becoming an Indigenous Protected Area we are also involved with the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations [MLDRIN] negotiating to get cultural flows for our wetlands. We do not have access to grasses for basket weaving. I am a basket weaver and our wetlands do not get the cultural flows that we need. That is one thing. We believe if we have control of the forest there will be economic opportunities for our community.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** What is the acronym you just used?

**Ms FLOWER:** The Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations. I am nervous. At the moment they are undertaking a national study into cultural flows.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** That is part of the Murray-Darling basin?

**Ms FLOWER:** Yes.

**Mr CREW:** Can I add that my background is with Indigenous Protected Areas in other parts of the State. I was involved in the New England with the first Indigenous Protected Area in New South Wales and it is a program that is growing in New South Wales and growing nationally. I think something like more than one quarter of all national reserve systems are now Indigenous Protected Areas. Where they differ from a national park is that they allow customary and current use of that environment with the protection of environmental and cultural values. Identifying the cultural and environmental values and protecting them goes hand in hand with continuing to use the forests. It allows for multi-use of those areas with the very clear provision that it is about conserving those values while allowing communities to use the land. It is in a different place than a national park is.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** I think you were in the room when I asked the Yorta Yorta nation representatives about the comments we heard about river red gums being white man's weed. We are trying to understand the history and importance of the river red gum forest. I understand it has changed but we are trying to get a sense of what it was like pre-European settlement. We are hearing that it is white man's weed. What are your views?

**Mr CREW:** My wife is a traditional owner. She could not appear at this inquiry. She talks about her father who talked about being able to see logging or bullock drays through the forest before he heard them. He grew up with woodcutters. That was their profession and that is where he got work. He lived and raised my wife and her family in the forest and on the oven mounds in that area. Their view was always that now the forests are too thick and associated with changing river regulation it has meant that forest has grown in areas where maybe forest was not before. The 1950s flood was extensive and a whole lot of red gums grew in that area. One of the issues is if they have not been watered since then they are now dying.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Is that in relation to the Werai specifically?

**Mr CREW:** It is an extension of the Werai. In certain sections of the Werai trees have not been watered in 50 years and you can drive through and say this is a devastated forest primarily because the trees have not had water; they have grown and then died. It is a different environment: a thin canopy and a lack of any sort of undergrowth development. One of the things that my wife talks about is that in the forests that they managed as a State forest the big trees with scars on them that were considered to be defective were ringbarked and removed to open up the canopy to grow tall straight timbers for forestry. That is an historical fact. It is creating dense red gum areas that encroach on areas that may be and should be box country. It should not be red gum country. There are a range of arguments in that area. One of them is if we accept and acknowledge that, then we have to look at what we want to preserve. What do we want to conserve as an environment and how do we go about making that happen?

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** What are your general views about the declaration of national parks in the area? I know you are here representing Werai but as to the conversion generally from State forest to national parks, do you think the river red gum national parks in the area are a good thing for the community? Could it have been done better?

**Ms FLOWER:** I think it could have been done better. We do not want Werai to stay a national park, we want an Indigenous Protected Area. We want to have a say in our country and we want jobs for our people. We believe the only way through that is for Werai to become an Indigenous Protected Area. Too long we have missed out. Everybody else has become rich off the forest but Aboriginal people have missed out for too long. We would like to have a go at managing it and have economic outcomes for our people.

**Mr CREW:** Something that was raised earlier was the expectation raised in the community. The process is repeated around New South Wales with old national parks and if we look at some of the agreements around Mungo we can see the hand-back processes where there has been agreement with traditional owners to have some input. When there is creation of a new national park there is an expectation from the local community that whatever agreements are made it will flow through with tangible benefits to the local traditional owner, and what we have seen is that it does not transfer through. My knowledge is over in Yanga. What happened over there was the traditional owners associated with Mungo National Park had an expectation that with the creation of Yanga there would be benefits for the particular traditional owners that had a connection to Yanga. That did not happen. It started all over again rather than building on what had already been negotiated.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Ms Flower, what you were saying about your people wanting to have a say in the management of the Werai area and maintaining the traditional management, do you see that your people would reserve the right, given the fact that you mentioned the economic situation, jobs and so on, to have a say where there was a multiple use situation arising out of that park? Your people would reserve the right to have some continuation of logging at your direction rather than at the direction of State forests?

**Ms FLOWER:** Yes. We are not against logging completely, as long as it is us benefiting.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** The current status is it is a national park?

**Mr CREW:** It is under part 11 of the National Parks and Wildlife Act. It is not a national park but it is managed as a national park.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Do you believe the current rules that relate to it are unduly restrictive on what you would like to do in that area?

**Ms FLOWER:** Yes.

**Mr CREW:** In the current process it is not a national park but it is managed as a national park and is therefore restrictive in terms of customary use.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** The land has been given to you but you cannot do anything with it that you would like to do? They are happy to give you the land as long as you remain poor.

**Mr CREW:** Not quite. The process for transfer is not easy. It is land that did not have a title. The process to create a title to transfer to freehold title can be long and expensive. One of the discussions has been about how to do something a little more innovative—I am not up with the detail—like being able to transfer

land with a descriptor instead of as a surveyed piece of land. The legal processes for transfer have not happened yet; they are in the process of being discussed.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Do you believe that you as local members of the community would have a better grasp of good land management practices than some land management official sitting in Sydney?

**Mr CREW:** Going back to the need for capacity development and building, there is a lot of capacity and a lot of people living in the community that have the capacity to build. It is a partnership process of building but there is certainly a lot of local knowledge that does not necessarily get into the documents.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** There is a school of thought, the ark principle, that is popular amongst the Greens and the environmental movement. The principle is to lock it up, exclude all human activity, leave it as pristine wilderness and never do anything with it again. Presumably you would not be supportive of that proposal?

**Mr CREW:** The map that was sent around came from 75 interviews of people ranging from 80 years old down to 19 years old. We have seen the pride that happened when people could put dots on that map and say they are connected to this country. They did not know that they could say that. The process was really very strengthening. The other thing is emotional: people had their personal maps and this is a collection. I have been to two funerals lately where their personal map has been part of their funeral service. The grandkids are looking at their nan's footprints on the country. If you take that into account, our position is that there can be no management of Werai without people.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** If you want to use a particular section of land for a cultural centre, an interpretive track or selective logging, it would be pretty rude of National Parks to say, "We do not think you should do that", would it not?

**Mr CREW:** The mechanisms to have that conversation haven't occurred yet.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** In principle you should have the right to determine what you want done on your land?

**Ms FLOWER:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** You said that the processes for looking at the legal and descriptive method of changing land tenures were in progress. Is your organisation involved in any of those discussions?

**Mr CREW:** Our organisation is being funded by the Federal Government through the Indigenous Protected Areas [IPA] program to enable that process to happen. We are involved in obtaining background information. The primary body that has been established to do that transfer is the Werai Aboriginal negotiating team. That is set up by the Government.

**CHAIR:** How far through the development of the concept would you say they are? Are they just at the start or nearing the end?

**Mr CREW:** They are examining the legal process right at the moment. The next meeting is at the end of this month.

**CHAIR:** So it could be a couple of years away?

**Mr CREW:** It could be a couple of years away.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** I have three questions. If you do not have the information to hand I will be happy to get it from you later. What is the unemployment rate for Indigenous people in the region? What is the life expectancy of Indigenous people in the region? What is the median income for Indigenous people in the region?

**Mr CREW:** I will get that information to you. I can say that the unemployment rate is probably 20 to 30 per cent. The life expectancy—sorry, it is a bit hard; we lost my nephew this week at 43 and that is considered an age. We are losing a lot, especially men in their forties, so we are losing potential. Like any

Aboriginal community, the shape of the population, the bell curve, is different. There are lots of young people and very few older people. We are working on the process of getting that data together so I will be able to put some more details together.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Can you give me an idea why some of your people are dying at the age of 43, unless they have a serious chronic illness?

**Mr CREW:** That is another inquiry and there has been some discussion about that. One of the things we are talking about is the need to build strong kids in our next generations. There are a whole lot of things relating to history, social disengagement, lack of employment, generations that are not working—all these things that everybody talks about and knows make a difference. We work very strongly to try to get strategies in place locally so we have run some Indigenous employment frameworks and we are looking at trying to make a difference for the current generation and to look at kids in school. We have 35 kids in Deniliquin High School. They are the next generation and we have to see how they can contribute. We see them working on country. Some of the research says that Aboriginal people working on country as well as looking at where they go are healthier, stronger and contribute better.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** You clearly have a vision and a plan for the future for this area. Would it not just be better to give this land to you guys freehold rather than have a white paternalist national park overlooking everything you do?

**Mr CREW:** That was the intention. That is stated in the Act. It is land that is legislated to transfer to an Aboriginal title-holding body. The process to do that is for freehold title to transfer and we need to create that Aboriginal title-holding body.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** It just seems belts and braces. You know what you want to do—

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Dr Phelps. The Committee will come to order. We have run out of time. I wish we had an hour as it would offer us a lot of insight. Please ensure you give us a detailed submission with some firm recommendations along the lines you have discussed today.

**(Short adjournment)**



**RONALD KEITH ROBINSON**, Member, Victorian Apiarists' Association, sworn and examined:

**BRIAN RICH**, Commercial Apiarist and Member, Victorian Apiarists' Association, Maryborough, Central Victoria, affirmed and examined:

**The ACTING-CHAIR (The Hon. Rick Colless):** I welcome witnesses to the hearing. In this session, I will be filling in for the Chairman, who is at another appointment briefly. Before we invite our witnesses to take the oath or affirmation, we welcome a school education program underway as well, and we have staff and students from the Deniliquin High School and the Deniliquin Christian School. Committee members spoke to the students a minute ago and they will be sitting in with us for the next hour or so to observe the proceedings. Would either or both of you like to make a brief opening statement?

**Mr ROBINSON:** I will start, and if Brian wishes to comment after I am finished, I think that would work out. A lot of our concerns relate to the land tenure and the lack of information to the beekeeping industry on what the change was about. We had no prior notice even that the Yanga State Forest was going to be a national park. There have been a lot of other land changes and you would turn up to a bee site, where you have bee operations occurring, and the State Forest signs are gone and erected are the national park signs, without any prior knowledge of that.

In the past Western Lands leases had a lot of this land that we used to use and still have, but that is changing too. There has been no prior opportunity to take out sites on these lands before the change. Of course, once it has changed, the policies change; therefore, to the industry, it is a lost site or a lost number of sites. We have just gone through the lost sites program in Victoria. Two hundred sites were supposed to be regenerated. It has taken five years for the process to occur and only half the sites have been returned to the industry as lost sites.

Our concern is: How much more land is going to be taken up by national park that will affect our industries through our bee arrangements and potential places to get bee arrangements for our bees? That is one of the big issues that we have now—the lack of bee sites for our industry to develop and grow. Expansion of the bee industry is probably borne out from the expansion of pollination associations. We are actually assisting farmers in seed sets of fruit and vegetable seeds and stone fruits.

We have a vast pollination service of the beekeeping industry and it provides not only for Victorians. Beekeepers are jumping the border on a yearly basis, and borders are no boundaries for bees. We just go wherever the season takes us to, whether that is rainfall or work contracts, to assist farmers in proceeding. In regard to the movement of bees, in the past as long as the continual drought has been out there the bees have not been moving as much as in a normal wet season. Therefore the need for those areas to be worked probably varies. Sometimes it might be up to five years before you come back to the traditional site. If you are running short of money, you will probably let those sites go or pick them up when you can.

But then you find that the land has changed in tenure, and the sites are not there. As Brian indicated in relation to the Yanga National Park, the change of that land means he is excluded from putting bees on that property. Now in our industry, we have the migration of bees as far as from Central Queensland. The bees are coming through Victoria to pollinate almonds. If you read the newsletters now, there is somewhere up around 110,000 bees going to Sunraysia to pollinate almonds in three States—South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland.

The restrictions we have throughout the different bee sites are getting harder and harder. The offices are closing down where people go on a local registered basis to pick up sites that are available. They are not there anymore. Western Lands leases and parks did want to issue bee sites on Western Lands leased land merely because farmers did not want 15 beekeepers running around their properties, not knowing who was on their property. So they sent us to the farmers on a personal level to obtain those sites.

It seems to me that national parks are taking a lot of the areas, a lot of river country, which is where we pick up our red gum, our black box and our resources for the honey industry. It is not about crossing borders for honey now. Our operations are probably 50 per cent pollination and 50 per cent honey whereas it used to be 100 per cent honey.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Mr Rich?

**Mr RICH:** Before I go any further, I would just like to mention to those who do not know much about beekeeping that we are a very important part of the ecologies. They say every third mouthful of food you eat is because it has been pollinated by a bee. Most of our vegetables are European-based and they are pollinated by bees. Therefore, they say if bees disappear, mankind itself disappears within about five years. I did not make it up. I think it was a bloke called Einstein—the bloke who devised  $E=Mc^2$ .

We fit in well with ecology. We are beneficial to the ecology. We leave no tracks where we have been. We go in and harvest our product and we leave it as we find it. I believe there is no real issue why we should not go into the national or State parks. My cause has been with Yanga Station, where I have been going since the late seventies or early eighties. I do not know if you have my history, but there have been three managers at Yanga Station while I have been there. I was made welcome to go where I needed to go to put bees in at that time.

Red gum is a very important part of our industry for honey production. It is at a time of year when we produce most of our honey. It is a good dry time of the year. It is a very thick honey. It is a very good build for us and it could develop into other honey farms in the autumn crops afterwards, and you do improve. With my history, I would just like to be able to maintain my access to those areas. Because it has been so dry—the first years I went there was in the early seventies after that country where it was wet for years. We went for Paterson's curse around Finley.

In one of the early years we went there the 'Bidgee actually overflowed. It was a very wet year and it was a wet year up at Balranald. The red gum bloomed prolifically. We did actually derive up to half our annual production of honey going to those areas. Red gum and black box yielded at different times as well.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Pardon my ignorance: I just do not understand. What is the rationale for the National Parks and Wildlife Service saying there should be no beekeepers on their parks? I might not understand a few things, but what is the rationale? I just do not understand, I am sorry.

**Mr ROBINSON:** Well, you have to go back to the national park beekeeping policies. There are articles out, and just let me read this:

Implementation of N.S.W. N.P.W.S. [National Parks and Wildlife Service] Beekeeping Policy by the Service since the revocation has resulted in reducing the levels of traditional access by migratory beekeepers of both states to the bio-region's public lands, based on the precautionary view that honey bees per sae (sic) (*A. mellifera*) are an exotic species and may impact adversely on the reproductive success of native flora and fauna. This submission requests the standing committee consider that migratory beekeeping, operating under seasonal, not limiting floristic abundance, is a practice not adverse to the successful, long term reproductive success of native flora and fauna, is a practice therefore compatible with these primary objectives of native conservation, and that future management of the bio-region's public lands needs to provide for the restoration of traditional levels of access through appropriate licensing arrangements.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Do I understand you correctly: they are saying your activities will push out the native bee population?

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** No, they are not even saying that. They use a precautionary principle which everybody knows is a massive fudge.

**CHAIR:** Order!

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** I am still not clear.

**Mr ROBINSON:** When you go to apply for national parks sites the New South Wales policy for national parks—although there are some sites in national parks and I don't know whether they have been there traditionally from years past—is beekeepers do not have sites in national parks. That is why State forests, Pasture Protection Board sites and travelling stock routes were targeted by beekeepers—because they were easy access. You could go to the local Pasture Protection Board and get a bee site. All those places that we obtained sites for bees are closing down. We have to deal with someone in Batemans Bay for a site in Mildura or Dubbo.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** I will not try and dominate the question. Is your activity a threatening ecological activity to the native environment?

**Mr ROBINSON:** There is no evidence to support that.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** This is why they have had to rely on the precautionary principle—when you have not got evidence you make it up.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Chair, could you call Dr Phelps to order?

**Mr ROBINSON:** A lot of it is in the park management plan and the interpretation of that plan is up to the park manager. If he says it does not suit the plan you are not there, full stop.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** On what scientific basis?

**Mr ROBINSON:** There is nothing.

**Mr RICH:** Years ago when we first dealt with the **Department of Sustainability and Environment [DSE]** they had four different issues including hybridisation and taking over the hollow logs in the forest and none of that was ever proven. This was in Victoria. Now they do not even mention it.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Dr Phelps, would you like to ask a question?

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** I would.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** He will ask himself a question.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Ask him what Minister Parker is doing about this.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** I thank the Hon. Luke Foley for his contribution. How long have you each respectively been keeping bees?

**Mr ROBINSON:** For 25 years. It is a family operation. I have two sons. Beekeepers are getting older; there is no room for young beekeepers to start up and access sites. There is none out there. Anyone who has sites keeps their sites and pays for them on a yearly basis in the fear that they might lose them. There is no access to sites. In the drought situation beekeepers had to go further and further to maintain sources to keep the bees in good health and wellbeing to assist horticulture and agriculture in pollination services. It was not about getting honey, it was about keeping the bees alive to create a service.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** You have had sites in areas that are now declared at national parks, is that correct?

**Mr ROBINSON:** Yes.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** During that period of time if there was any damage adduced by beekeeping it would have shown itself, would it not?

**Mr ROBINSON:** Yes.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Instead these areas were rated as such high conservation value that they were turned into national parks. There would seem to be a contradictory argument about the so-called effects of beekeeping and the conservation values of the area which became parks?

**Mr RICH:** Bees came to Australia in 1822 and I think if they had done damage it would have shown by now.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** I would have to agree with you there. The reason you have been given is that something might happen if you continued your activities in a park despite the fact that for roughly 190 years nothing has happened; would that sum up the view of national parks?

**Mr ROBINSON:** I agree.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Not very rational, is it?

**Mr RICH:** No.

**Mr ROBINSON:** No. You have to realise bees do not care who owns the park, we just want the right to access the flora and fauna for the health of our bees.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Presumably if you set up on a private property next to a national park the bee is unlikely to respect the boundaries of that national park?

**Mr ROBINSON:** That is what we are doing now. Beekeepers do not mind paying fees for bee sites. It is part of our operation and migrating system. For argument's sake, bees are coming out of Queensland to Robinvale to pollinate almonds. Can you imagine the hassle associated with putting a bee on a truck in Gympie and trying to get it to Mildura? You have work, health and safety issues, you run out of log book time and you have nowhere to unload the bees between here and there. Let us put bees back into perspective as travelling stock. There are more bees on the road than sheep and cattle but we have nowhere to put them, nowhere to rest beekeepers on the way through to their pollination contracts, and we have no sites to drop off. At this time of the year they are not getting put on these sites for honey, they are getting put on these sites for safety for the people driving the trucks. At the moment our workplace is the bush down the road, our health is the pie shop around the corner because you have to grab and run, and the safety is keeper on the road.

**Mr RICH:** Could I make mention about damage to the forest. They have had two studies: one at Naracoorte in South Australia and one in the Heywood region. They set out to prove that we are detrimental to the environment and they both came away concluding that bees being there benefited the others because it takes pressure off other native bees—there are no native bees in Victoria and New South Wales—it takes pressure off them and it helps the bird life and everything else. They wanted detrimental proof and found we were beneficial.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** We are told we should listen to the science, so perhaps we should listen to the science.

**Mr ROBINSON:** I have one further comment. I would like to see the Yanga management plan. I had a quick view of it from one of the fisherman in Balranald the other day. There is no exclusion of bees in that management plan. I do not see why Mr Rich should not have his traditional access to where he was. Beekeepers have been there for over 60 years that you know of, Brian?

**Mr RICH:** There were a lot of beekeepers before I got there. We first went up there in 1973. We have been on Yanga since it took over Talpee station and I had free rein of the place. I had keys to the place and padlocks and I was always made welcome there. Payment was generally we would give the management a couple of 30 kilo drums of honey. That was how we paid access to the property—and goodwill of course and being trustworthy.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** Following on from Dr Phelps's questions, there are two people with the authority to fix this up. If you had Premier Barry O'Farrell or the Deputy Premier sitting here now, what is the one thing you would tell them and ask them to do? Not the rationale, you have explained that, but the particular action—what is the one thing you would want them to do to fix the problem?

**Mr ROBINSON:** What we want is access to flora and fauna on any land whether it be national park, forestry or travelling stock routes. If we are paying a fee for those sites and we need that land and those sites secured and protected. We need those sites for our generation and in 100 years time—for it to be passed down. We do not want it burnt or cleared so there is no reason to pay. We like environmental flows; it is water on our trees. We want to preserve the fauna and flora because that is where we get our honey.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** I want to ask about Western Lands in a minute. Can I start with national parks? Is restriction or removal of access to beekeepers enshrined in the national parks Act or is it a policy decision in the National Parks and Wildlife Service? Can you clarify that one?

**Mr ROBINSON:** My understanding is it is a policy. You get to the counter and they say, "We do not have bee sites". That is it. You do not get any further.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** I was in the Pilliga in the north west of the State and I stumbled across beekeepers. My understanding is when the conservation decisions were taken in that part of the State, the Nandewar-Brigalow, there were definite decisions taken at the time to maintain access for beekeepers in the

apiary industry in the Brigalow. Are you aware of that and do you think similar concern for your industry in the south of the State should be implemented by this Government?

**Mr ROBINSON:** I can only go on my past experience with the Mallee Cliffs State Forest. There were 40-odd sites in that forest. I had four sites there. When Peter Murray was the person who used to write the sites out it was sent to me and they said, "A circle represents a bee site", that is the range a bee flies. It is usually 0.8 of a kilometre. Here it is a radius on a map which is probably a one kilometre circle. There were up to 40 sites in that park. I had four that were current at the time of the transfer from State forest to national park. That is what I got—circles with nothing in them. Because they were not current paid-up sites at the time of transfer in that area they were dropped off the board. Conversation with Craig Arms in Dubbo, the coordinator for the sites for that area, said they were the only four sites there.

All that river resource of mallee country, mixed species of seasonal honey crops, they follow on from each other, have gone. That is only one instance. There are sites that in the past were burnt out by wildfire and not regenerated; there are sites that because of drought were not taken out as they were not a viable proposition to put bees on, so bees did not need that source. There are regeneration programs of some sites in Victoria that are on hold, and New South Wales would be the same because of regeneration of red gum forests. The environmental flows are helping and the trees are coming good but we need a broad range of fauna and flora to keep the bees healthy. The food studies tell us that the population is going to grow so we need to feed the people. Bees play a big part of that role. The health of the bees is important.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Could I ask about Western Lands because our inquiries are not just looking at national parks but all public lands? Could you expand on what you said earlier about Western Lands and tell us about the difficulties you have there?

**Mr ROBINSON:** A lot of us use Western Lands leases. It is by a personal agreement with the farmers. When I started beekeeping 25 years ago we went to Western Lands offices to take out bee sites and they said, "If you want to put bees there go and deal with the farmers. We are not interested in giving bee licences on these properties because you might sell it to someone else and the farmer does not know who is coming." The farmers were happy to have us put the bees there for a bucket of honey. That is part of life. When the land has changed they have rung up and said, "I am sorry you cannot come any more, it is national park. The deal is done". There is no opportunity to say it might have been a Western Lands lease. If I had had the opportunity I would have taken sites out there but there was no knowledge of change or prior opportunity to do that. If you put the sites out there the beekeepers will take them. We will pay the fees. Put it into the management plans of what we do for honey and pollination resources and let us move on. We do not need red tape holding us up from accessing bee country.

**Mr RICH:** In Victoria a lot of the country has gone over to State parks but the sites are maintained.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Thank you for appearing. It is important for us to understand how apiarists need access to lands and the history of that, which I find very interesting. However, there has to be some kind of impact on native flora and fauna, does there not, if you think about the food source for honey bees being pollen and nectar, which our native fauna feed on as well, including honeyeaters and I am sure some small marsupials. You both have a long history in the bee industry and you would know that that surely would have an impact.

**Mr RICH:** We only go to these areas when the honey flows are on and things are plentiful. When the flows ease off, we leave, but as I stated before, they found we are beneficial. It takes pressure off the other native species there. We are more beneficial than not.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Are you aware of a report by the Australian Nature Conservation Agency called "Overview of the impacts of feral and managed honeybees in Australia"? I see some people in the public gallery nodding. That report has found, for example, that the responses of honeyeaters to the influences of honey bees have varied. We do know, for example, the Regent Honeyeater is a threatened species. Population densities of honeyeaters were reduced by 30 to 50 per cent when honey bees were prominent. I wanted to add that to the discussion and get your views on that. I am sure you are aware of some of the opposition coming from National Parks or conservation agencies. However, this report does say that potentially some parts of parks or public land could be given access to honey bees while ensuring that other parts of national parks remain free from honey bees so that if parks are declared for conservation values some areas are free from the influence of honey bees, which I understand can travel two kilometres or so. Do you agree that if you wanted access to

Yanga, for example, because of the concern that your honey bees could be having on native flora and fauna there should be some areas that are free from honey bees?

**Mr RICH:** I think so. That is only fair. You could have reserve areas that remain so. That happens in Victoria too, so, yes, we are in agreement with that.

**Mr ROBINSON:** May I ask you a question? A lot of flowering species are seasonal. Where do those honeyeaters go when those flowers are not in flower?

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** The question is to you. Surely the honeyeaters thrive, like any species, in the wet when conditions are good. When conditions are not good, they do not thrive. If they have to compete against another species when they should be flourishing it is a concern. If you are taking your honey bees into areas that are flowering in a big way where the native fauna and birds are also supposed to flourish, do you not think that that will have an impact on the survival of, can I suggest, a Regent Honeyeater, which is a threatened species?

**Mr ROBINSON:** I think they can live together. Like you said, we can have areas for bees and we can have areas for those. Surely if that study has been done the areas are there for those. I am not saying all the country in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia or Queensland should be opened up for beekeeping. There is public land and there are other users of that land. Let us not put us all in the one paddock so we are flogging the country to death. Spread us out a little bit. Give us the resources that we need so that we can operate, with a fee to the Government or other bodies, and let us all work together. We are not looking to kill exotic species; we are looking to feed the future population. Bees are going to play a big part in that job.

**ACTING-CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your contribution.

**Mr RICH:** It was Einstein who said we will disappear in five years without the bees.

**ACTING-CHAIR:** It would be a terrible death, by starvation. Thank you for giving evidence.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**KEITH WILLIAM STOCKWELL**, Secretary and Acting Conservation Officer, Birdlife Australia Echuca District Branch, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** We note you have made a submission to the inquiry. Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mr STOCKWELL:** Birdlife Echuca District is one of about 50 branches or affiliates of Birdlife Australia, which in turn is affiliated with Birdlife International. Our branch is a cross-border one which covers the area to the north of Deniliquin through Deni and down across the Victorian border. We have over 130 members. Some of those are family memberships so the actual number of people is considerably greater than 130. We conduct tag alongs, birding camps and day outings, and many of our members, perhaps most, bird individually. Some of them go out several times a week into the bush, wearing inconspicuous clothing in most cases and sometimes sitting beside a lagoon or billabong or bush or in a portable bird hide with their camera or telescope. For that reason we are extremely concerned about unsupervised shooting in national parks and reserves. We fear it would be easy for one of our members to be mistaken for a feral animal. There are better ways of controlling feral pests.

You may be aware that a few years ago much of this area received heavy rain and the Plains Wanderer numbers increased on the grasslands because there were ideal conditions for them. Since the rain their numbers have virtually vanished and we fear for that bird and hope that this Committee can inform the appropriate Commonwealth department that the bird is in diabolical trouble. The number of feral animals increased following the rains. We were very concerned. I am the Secretary of the Friends of Terrick Terrick National Park and I am also on the advisory committee of the Kanyapella Basin. It is terrific that there are advisory committees and friends groups for national parks and reserves.

Because we were concerned with the increase in rabbit and fox numbers after the rains a contractor was employed. He did two 100 kilometre transects around the national park. The local people and parks employees gathered at a public meeting in Pyramid Hill and it was decided to have a baiting program. Free baits were made available through the Conservation Management Network. They were laid during a very short time and the bait stations were checked daily. After a couple of weeks that program of laying liver baits ended and the contractor and his employees fumigated warrens and attempted to get rid of rabbits by destroying the warrens and fumigating them.

There was then a second round of baiting using Foxoff. The contractor, Nick Hunter, once again conducted two surveys of over 100 kilometres each and found there was at least an 85 per cent reduction in fox numbers and well over 90 per cent going on to 100 per cent in rabbit numbers. The reduction in rabbit numbers was due probably not to the baiting but to an outbreak of myxomatosis because in a similar program further north the rabbit numbers were not impacted upon greatly. They have now fallen following an outbreak of myxomatosis on the Avoca Plains. We did not involve shooters and most of the remaining foxes were in a hotspot where one of the landholders failed to lay any baits.

In the Kanyapella we conducted a similar program at the end of which the Sporting Shooters Association agreed to walk through the reserve. The contractors estimated there were about six foxes, old, wiry adult males, which had failed to take the baits. They were too clever. However, the shooters went through on a couple of occasions and I think managed to get only about two of the foxes. The fox baiting needs to be over a wide area. It was a 50 kilometre radius with a 100 kilometre diameter around Terrick Terrick so it is important that it is a big area, that it involves local landholders as well as government agencies and that there is a follow-up. If you do not follow it up each year or a couple of times a year it is not going to work.

Whilst sitting in the public gallery I heard some comments from the beekeepers. Some of the honeyeaters—not all of them—migrate according to where blossom is. A lot of them migrate over vast distances. Obviously the bees compete for nectar and there is a case for beekeeping. Perhaps there is a strong case also to have some areas in national parks where there are no beekeeping activities. There is a window of opportunity in the morning for honeyeaters before the European honey bee becomes active. The honeyeaters have a couple of hours in the early morning when there is no competition, which is a good thing. But bumblebees start their activity at first light and that window of opportunity will be closed, so we are strongly opposed to the deliberate introduction of bumblebees.

Crash grazing is acceptable over a small area to attack weeds, perhaps on a sandhill or a weed-infested area as long as it is quick and in a small area. We are in favour of sheep grazing on grasslands such as when the grass is thick and it is desirable to have grazing to ensure conditions suitable for the Plains Wanderer, dunnarts, curl snakes and other animals. However, the sheep should be taken off before the native grasses flower and set seed. In other words, it would be good if the sheep were removed in early spring and kept off the grassland until Easter. At Terrick Terrick at the moment the sheep have been left in over summer because the grass is simply too thick and high to meet the needs of the Plains Wanderers, but normally the sheep would come off.

Cattle grazing willy-nilly increase the long-term fire risk because they are selective in what they eat. They will eat the most nutritious grasses, the grasses that taste best such as kangaroo grass, Moira grass and wallaby grass, and they will leave woody weeds such as *Juncus ingens*, which is very flammable when it dries and burns ferociously. It is very difficult to control a fire in *Juncus ingens*. What has been happening in Barmah-Millewa is that Moira grass is being eaten out and lost, partly due to the lack of flooding, and *Juncus ingens* has increased in area. Cattle also introduce weeds. Briefly, environmental water can be used, if the natural pattern is followed, to help drown young saplings and maintain the Moira grass plains, over 90 per cent of which have been lost. They are being replaced with *Juncus* and saplings.

So it would be good to have environmental water. Barmah-Millewa is like a bucket with holes in it; as soon as you put water in, it comes out of the various holes. Fortunately, in the case of Barmah-Millewa, a lot of money has been spent over the years installing regulators to try to close the holes in the bucket so you can open the regulators when the river is high and let water in, and close the regulators to keep the water in. After the egrets have finished their nesting cycle in the late summer, you can open the regulators and let the grasslands dry. A good wetland does dry out and crack, for instance, in the autumn.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment [DSE] and one of the catchment management authorities [CMAs] in Victoria measured the amount of environmental water coming into Barmah-Millewa and going out over a period and claimed that 96 per cent of the water that was put in drained out and could be used by irrigators and others downstream. Personally, I dispute that figure of 96 per cent because I think they might have failed to account for water seeping from irrigated properties underground back into the river system.

I spoke to a Wentworth Group scientist here at Deniliquin last year and was told that they believe the figure to be at least 80 per cent. Please do not think that all environmental water is wasted. It is not. It is not lost. It does not disappear. Most of it finds its way back into the river system. The loss to evaporation and transpiration is less than 20 per cent, according to scientific studies. I am relying on by studies of the catchment management authority scientists and the Wentworth Group and so forth. It is important to bear that in mind.

Some communities have opposed national parks. We had a case at Gunbower, where some of the locals were very concerned. Now the national parks there have been proclaimed, they have decided to cash in. They have a sample bag of information about the local eateries and accommodation and they asked me to produce this brochure. The chappie who lives over at Picola, who took this photo, it took him two days sitting by a bush by a billabong. This brochure is full of photos of birds and you do not just get your camera and go click. A lot of patience is needed—probably inconspicuous clothing is good, and a lot of patience.

That is one of the reasons we are very concerned about the fact that people as young as 15 may possibly be allowed to go hunting without supervision in parks and reserves. In the Kanyapella, we have used the sporting shooters who go through the reserve. Most of them are over 40. The park was closed. It was organised; it was supervised. It was the last of the measures taken after the baiting program and ripping of warrens, et cetera. I think I have fitted in most of the points.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Thank you very much, Mr Stockwell, for your submission. I have read it. You tell us about the potential for a nature-based tourism industry for bird watchers. The New South Wales Government has released a River Red Gum Nature Tourism Action Plan. Have you seen that document at all?

**Mr STOCKWELL:** I have not, no, but I do have some ideas how tourism can be promoted.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Good. That is what I was about to ask you. This Government has a policy of doubling tourism expenditure by 2020. What would you like us to take back to the State Government as your suggested priorities for that doubling of expenditure to facilitate the growth of tourism for bird watchers?

**Mr STOCKWELL:** I have mentioned the Gunbower community.



**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** That is on the Victorian side of the border.

**Mr STOCKWELL:** It is, but it is on the border. They approached me to produce this brochure, which they put into their sample bag. They distribute their sample bag at various shows and farmers' markets and that sort of thing. They have been actively promoting tourism, pointing out that their little town is in the middle of a triangle of Gunbower Island, Terrick Terrick National Park and Kow Swamp. They persuaded our Bird Observation and Conservation Australia [BOCA] group, as it was then—it is now Birdlife Australia, as I said—to have a photo congress in Gunbower, which was over a Melbourne Cup long weekend plus a few days either side.

Over 80 bird photographers attended. Every piece of accommodation in Gunbower was booked out for that week. As well as the photographers, there were their partners and in some cases children. The whole community was involved. The football club, for instance, catered for a dinner. The fishing club catered for a dinner. The Country Women's Association [CWA] catered for morning and afternoon tea. The whole little community—it is not a very big community—was involved. We also had two bird camps nearby, which were attended by about 50 people each time. Why Gunbower? Why not Mathoura?

Well, the sign on the door of the information centre is a sort of an anti-greenie type sign and there were nasty signs on some of the shops. The first thing to do is for shopkeepers and the information centre to take those signs down and try to welcome people who have a green bent. A few anti-national parks signs and so forth that remain—and there are a few—over the border, they should come down as well. There is a terrific walking track at Mathoura along Gulpa Creek. There is also a new bird hide halfway between Mathoura and Picnic Point. It is on the New South Wales side of the forest.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** That is the one we went to yesterday.

**Mr STOCKWELL:** I would like to see a marked walking trail linking the bird hide to that walking track system. There is an old bird hide on the other side. The track eventually could be extended to that. There is an existing footbridge over the creek. Some years ago a few of us tried to put a track in from that bridge down to the Murray. The only trouble is that the track floods and it needs an elevated boardwalk. It would then be possible to walk alongside the Murray, if there is a bridge over the Moira Channel, all the way to Barmah town. It would take people two or three days and I think it would attract hundreds of people a year. The walking track system is the first thing I would be developing. Then if the community decides that they would like to cash in and try to organise and follow the lead of the Gunbower community, I think that would be a positive step as well.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Thank you for those suggestions. In your view, what is the impact of grazing on bush birds?

**Mr STOCKWELL:** The cattle tend to destroy bushes or damage the lower branches on which robins and other birds nest when they are looking out for food. The cattle reduce the diversity of vegetation and hence the diversity in bird numbers. The classic example was the reed beds area. You went to the bird hide, apparently. Before 1988, cattle were in the reed beds. I remember the late Graham Pizzey, when he opened that old bird hide, being exceptionally critical of the fact that there were cattle damaging the area. Some of the rarer plants seem to be absent.

Since the area was fenced—you may not have realised this when you went to the bird hide that the fence is actually on the other side of the road, which I think is brilliant—the Murray River forms a type of fence as does Moira Creek. The fence does not go all around the reed beds; it does not have to. But within a couple of years the diversity of plants that were observed in that reed beds area increased dramatically. Some plants, which were thought to be locally extinct, reappeared. There was also an increase, if I may say so, in the number of snakes.

You might think that is a bad thing but it is a sign that there are frogs and a healthy environment. The good news is that they are mainly red-bellied blacks, which are very forgiving if you inadvertently tread on them, or whatever. They are not as vicious as tiger snakes and they tend to keep the other snakes at bay as well. But, yes, the numbers have increased. Where you have cattle grazing, there will probably be fewer snakes, but also less diversity. Another good example—although I do not whether you have had the chance to go to the

Langland sandhill—is a fenced area there within which the vegetation is more diverse and healthier: The difference within and without of that fenced area is like chalk and cheese. It is very obvious.

But, as I said, I am not opposed to grazing of sheep on the grasslands over the winter, if it is dry, to try to ensure that conditions are suitable for plains wanderers and curl snakes. We are not opposed to crash grazing of weedy areas, provided the sheep or whatever are contained to a small area for a small period. But in the long run, as I said, because they are selective in what they eat and they ignore those woody flammable plants, cattle will result in an increase in the long-term fire risk. So it is a short-term solution, but not a long-term one.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Mr Stockwell, yesterday we toured some of the mills in the area as well as some of the forests. I heard from some of the people showing me around that State Forests, Forests NSW, conserves habitat trees when they log. Yesterday, both mills we visited had logs and one of them had rows and rows of logs, some quite significantly with hollows in them, although I was assured during that trip that trees with hollows were not logged. What is your opinion about the practice of Forests NSW logging in the area, its impact on birds, and its protection of habitat trees?

**Mr STOCKWELL:** I think I might need to express my personal opinion here because I have not discussed this with our members recently. Personally I was very disappointed that the veneer mill closed at Barham, I believe. Personally, I have no objection to milling of timber for higher value-added purposes. I think there is an adequate area put aside for sustainable logging and it is important that the forest industry continue.

However, trees should not be cut for firewood unless, as I said before, they are coppice trees, which are never going to develop into really good habitat trees and they are not going to be very resistant to drought. It does not look very natural to go into a national park and see lots of coppice trees. So there is an argument for small-scale logging of coppice trees, perhaps by Indigenous people or by displaced forestry workers, to try to ensure that the forest will resemble something like its original condition 200 years ago.

But that is a program that will at best take 100 years or more. We do not want them to cut all the coppice trees at once. They are useful for micro bats and other animals and do provide some nectar, but an old tree is going to provide better habitat for a wider range of creatures and a lot more nectar. Young trees put their energy into growth. An old tree puts more energy into production of blossom. So the old trees should be left. I think that selective logging is the way to go rather than clear-felling in small areas. I think there has been over-logging in the past.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Can I ask you about the impact, for example, on species such as the barking owl and the type of habitat tree needed by, for example, owls and micro bats you mentioned in the area. Do Forests NSW forests have sufficient habitat for those types of species as they stand now as a result of intensive logging?

**Mr STOCKWELL:** I think there is an inadequate number of good habitat trees. In the past, trees which were good habitat trees were deliberately ringbarked. Those old ringbarked trees in many cases are still standing. They provide good habitat for superb parrots and other birds, other animals, antechinus and so forth. But those old habitat trees that have been ringbarked are not starting to fall down, so the number of old trees with hollows is likely to decrease over the next decade. I think there is an inadequate number of old trees with hollows. Past forestry practices were not perfect. They did improve once ringbarking stopped and logging became more selective. There is a case for some continued logging but it should be more scientifically done and trees which can be developed into good habitat trees should remain unlogged.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Can I refer to your comments on tourism. Do you believe tourism can replace the lost economic activity that was generated by the red gum timber industry in this region?

**Mr STOCKWELL:** Time will tell—probably not entirely. If more effort is made more people will visit the area. I think time will tell. I do not know the answer.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Do you believe that the tourism initiatives depend on the national park or can we have the tourism initiatives in a State forest?

**Mr STOCKWELL:** There is no doubt that more people will be attracted to a national park. The term in itself will attract more birders and bushwalkers than a State forest will, especially because a national park is likely to be better habitat and be more pleasant in which to walk. A lot depends on the local community. The

Gunbower community has been absolutely terrific. They have promoted the fine food served at the local hotel and they have a regular mention in the *Age* on how good the food is. They are promoting their town and doing a terrific job. One person has donated their leasehold back on the condition it was added to the national park and that was from someone who was anti-national park to start with. It depends on the community getting behind promotions.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** The numbers are enormous. When you start talking about \$80 million being generated in this region from the timber industry annually, then the expected 50,000 visitors a year to come into this region in the future—that is 1,000 people a week—each of those 1,000 people a week has to spend \$1,500 to replace that \$80 million.

**Mr STOCKWELL:** Are you ignoring the fact there is still some timber industry available? One of the mills at Barham closed, which surprised me because there was still quite a lot of land set aside for forestry. I think it closed because it was uneconomic.

**CHAIR:** We are out of time. Mr Stockwell, thank you very much for making a detailed submission to the inquiry. If you have any other information you would like to put to the inquiry by way of supplementary submission please do so. If there are questions that the Committee did not have a chance to ask are you prepared to accept further questions from the Committee in writing?

**Mr STOCKWELL:** Yes, Mr Brown.

**CHAIR:** We ask that any answers be returned within 21 days.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**VICTOR IAN PIERCE EDDY**, Former Forest Manager, Yanga Station, sworn and examined;

**CHAIR:** The inquiry has received a submission from you and has agreed to publish it. Could I ask you before we go to questions to give us an opening statement?

**Mr EDDY:** A very brief resume of what I have tried to get across is that personally I am not greatly concerned about which department or organisation actually manages the public land but it comes down to the way the different departments do it according to their ethic. In the case of National Parks, while they could manage a forest that is being harvested, they would have to experience a major cultural shift before they would do it in a practical fashion. That is the essence of my submission. The alternative is Forests NSW. Their major problem is that they have been so interfered with by other bodies that I do not think they are doing a particularly good job at the moment anyway. Their position needs to be revised by the Government to give them freedom to do the job that the forestry Act requires of them.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Mr Eddy, you have long experience on Yanga and with the area. We heard that about a nine hectare trial of ecological thinning will be undertaken at an expense of \$500,000. What do you think Yanga will look like in 20 years time if the approach of micro-scale thinning is taken and you do not have active management?

**Mr EDDY:** If they are only meant to be doing tiny little bits like that I cannot see that Yanga as a whole will look greatly different to how it would look if they did none. There would be tiny little pockets. My assessment of the 17,000 hectares of river red gum country on Yanga was that about 8,000 hectares was a commercially viable forest and eight hectares is 1/1,000 of that.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** In 20 to 25 years will that forest look healthy? Will it have biodiversity and will it have all the ecological outcomes that everyone is looking for?

**Mr EDDY:** It will be a far less biodiverse forest. Our red gum forests have only been with us for the last 6,000 years. The red gum forests are still evolving. They invaded a human habitat; the humans did not invade theirs. We displaced the Indigenous population and we displaced their population control of the red gums by fire with harvesting. If there has been a fault in our management in the last 100 years we have not been falling enough trees, because the forests have been getting gradually more and more dense. If you see a dense red gum forest you see river red gum trees with leaves, bark and sticks on the ground and only the very occasional ground plant.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** My take from that is unless we have active management, including ecological thinning on a realistic scale, we will have a degraded forest in years to come?

**Mr EDDY:** I have always said yes, there will be change. Some will say that is good and some say it is bad. Whether it is degraded or not is a personal opinion. Some people might think that the dense red gum forest is the ideal.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** You make the point in your submission that National Parks are generally opposed to active management of forests. Why is that a problem specifically for red gum forests?

**Mr EDDY:** Of all the eucalypts the river red gum is the most invasive of them all because of its ability to survive drought and flood. In California it is regarded as an environmental weed. It was mentioned on Tuesday afternoon that you had seen part of Yanga. I gather they are prepared to sacrifice part of the forest to not being forest any more by it drying out. I would suspect that when the current floodwater recedes from there they will be embarrassed by wheat field regeneration.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** You note that Oolambeyan National Park allows grazing operations on its land to maintain the health of the landscape for the plains wanderer. Do you believe it is necessary for significant harvesting operations to be undertaken in national parks to maintain the environmental health of those areas?

**Mr EDDY:** Yes, I do. In my submission I say that the manager of the forest needs to be very clear in their intent. Do we want to retain something as we believe it was 200 years ago, do we want to retain something that is consistent with what it looks like now, or do we want to watch it evolve naturally without the human

element influencing the density of the forest? It is my impression that National Parks are heading more to this experiment of seeing what evolves rather than trying to maintain what was there or duplicating something that they perceive might have been there 200 years ago.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Essentially the areas declared national parks because of their wonderful environmental values have not been left to grow willy-nilly, they have been actively managed for 20, 30, 75 or 100 years?

**Mr EDDY:** Yes, that is their past.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** They are only in such good condition because of active human intervention and specifically thinning operations to maintain the health of those areas?

**Mr EDDY:** It is a significant influence on how they look today, yes.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Based on your almost 50 years of forestry experience and 28 years experience in river red gums, what do you believe are optimal numbers of trees per hectare to maintain the health of a particular area?

**Mr EDDY:** That depends entirely on the size of the trees. My outlook on silviculture treatment of the forest is based on spacing according to the size of the trees. If you have the big old magnificent habitat trees, four of those can be fully occupying a site whereas if they are only 40 centimetres in diameter you would have 100 of them occupying the same site.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Do you have faith that National Parks have the level of forestry experience within its ranks to accurately adjudge the health and the load levels for the parks under management here?

**Mr EDDY:** To be honest, no.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Mr Eddy, just following on from the line of questioning from Dr Phelps, do red gums reach a lockup size when they reach that maximum stem area?

**Mr EDDY:** Yes. When it locks up it will fight itself to the bitter end before it starts to thin itself.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** It will eventually thin itself?

**Mr EDDY:** It will eventually thin itself out.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Does it go through a period of slow growth while going through the natural thinning process?

**Mr EDDY:** Yes. Its growth will be so slight that you will almost need a micrometer to measure it.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** When it is at its optimum basal stem area what sort of growth rates can you expect to see assuming that it has good water under it?

**Mr EDDY:** In the order of 3 centimetres in diameter a year. That is at least as good if not better than we expect from our *Pinus radiata* plantations.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** So it can be a very productive resource given optimum conditions?

**Mr EDDY:** It can.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Following on from the line of questioning by Dr Phelps in relation to thinning, at what stage should that regeneration be thinned? You have already mentioned that it will come up like a wheat field—I think that was the term you used. What is the optimum stage for thinning that into a density that will eventually be optimal for two things, timber production and an ecological situation in which we are trying to recruit habitat trees? What is the optimum stem spacing for those two scenarios?

**Mr EDDY:** It would be nice to start thinning at the small sapling stage but the cost of doing these jobs is such that you really need the first thinning to be when it can be done commercially so there is a product out of it. We could do relatively small trees purely for chips probably to be used for producing electricity. I have no doubt the volume of red gum regeneration would be sufficient to power a small but quite valuable powerhouse.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What size stems are you talking about?

**Mr EDDY:** Up to about 10 to 15 centimetres in diameter at breast height. Otherwise you do it when it gets to a commercial stage. Your first thinning still needs to be at a spacing of between 5 and 10 metres apart per tree.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** We would be talking about stems with what, 25 centimetres, by that stage?

**Mr EDDY:** Yes, at least 25 centimetres.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Realistically, how old would those trees be at that stage?

**Mr EDDY:** Thirty to forty years.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** You mentioned stem spacing of five to 10 metres per hectare and as the trees get bigger obviously that spacing would increase so would there need to be a continual thinning program if you wanted to end up with old habitat trees?

**Mr EDDY:** Yes. There is a neat little mathematical equation for working out how far apart the trees should be. You measure the diameter of two trees, average it, divide it by four and multiply by 100 and that is the number of metres apart they should be. So two 40 centimetre diameter trees should be 10 metres apart.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** How much timber was extracted from the forest at Yanga on an annual basis during your long time there?

**Mr EDDY:** On an annual basis we were aiming at 4,500 cubic metres a year from the 8,000 hectares.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What is the value of that figure in round figures?

**Mr EDDY:** The logs plus the firewood was in the order of \$250,000 to \$300,000 a year.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** The conversation I have just heard sounded like we are talking about State forests but, of course, we are talking about national parks and river red gums being reserved in national parks. Are you aware what a healthy, functioning forest ecosystem looks like for biodiversity as well as for the production of wood?

**Mr EDDY:** I believe I am.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Has your history of working with the forests all been from a forestry perspective in producing a product?

**Mr EDDY:** Yes, it has.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** In your response to questions from the Hon. Rick Colless you said trees should be 20 metres apart if they are 40 centimetres in diameter. Is that for the optimal supply of a tall tree for timber?

**Mr EDDY:** No, that is for the optimal, healthy and vigorous growth of red gum forest. At that spacing you will also have an understorey of saplings and ground cover of shrubs, herbs and grasses. In my assessment of Yanga I would come across about 130 different botanical species because each time I measured a plot, and each plot was 0.6 of a hectare in size, I would comb that plot to see what plants were growing there or had recently died. You are dealing with a floodplain that lives and dies. If there is fresh dead stuff there, it will be there again next time it gets a drink. It was principally the plants that were alive. There was a broad diversity

and about 10 per cent of those species were exotic invading species. National Parks have never asked a question about what was there.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Are you aware that the National Parks and Wildlife Service is conducting an ecological thinning trial at the moment?

**Mr EDDY:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** In your submission you suggest that Forests NSW has the legal capacity and expertise to manage native forests sustainably and commercially. What do you see as the difference between Forests NSW doing ecological thinning and the National Parks and Wildlife Service doing ecological thinning in a national park? Do you see a difference?

**Mr EDDY:** Unfortunately I think I do because Forests NSW are doing it as a commercial operation and National Parks are doing it as a completely non-commercial operation and all they are doing is adding to the woody fuel on the forest floor, which will increase the risk of greater damage should it ever catch alight in a wildfire.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Do you agree that National Parks would be undertaking ecological thinning from a conservation perspective rather than from a commercial perspective?

**Mr EDDY:** They think they are.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** And your evidence is?

**Mr EDDY:** Before we came along and interfered there would have been very little woody residue on the forest floor because the regular fire practices of the Aborigines would have minimised the amount of woody fuel. In the debate leading up to these forests becoming national park there were claims that there should be 125 tonnes per hectare of woody litter. That would create the most horrific wildfire should it ever catch alight. We also have this problem now of buried litter since we stopped the Aborigines from burning off. When that catches alight it can smoulder for weeks or more below the surface. The occasional wisp of smoke will come out through a crack or a root hole but it will ringbark every tree it comes to. To go back to the Aborigines' use of fire we would have to be prepared to sacrifice a lot of the trees we have today to start from scratch again. If that is what we want to do, if that is the experiment, then by all means.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** You recognised the biodiversity in the forest at Yanga that you managed. Are you aware of the role of woody debris in supporting a whole diversity of species?

**Mr EDDY:** Yes, it does, but people get a bit confused at times because solid wood is a habitat for virtually nothing. Old hollow fallen limbs and trees provide lots of habitat, but with thinning the bulk of what you put on the ground will be solid. It will provide some habitat in the loose bark for cockroaches and lizards and things until it falls off and goes into the humus layer. As far as the wood goes it will be a long time before it becomes a habitat for anything.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Thanks for appearing today and for talking to us in Balranald as well. We appreciate it. I see from your submission that you had 22 years with the old Forestry Commission in public forestry, if I can put it that way, and then 21 or 22 years as a private forester. In your submission you tell us the river red gum forests deserve to be managed well by sufficient professional staff to maintain continuity of knowledge and its application. Will the very significant job losses that are occurring under this Government in Forests NSW and in National Parks, as part of their contribution to an overall cutting of 15,000 jobs, affect the capacity of both of those agencies to manage the public forests here?

**Mr EDDY:** I believe it will. I am probably not the longest serving forester in red gum because in years gone by there were two brothers, both foresters, one at Barham I think it was and the other at Mathoura, who had over 30 years in the one office. They had a wealth of local knowledge that went with them. Unfortunately, when you are in a one-forester district and the forester leaves you take your personal knowledge with you. If there are two or three foresters, at least you can hand it on. On the coast it does not matter all that much because the difference in management is not great. I also say in my submission that these bright-eyed, bushy-tailed young foresters come over the hill and try to apply their coastal experience in the red gum and they start

learning that it does not always fit. They are moving from an area of nearly 1,000 millimetre rainfall on the coast to 250 to 300 millimetre rainfall out here where the forest depends on intermittent flooding.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** From your knowledge of Forests New South Wales, can it afford to lose very large numbers of professional staff through job shedding by the State Government?

**Mr EDDY:** I do not think it can. There has been a movement to terminate the forest service for quite some years now and I think this process is gradually going on. Most of the quality foresters grabbed the redundancy packages and ran because they knew they could get a job in the outside world. The sooner you got out there the sooner you could get one of the jobs that were left.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** How long ago did that happen?

**Mr EDDY:** That they were leaving? Most of that would have been 10 to 15 years ago.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Under a government that demonised forestry and forest products.

**CHAIR:** Order. Dr Phelps will come to order.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Will you stop the job cuts now?

**CHAIR:** Order! Members will come to order.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Perhaps you will recommend that.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Find me some forests where people can actually cut down stuff.

**CHAIR:** Order! Be quiet please. If Mr Foley has a question he can continue. Mr Eddy's answer should be heard in silence.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** You have had 28 years with river red gum, more than 20 in the private forestry area. What can you tell us about the evolution of the private forestry industry across the Riverina red gum region? We met with some representatives of the timber industry yesterday. Has there been a reduction in the size of the industry over the 28 years you have been here? Has it got to a smaller number of large operators? What can you tell us about the evolution of the industry across the 28 years you have seen it?

**Mr EDDY:** Before I came here, most of the operators were relatively small. The bulk of them, I always think, were probably mobile sleeper cutter operations. But probably about 30 years ago it was changing noticeably for sawmill licences to be amalgamated into larger units because fixed sawmills—because of their overheads—need a larger volume to reach viability than the small mobile operator.

The company I worked for during the whole time I was managing Yanga was the owner of Merbein sawmill, which was the largest of the sawmills, and that was an amalgamation of three that had been put together to create the Merbein sawmill. It fell by the wayside because its allocation was cut from 5,560 cubic metres to 1,000. At 5,560 it was dependent on a proportion of private property logs to be a viable operation at the size that it was.

A side issue was when I arrived in Mildura as a district forester with the Forestry Commission Merbein sawmill was the first New South Wales native hardwood sawmill I had ever struck that did not a waste burner. They did not have waste. They had a market for everything. We tended to regard the red gum as a bit of a penance job—that you would go out and do a bit of penance in the red gum—but I found it extremely stimulating from that point of view because it was a little isolated industry, the pimple on the elephant of the timber industry in Australia but it was viable. It was good.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** I think the Hon. Luke Foley was trying to score a political point before. Can you tell me how many private sector jobs you think were lost as a consequence of the Labor-Greens decision in 2010?

**Mr EDDY:** No, I am sorry. I do not have those figures at my fingertips.



**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Can you take that on notice?

**Mr EDDY:** Yes, I could take it on notice.

**CHAIR:** We have run out of time. Mr Eddy, thank you very much for agreeing to come and see us today and thank you very much for the time you provided to the Committee the other day. Your input has been very valuable and we appreciate it.

**Mr EDDY:** Thanks.

**CHAIR:** If the Committee has any questions that they were unable to ask you, would you be happy to answer any questions of the Committee in writing?

**Mr EDDY:** I will. Can I just add one little thing? In the light of what you said on Tuesday about Western Lands, I have just written a letter on behalf of a group of Western Lands lessees regarding their problems with the impediment of firewood being harvested from their Western Lands. I would like to edit that and send it on, and I gather you have extended the submission period.

**CHAIR:** We have.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Put in a supplementary submission.

**Mr EDDY:** I will edit what I wrote to the Minister for Primary Industries.

**CHAIR:** You can leave it as it is. If there is anything contentious in there, the secretariat can recommend we publish only parts of it.

**Mr EDDY:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** But certainly make that supplementary submission. We would love to have it. Thank you very much. We will now adjourn.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**

**WILLIAM MAXWELL RHEESE**, Executive Director, Australian Environment Foundation, sworn and examined;

**CHAIR:** Would you like to make a brief opening statement?

**Mr RHEESE:** Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the inquiry. I know some of you have read our submission. The recurring theme for our submission is not opposition to previous or future change of public land tenure but what is required to improve the method or process of change and the model of land tenure that is used. We believe that a new paradigm of public land reservation needs to be established to meet the expectations of the whole community, not just environment groups or the politically active.

This requires a broader suite of land tenure options to be available to government that embraces a wider variety of utilisation of public land. The vast majority of land currently reserved is under national park status, which has a rather narrow view of land use. We are keen to see the model of sustainable use embraced. The prestigious international body, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, a decade ago recognised formally the value of sustainable use, as has the international Ramsar convention. We believe the current view is very twentieth century and that sustainable use is excluded in the majority of land reservation decisions.

The Australian Environment Foundation believes that the politicisation of land tenure change is weakening community support for further land reservation as national parks. Further, our view is that the process of conversion of the red gum forests of the Riverina to national parks was an appallingly conducted process with long-term adverse impacts on the local communities and the forest environment. There is no evidence to suggest the biodiversity outcomes in the river red gum forests will be enhanced by national park status. In fact there is every reason to believe there will be a thickening of the forest, as has occurred in the Nyah-Vinifera forest near Robinvale.

This thickening of the forest is turning forests that have been reserved or protected into biodiversity deserts. When the investigation was going on for the Riverina red gum national parks the foundation invited Dr John Williams down to the Nyah-Vinifera forest, which is just over the river near Robinvale, and we did a tour through the forest. We wanted Dr Williams to see the Nyah-Vinifera forest because we believe that is what the future of the Millewa forest would be if it was declared a national park. The question put to the tour guide, forester Vic Eddy, was how many trees he believed were there in a particular part of the forest we were at, how many trees per hectare. He replied, "About 2,000 trees to the hectare." He was then asked how many trees he believed should be there to represent the natural forest to which he replied, "About 200."

Those are the concerns that we articulated to Dr Williams, which is why we invited him down there for the tour. This was a forest that was not a national park but protected as if it was a national park. It was progressively changed from sustainable use; timber harvesting was excluded, grazing was excluded and the forest was thickening to the point that it was so shaded in lots of parts of the forest that there was virtually no ground cover what so ever. The dwarf native cherry *exocarpus cupressiformis* was starting to colonise the forest. It is a parasitic native shrub that previously had been kept down by grazing. The forest was changing because of the changed management, and we believe that was a change for the worse.

When the party stood on the edge of the Murray River with the Nyah-Vinifera forest at our backs and looked across the river to the New South Wales side there was healthy open parkland-like forest that was obviously in good condition. What we had behind us was a protected forest that was slowly going backwards and where the dwarf native cherries were in clumps so thick you could not walk through them. It was why we took him there; to see the future of what we believe the Millewa would be like. Dr Williams has repeatedly stated in his report to the New South Wales Government that all river red gum forest ecosystems in the Riverina will need to be intensively and actively managed.

Two years after the declaration of the forest as national parks there is no evidence this will occur on any significant scale to mitigate degradation of the forest through thickening. Not only do the National Parks and Wildlife Service have no expertise in this issue—probably little in the way of funding to implement it—we are certain that they have no desire to oversee active management of river red gum forests. The primary stated aim of the National Parks and Wildlife Service is the conservation of natural values. One could say that is their whole reason for being. The further expansion of tourist activities in national parks, however good that might be—and there is wonderful benefits for communities from further tourism in national parks—the expansion of tourist activities will divert resources away from biodiversity conservation. That is why we have in our

submission called for an audit of National Parks and Wildlife Service activities to determine the actual resources that are devoted to biodiversity outcomes and what is achieved.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** In your submission you talk about the suite of options available when land is added to the reserve system. Is it your view that the current suite includes national parks, State conservation areas, regional parks, Indigenous areas and community conservation areas when you look at the Brigalow? Is it your point that there are not enough options and there need to be more options or is your point that too much land is made national park and the other options are not used enough?

**Mr RHEESE:** Both of those points. The suite of options available to the Government should be broadened to specifically enable sustainable use or the community conservation area option should be enhanced or broadened a little bit. We are favourable to that particular option. We are not that mad keen on the zoning system used within community conservation. If it was up to us we would say let us have a new suite or new tool in that suite of tools available that is called a Ramsar national park, or whatever, with a primary purpose of conservation and sustainable use.

To answer your question, we would like to see the suite broadened a little bit. What we are seeing now is that only 6 per cent of the land reserved in New South Wales is reserved under community conservation area. I say initially to your question: both. It is no use having that tool there if it is not used. That requires, we believe, a new way of thinking about what it is we are trying to achieve. If you look at the history of national park reservation in New South Wales it started in 1879. The first 90 years saw one million hectares of land reserved and in the next 34 to 35 years it jumped to six million hectares. It is all good but has anything changed over those 125 years? Have the community attitudes to land reservation changed? There is evidence it has changed from what was started and why parks were originally reserved. We believe the community attitude has changed and changed again several times but there has been no change since the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974. There has been no change to how national parks are thought of, how they are reserved, what their purpose is and what it is we are trying to achieve.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** There have been new options added to the suite?

**Mr RHEESE:** That is right. Has anybody said at any point in time, "We have done a great job. We have now got six million hectares and 827 parks and reserves, which is so much better than 50 or 100 years ago"? It is in many respects. Has anybody said, "Have we now achieved an end goal? Have we achieved what we wanted? Do we need to do more?" What I put to the Committee is the low-hanging fruit of land reservation has already been harvested. The emblematic areas such as Kosciusko and the Blue Mountains have been reserved. They should be, they are emblematic; they have significant landscape values and national parks protect and enhance those values very well.

We are now starting to see further conflict within the community because more and more land is being reserved and it is becoming harder to reserve than land under the national park banner without bringing adverse impacts on the community. We saw that clearly with the reservation of the red gum parks in the Riverina because they were used as multiple-use forests because their reservation had serious social and economic impacts on the community. We need to look ahead. This is going to get harder and harder if we want to keep reserving land, and I presume the community wants to do that.

It is going to be harder, so we need more tools in the tool box that will enable further protection where it is identified as necessary, but the adverse impacts on communities will be lessened through, for instance, reservation where there is sustainable uses allowed. I want to make the point that we are not saying, "That is it. We have six million hectares of public land in national parks; no more." We are not saying that at all. We are not saying that all future reservation should be sustainable use. We are saying where appropriate it should be sustainable use. We are saying that tool is not used and not recognised.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Is it correct that one of the Australian Environment Foundation's founding directors was representing Timber Communities of Australia?

**Mr RHEESE:** Yes. When you say "representing", she was a representative of Timber Communities Australia, yes. We have no corporate membership available in the Australian Environment Foundation so every person is there as an individual but almost every individual represents or is a member of one or more organisations.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Or perhaps one industry or natural resource use?

**Mr RHEESE:** Yes.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** I believe that another director, Leon Ashby, organised two rallies protesting against the Queensland Vegetation Management Act.

**Mr RHEESE:** I think that is probably right. I have no personal knowledge of that, but, yes, that sounds right.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Did the Australian Environment Foundation hold any rallies against the proposal at the time to protect river red gum forests?

**Mr RHEESE:** Through the Rivers and Red Gum Environment Alliance, yes.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** What was that rally?

**Mr RHEESE:** That was a public rally on Sunday 3 October 2008. About 2,000 to 2,500 people gathered in Echuca for a march through Echuca and were addressed at a gathering on the edge of the Murray River to talk about the proposals.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Did the Australian Environment Foundation contribute funding to the organisation of that rally?

**Mr RHEESE:** No. I was secretary of the Rivers and Red Gum Environment Alliance. The Australian Environment Foundation initiated the Rivers and Red Gum Environment Alliance, so there was no financial contribution to the rally or to the Rivers and Red Gum Environment Alliance but certainly it was supported strongly.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** You say the foundation initiated the alliance. Who else was in the alliance?

**Mr RHEESE:** Twenty-six organisations plus six councils.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Was the alliance formed in opposition to the proposal for river red gum national parks?

**Mr RHEESE:** Yes. The alliance was never opposed to the protection of river red gum parks but it was opposed to the model that was to be used, which was for national parks. We pointed out that on both sides of the river the forests had been managed very well under the Ramsar protection they had and that we were opposed to national park status being applied because it would end sustainable use.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** When your organisation formed in Tenterfield on World Environment Day in 2005 why was the name Australian Natural Resource Users Foundation, for example, not used instead of Australian Environment Foundation? Do you think that is slightly misleading?

**Mr RHEESE:** That was the decision of the people who moved the motion to form the organisation at the Eureka Forum, which was a two-day forum in Ballarat in late 2004. During the discussion at the meeting various options were put forward but it fairly quickly settled on the Australian Environment Foundation.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** In other words, you are here today as a witness representing different park users and natural resource users rather than representing an environmental non-government organisation that is advocating for healthy ecosystems? You are really advocating for park users and natural resource users.

**Mr RHEESE:** We are advocating for both.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** I will ask a question about State forest logging. Do you think, if you are advocating for healthy ecosystems, the way NSW Forests was logging the river red gum areas around

Barmah-Millewa before they were gazetted as national parks was sustainable? Did there need to be any change to that logging regime for it to be sustainable?

**Mr RHEESE:** I believe there needed to be some change to what had been happening over time, so we would not have been opposed to changes suggested to the timber harvesting regime that had been going on at that time.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Would it be fair to say that the Australian Environment Foundation is anti-national parks?

**Mr RHEESE:** No, it would not. I would like to make the point that in our submission we listed the values of the Australian Environment Foundation and that we embrace the sustainable use principles of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature [IUCN]. Our values and what we believe in are no different from what Australia supports through its membership of the IUCN.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Are you aware of the environmental impact study [EIS] done by NSW Forests in 2009, I think it was, on the river red gums?

**Mr RHEESE:** I am aware of it.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** The statement that stands out in that for me was that forestry was sustainable according to that EIS and it was trumpeted by the Minister of the day, Ian Macdonald. Is there any doubt in your mind from those sorts of documents that there was a sustainable forestry industry?

**Mr RHEESE:** No doubt.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** I want to explore the issue of ecological thinning. I am having trouble getting my head around the figures. I understand the current trial is \$500,000 for nine hectares. That works out at about \$55,555 a hectare. On Yanga, if I heard correctly, there were 8,000 hectares of forestry. How do we convert to a national park where everybody seems to agree—I have not yet heard anybody disagree—that we need active management, including thinning, over these vast areas where the National Parks and Wildlife Service is proposing to spend \$50,000 a hectare? My back-of-envelope figure says that is \$440,000 a year just on Yanga. How do we have any prospect of going forward with these forests to do a reasonable job of ecological thinning, or whatever thinning you want to call it, with that sort of cost level? Where is that money going to come from or was this a thought bubble under the previous Government with no plan to manage or finance it?

**Mr RHEESE:** I think I addressed that partly in my opening statement. We do not believe the funds will be made available to the National Parks and Wildlife Service to the degree that is needed to bring about what you are talking about. I think there were several thought bubbles in this whole process. Obviously the Minister for forests was opposed to the proposals. The original proposals were to have a substantial part of the Millewa forest open for timber harvesting for a transitional period. That disappeared—

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** It was going to be five years, wasn't it?

**Mr RHEESE:** That is right.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Until the horse trading started.

**Mr RHEESE:** Just going on the thought bubbles, all these things got swept aside because obviously Minister Sartor recognised this would have an adverse impact on the community, which is why he proposed that transitional period. That got swept aside. I think there were a number of thought bubbles in this whole process. What you are getting at is the fundamental problem for the future of the Millewa forests. It is very unlikely that future New South Wales governments are going to make available the funding that is required to have thinning of the magnitude required to bring about good biodiversity outcomes. That was the point I was trying to make with the Nyah Vinifera State Forest. Somebody at some point in time has directed or convinced Parks Victoria to manage—

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Lock up and walk away.

**Mr RHEESE:** Yes, and the forest is going backwards. It is a disgrace. If you go there and look at this red gum forest, which is 80 metres across the river from New South Wales so it is in the same bioregion and the same sort of forest, you see the trees are all growing straight up. They are like alpine ash. They are going straight up because they are so crowded. Here and there throughout the forest you can see the remnants of much older trees. They have broad spreading branches in the classical canopy shape of a red gum and they were obviously there before the trees we were looking at, which were probably 40 or 50 years old, came up as a result of a flood. They were able to grow as they should, as Bob Carr so eloquently described it when he spoke of the red gum forests. They are magnificent trees but the Nyah Vinifera State Forest is now full of trees that have a circumference of 30 or 40 centimetres and grow straight up and cast a shade so thick that nothing will grow underneath them, and this is done in the name of biodiversity conservation.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** So we have actually had a worsening of the ecological and environmental outcomes?

**Mr RHEESE:** Absolutely. There is no question about that. What I am hoping will come out of this inquiry is where we go in the future because this sort of process that is happening—

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** So we avoid that?

**Mr RHEESE:** Yes.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Are you aware of the management regimes of national parks in international jurisdictions?

**Mr RHEESE:** Not particularly. I am sorry, I would like to be but I have not been able to devote a great amount of time.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** We had a meeting the other day with Dr Leon Bren who made a statement to us that in most international jurisdictions national parks very much have a multi-use approach to their management rather than "lock it up and leave it" like the Australian mentality. Do you think national parks should have a multi-use component to their management?

**Mr RHEESE:** I do. This is the suite that we need to have available. I am sure there will be areas that for whatever reason need to be left as they are—however you can do that in a dynamic landscape—scientific research or whatever, and virtually "lock up and leave". I do not believe that is appropriate or should be applicable to the vast area that is reserved because as the IUCN has recognised, sustainable use is very compatible with biodiversity conservation. On that basis alone you would make the broad statement that multiple use brings about the best social and environmental outcomes.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** In that multiple use situation do you think we could have a whole range of options in the toolkit that we could apply to a park as management tools and that could result in the park management arriving at a predetermined ecological objective that they might be striving to obtain?

**Mr RHEESE:** Yes. You see that in the zoning of the community conservation areas—zones 1, 2, 3 and 4. Zone 1 is primarily for biodiversity conservation. The only problem, to answer an earlier question, is that you can start off with an area that has these zones and over time the zoning can then be incrementally changed. That is an issue for the people of the day. That is the only problem we have with the zoning: it can be reneged on. We saw that in the Barmah State Park, on the Victorian side, where it was agreed that sustainable timber harvesting would be allowed after the State parks were initiated. That applied for several years and then it was withdrawn. So that is the only problem we have with zoning. The tools can be incorporated into land reservation and management to achieve the various outcomes that government wants to see achieved. But it is very hard to do that when you do not have the tools. There is no real recognition within the national parks Act, or, I believe, within the National Parks and Wildlife Service, of the concept of sustainable use.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Mr Rheese, the River Red Gum Alliance to which you referred, did that have some timber mill operators on that alliance or representatives of the forestry industry?

**Mr RHEESE:** No, not individuals because the organisation was a peak organisation, but it had Timber Communities Australia as one of its members. There was no individual mill owner or person.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** The alliance was actively campaigning against any changes to land tenure in the area and for Forests NSW and mill operators to be able to be given continued access, as they currently have it, to the forests?

**Mr RHEESE:** We were not opposed to a change of land tenure. We were opposed to the proposed change, which was national park.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** In other words, when you are here today talking about sustainable use from the Australian Environment Foundation's perspective, you are really talking about what you had before the national park was gazetted. Is that right? If you were actively campaigning against gazettal to national parks, you were comfortable with the existing situation in State forests. When you are talking about sustainable use, are you wanting to go back to what you were fighting to protect during this public land rights rally a few years ago?

**Mr RHEESE:** Broadly speaking, yes. We would have been happy if the Government had come out and said, "We are not going to have national parks. We will keep it protected under the Ramsar use, and the existing uses of the forests will be allowed." If that is what you are asking, yes, we would have supported that.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** In other words, that is sustainable use of a State forest for a continued supply of wood, rather than sustainable use of a national park for conservation outcomes? I think the International Union for the Conservation of Nature [IUCN] has a different definition to what you are advocating today.

**Mr RHEESE:** No. If I understand what you have just said correctly, we would support sustainable use under the International Union for the Conservation of Nature principles and we would see those as very close, if not identical, to what it was that you are proposing.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Close or identical to what State Forests were doing in the State forests?

**Mr RHEESE:** Yes. I hope I have answered your question, as I understand what your question was. We did not see any material difference in what was happening at the time prior to national park gazettal and the principles of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature or the principles of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** Or Forests NSW logging of the Barmah-Millewa area at the same rate they did that in 2008 when you had your public land rights rally. In your mind, that is the same thing?

**Mr RHEESE:** When we had the public land rights rally, that was addressing the Victorian issue. That was the context of that rally and the timing of that rally, so the opposition you are talking about was to proposals for the Victorian side.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** That was a campaign for river red gum protection generally.

**Mr RHEESE:** Yes. I am just trying to draw the distinction. When you say we were campaigning for the continuation of harvesting at the rate that was happening right at that time by State Forests, no. We have not said that and that was not the intention. The intention was to allow for sustainable use as per the question over here just before. I think that we would have supported some of the changes that had been put forward to the amount of timber being harvested at that time.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** During that period, did the Australian Environment Foundation ever advocate to Forest NSW or the New South Wales Government for more sustainable use, as you are calling it, or more sustainable forestry practices? Have you ever undertaking lobbying in that regard?

**Mr RHEESE:** No. Well, certainly not to State Forests New South Wales. We certainly lobbied Minister Sartor for the continuation of sustainable timber harvesting.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** For the continuation of existing logging practices, which you are suggesting may not have been as sustainable—

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** That is not what he said.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** No. You are calling it sustainable use. In other words, the only lobbying you did was for the continuation of what Forests NSW was already doing.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Point of order: The Hon. Cate Faehrmann is putting words in the witness's mouth. That is not what he said at all.

**CHAIR:** Order! I will allow the question. I am sure the witness clearly understands what is intended by the question. The witness should answer the question without interruption.

**Mr RHEESE:** We lobbied Minister Sartor, in particular, for the continuation of sustainable timber harvesting. We never lobbied for the exact amount of harvesting that had been carried out prior to that point. So we supported then, and we do now, sustainable timber harvesting. We never made any mention of particular levels, the point being there that whatever was carried out needed to be sustainable, whether that was in the State forests or whether that was in a new national park or existing reserves elsewhere. If it is not sustainable, it is not going to produce biodiversity outcomes that the community wants.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Mr Rheese, there are some people in the extreme environmental movement who happen to believe that sustainable commercial operations and green environmental outcomes are mutually incompatible. Would that be the view or the experience of your organisation?

**Mr RHEESE:** Yes, and that is a real problem for the community—that that idea has taken hold. I think this is at the root of thinking that has come about in the last 40 years and how we have got ourselves into this pickle.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Do you believe that that extreme viewpoint has taken over much of National Parks thinking?

**Mr RHEESE:** Anecdotal evidence suggests that that could be the case, but I have no direct knowledge of that.

**CHAIR:** Mr Rheese, thank you very much for appearing before the Committee. We value your input and we are happy that we received your submission. If members of the Committee wish to put any questions to you that they were not able to put in the time available today, are you happy to receive those questions?

**Mr RHEESE:** Certainly.

**CHAIR:** If so, could you perhaps reply within 21 days of receipt of those questions?

**Mr RHEESE:** Certainly.

**CHAIR:** Ladies and gentlemen, we will adjourn for five minutes while we await a witness who has had a long way to travel.

**(Short adjournment)**



**FRANK WHITE**, Board Member, Riverina Regional Tourism Board, and

**KENNETH MURPHY**, Chairman, Riverina Regional Tourism Board, and

**LINDA TILLMAN**, Executive Officer, Riverina Regional Tourism Board, sworn and examined:

**CHAIR:** I welcome our last witnesses for this session. We understand you have travelled a long way.

**Mr MURPHY:** That is correct.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. I invite any or each of you to make an opening statement. I note we have not yet received a submission from you. The Committee has decided to extend receipt of submissions until the end of August. We are hoping to receive a submission from you.

**Mr MURPHY:** Thank you for the opportunity to come here today to offer some views. We are aware of the inquiry and we have had a look through the terms of reference. I guess from the point of view of our view reflecting Riverina tourism, we have four key platforms, and one is natural attractions. Natural attractions bring in our interest with national parks and I should say at the very beginning we have had discussions with the National Parks which have evolved naturally following the declaration of those parks and those discussions have been at a constructive level working together. I suppose the suite of issues we would raise is not all that detailed but I guess they are important: if national parks are going to be an important plank in our tourism then there needs to be resources allocated to it. There is no point in having national parks as a tourist attraction in name only; it must be backed up with resources.

We would be hoping for some sort of commitment at a State level if that is the case. Because this is all relatively new in terms of time, the issues that immediately come to mind are access to the parks, ongoing maintenance responsibility for the park and things like signage and marketing. In order to market something you need to have access and if you are going to have access you need to have some complementary signage depending on the type of natural attractions involved. We see those as an obvious thing that needs to be considered to promote the value of the national parks. It is early days and we have had some discussions along the lines of what we see as an area that can be addressed such as the ones I have mentioned. Our Riverina tourism, through Destination NSW, obviously has a desire to complement and work with National Parks marketing of the existing parks and that is about where we are at the present time.

**CHAIR:** Before I pass on to questions from the members, how is your organisation funded?

**Mr MURPHY:** It is funded by local government members and industry members and Destination NSW provides us with some capacity funding as well.

**CHAIR:** In terms of providing the destinations or the infrastructure, that would need to come from other sources such as local government, National Parks or the State or Federal governments to build the things you propose?

**Mr MURPHY:** It would need to come from some other source. We have 18 local government areas that make up Riverina Regional Tourism. I do not think it will be coming from there. We work very closely, they are supportive and it is a great network but I do not think there will be any financial assistance. It is not realistic. There would need to be some support. What I was saying is that our board is keen to cooperate and market.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Was there any consultation with your body prior to the declaration of the parks? Where I am coming from is I have heard numbers forecasting that the parks would attract 20,000, 50,000 or 80,000 tourists. Was there any consultation or were these figures from the government of the day on the back of a beer coaster?

**Mr MURPHY:** We have not had any specific consultations. I was invited as chair some time ago to a meeting here in Deniliquin where the matter was being discussed. There were figures being mentioned. I cannot recall what they were. Getting back to your question, we have not had any sit-down specific discussion about figures.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Mr Murphy, what do tourists come to this region to enjoy?

**Mr MURPHY:** They come here for a range of reasons; it is not just natural attractions. It might be appropriate for our executive officer to make comment.

**Ms TILLMAN:** To answer your question, as touched on by Mr Murphy, Riverina Regional Tourism in terms of marketing our region and attracting visitors into our region is focussed on four key areas. One of those is food and wine and the agricultural diversity within our region. That is a major attraction for our region. We also have caravan and camping. A major market within our region is the drive market so we tend to market quite directly to caravan and campers. The natural attractions such as national parks that we are talking about today are a major asset for us. We have a lot of rivers in our region as well. We focus a lot on the natural attractions and events. That is our fourth category. We have a large range of major events in our region. We tend to market based on events as well. They are the four key experiences that we tend to promote in terms of visitation.

Unfortunately, I cannot give you any sound data in terms of what is the most important experience for people coming to the region. We do not have solid data apart from the data supplied through Destination NSW which is based on very small sample sizes. I cannot give you solid data as to how many people come for each of those experiences. They are the four key experiences we take to market.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** In relation to the level of tourism which might be under a heading of hunting and fishing tourism, is that a major component of tourism in this area?

**Ms TILLMAN:** I will comment but Mr White might have a bit more knowledge about tourism based on the river. In terms of fishing specifically, that is a major attraction for our region, particularly with Hay and Deniliquin in this area. We have a number of fishing festivals and events that occur within the Riverina. I would say that fishing is a major attraction to this region. In terms of other forms of hunting that is not something I can comment on.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Going back to those four categories you mentioned, have you got any idea what the average spend is per category or even in total per head of tourist that comes into the region? How much money do they bring into the region each year?

**Mr MURPHY:** There are statistics that we get based on visitor nights expenditure. I do not have the figures with me but they are published. They are probably not answering what you are looking for because they are too broad. They look at the number of visitor nights and there is a formula based on average expenditure as to what that would generate for that community or location. They are published and divided into regions. To my recollection that is probably the most detailed data that we get.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Does that data include people visiting Deniliquin on business or purely as tourists?

**Ms TILLMAN:** It does cover business. It is published data and I can certainly pass that on. I did not bring that with me. It is the national visitor survey distributed through Tourism Research Australia. It is small sample sizes but it gives you an indication of the kinds of people that come to your area and business tourism. Another key market which I did not mention before is visiting friends and relatives, and that tends to be a major growth market within the Riverina region.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** We have been told that the red gum industry in the region is worth somewhere around \$80 million to \$100 million per year and if that is downturned by 50 per cent there is a \$40 million loss to the community. With the previous Government putting a lot of emphasis on tourism replacing the loss of jobs that occurred in the red gum industry I am trying to work out how many visitors come to the region and how much they spend while they are here. If it is 50,000 visitors that are going to go to the national park every year they have to spend \$1,500 each in order to replace the timber industry of \$80 million. It was pointed out earlier by Mr Foley that that is the total value of the industry. If there is a \$40 million loss they are going to have to spend \$750 each for the three or four days they are here. Is it feasible to expect that when people come to the district they are going to spend that amount of money?

**Ms TILLMAN:** I wish I had the data on me now from the national visitor's survey because you would be quite surprised at how much the average visitor spends in the region. We are doing a campaign with Destination NSW which is a short breaks campaign and we are focusing on nature-based tourism and food and

wine. In preparation for that campaign Destination NSW went back to the data that they have and the Riverina region is attracting high spenders. Our region attracts people that have a high expenditure. I do not have the figure; I could guess but I am not going to. Once again I can pass that data on in terms of expenditure. You would be quite surprised that that \$750 is not unrealistic.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** That is per person, not per family. If you bring a family of five that is \$12,000-plus they have to spend.

**Ms TILLMAN:** That might change things a bit.

**CHAIR:** When you do make your submission any information that you may have on those statistics for your region and any promotional brochures that show what you do and how you do it would be welcome information. When you get around to putting in your submission, could you provide us with that information?

**Mr MURPHY:** Just adding to that, we were discussing the status of before and now we are talking about after the national park. It is difficult for us, as much as we would like to help, to give hard data because it is so recent. It is hard to get anything on that. If we make statements we are guessing. We have to wait for the tourism figures and even up-to-date ones could be 2011 figures. I am trying to convey to you that it is hard for us to help you with that even though we would like to.

**CHAIR:** What we are talking about is any available data or baseline data. Excuse my ignorance, can I ask you a question related to the Riverina? Could you give the Committee a description of how large an area that is?

**Mr MURPHY:** We have 18 local government areas. You start off to the northern side with Moira; West Wyalong to Cootamundra; then we come across from Cootamundra to Gundagai; from Gundagai we are going down to Wagga Wagga local government area; then we are moving out to Urana shire, which is a large geographical shire but small in population; Jerilderie is getting towards the border side; then we go to Hay; and in the middle is Narrandera and Griffith.

**CHAIR:** It is a huge area?

**Mr MURPHY:** It is a big area. I do not have the data on the geographical area but 18 local government areas is a significant area. As I stated at the beginning of my comments, it is a good networking supportive area.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Mr White, from your professional experience what are the experiences that people who come down to this part of the Riverina are looking for? Are they looking for a passive recreation experience or active recreation experience in this area?

**Mr WHITE:** There are different markets. In this area you do get the elderly groups that come through that want passive and others want sporting. There is a lot of fishing and water sports. There are a lot of people who want to get out in the bush but they want to come back in. We are seeing differences in the way that is happening at the moment. It is the outdoor experience. People want to get out of the city and be in the bush but they also come back into—

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** Their creature comforts.

**Mr WHITE:** —their creature comforts very quickly.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** If fishing and water sports were excluded from national parks would that have a material effect on the ability of people who want active recreation to engage in it?

**Mr WHITE:** They would be confined to smaller areas. We already have that when areas are flooded and you can only use certain areas, and even during drought.

**The Hon. Dr PETER PHELPS:** But that is seasonal. A national park is for life—like a puppy—not just for Christmas.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** We have heard from various witnesses about the decline in tourism as a result of the loss of the timber industry. We also heard from another witness who said there was a general

decline in domestic tourism numbers. What has been happening to tourism numbers in the Riverina over the last decade and in particular over the last couple of years?

**Ms TILLMAN:** We were seeing quite reasonable growth up until the last 12 months. The data that has come in for the last 12 month period shows a decline but I would have to agree that that is a general decline in domestic tourism in this country. That is purely because people are going offshore for holidays. In the Riverina we have seen a decline of, I think, around 3 per cent, but once again that is in the data I can provide. Up until that period we were seeing a nice consistent rise in tourism numbers. We are not talking huge rises but a couple of per cent each year. In the last 12 month period that dropped. We also need to keep in mind in relation to that decline that we had major flooding in one of our peak periods. That was in the 12 month period so we could easily associate that decline with the flooding. The data has not necessarily taken that into consideration so it is hard to say whether we would have experienced that under different circumstances, but there was a small decline.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** You said a little in your introduction, Mr Murphy, about the assistance the State Government provides through Destination NSW. What does the State Government do to actively promote tourism in the Riverina region? What resources does it provide?

**Mr MURPHY:** The funding formula is under review at present and the new one is about to be announced. At present we have what is called capacity funding, which is funding from Destination NSW, from the State Government.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** For your organisation?

**Mr MURPHY:** For our organisation and it goes out to the regions. Under this program, which has changed slightly depending on the viability of each organisation, in our particular case we have had capacity funding to meet our administration. That is in the vicinity of \$170,000. There a second component, which is matched funding, and our local government areas and some operators match that \$70,000. Without getting involved in the complications of the formula it really results in about \$90,000 in demand funding, which in plain English is the marketing or the action funding that we operate on. Our local government areas put money in and we match it with Destination NSW and we undertake marketing and other promotional programs with that funding.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** To me that does not sound like too much funding to be able to market the Riverina to a State, national or international audience. That is a bit of a tight budget.

**Mr MURPHY:** I am sure you are aware of the O'Neill report, which had a good look at tourism and resulted in the partnership program and an increase in the funding. Like any change it did not go the full step that was recommended in the O'Neill report. However, it did increase funding and that has to be acknowledged. Geographically, with the number of local government areas, we are a big region and we have to make the best of what we get.

**Ms TILLMAN:** We should note also that we are getting purely transitional funds from the State Government in the 12-month period we are in. That is extension funding from Destination NSW of the partnership program. It finished in the financial year just ended so they have given us transitional funds for 12 months. When the Visitor Economy Taskforce report is released, hopefully very soon, we will know what will happen beyond that.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** Are you aware of the NSW River Red Gum Nature Tourism Action Plan?

**Mr MURPHY:** I am aware of it and I think our board would be because it was brought to our meeting. Linda has only just recently taken over as executive officer but I think a copy of that plan was given to us at a meeting several meetings ago.

**Ms TILLMAN:** Yes, it was given in draft form. This was in my handover period in the role. Then whilst it was still in draft form there was a consultation meeting held in Narrandera with National Parks. They invited representatives along, which included Riverina Regional Tourism. We provided feedback at that time and the final report has come out, which we have seen.

**The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN:** When was that meeting and when was the handover?

**Ms TILLMAN:** That was around March this year.

**The Hon. LUKE FOLEY:** I think the final document, the plan, was launched by the Minister for the Environment, Robyn Parker, here in May. The document tells us that the New South Wales Government's plan to make New South Wales number one includes the aim of doubling tourism expenditure by 2020. What would you ask us to take back to the Government as the best bang for the Government's buck if they are doubling tourist expenditure in this region, the red gum region? What would be your top priorities to put to the Government to assist tourism operators and the growth of the tourism industry along the Murray River and in the red gum areas?

**Ms TILLMAN:** These guys might have a different opinion but from my perspective in this region, and I am talking about the whole Riverina and not just the red gums, what we need to develop tourism and contribute to the goal of reaching the 2020 target is support in developing tourism product. We have some solid product across the region but we do not have enough. There is all this talk about growing the international market, particularly China. Domestic tourism is in decline. We need to be able to enhance what we already have and also develop new product in our region in order to attract people to the region to spend money.

**Mr MURPHY:** My view would be very similar. We have had a good working relationship with Regional Development Australia Riverina and we see a need to develop an improved product and bring in new product so we can sell the area in a much more effective way. We have attempted to do that in various ways but of course it all requires resources. If we could get resources to help us in our development I think the operators, who are one of the most important parts of the equation because they are going to provide the wherewithal to bring people, would appreciate that. We have had some mentoring programs—we have had a variety of programs—and they have all been positive but of course they are limited in what we can do with our resources.

**Mr WHITE:** To be honest, as an operator and a board member, it is to have the areas grow so that when we invest in a place we know it is going to be around in a few years time. At the moment, as an investor, I am starting to worry about what is going on. Some regions feel like they are not going to exist much longer. When you spend a lot of money you want to know they are going to be around. Anyone else coming into an area like this to invest is going to be thinking exactly the same way I am.

**CHAIR:** Where is the tourism group located? Where is your office?

**Mr MURPHY:** We do not have an office. We operate on very low overheads. Our office is operated virtually from home by the executive officer. Linda is the office.

**CHAIR:** I offer my congratulations. What a fabulous way to run an organisation: lean and mean. Mr White, you mentioned your own interests as an investor. Where do you come from?

**Mr WHITE:** I come from Deniliquin. I did not have to travel far for once. I have the Big 4 Holiday Park here in town. In the last 10 years I have invested over \$5 million here and I am still digging holes. It is a concern.

**CHAIR:** Do you and your operation provide facilities for the RVs, the dump sites for RVs, and allow them into your park?

**Mr WHITE:** Yes.

**The Hon. SCOT MacDONALD:** Am I right in assuming that when you are talking about uncertainty about whether something is going to be around in the future you are in large part alluding to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and the way that has been handled, or mishandled, over the past couple of years?

**Mr WHITE:** It is a bit of everything, to be honest. It is definitely that but it is not just that. When you think about it, all these different things keep coming up and that is where you start to get a bit jittery about what is going on.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** Is there a current Riverina regional tourism development plan document?

**Ms TILLMAN:** We have a three-year strategic plan, which is due for renewal at the end of this year, so we are just about to start the process of renewing our strategic plan. There are a lot of changes happening in regional tourism at the moment but one of the things that I know Destination NSW will be encouraging is for us to start doing destination management planning. That is something we will also be doing over the next six-month period.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** The second part of my question is can we get a copy of that? Is a plan still available that was in existence immediately prior to the gazettal of the national parks? Can you lay your hands on it? Could you get us a copy of that as well?

**CHAIR:** That would be your current three-year plan, would it not?

**Mr MURPHY:** That is our strategic plan.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** What does that incorporate?

**Mr MURPHY:** Our strategic plan would have been done just before that. It goes back about—

**Ms TILLMAN:** 2009.

**The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE:** Let us get a copy of that if you can.

**Mr MURPHY:** Certainly.

**CHAIR:** Thank you for appearing before the Committee, particularly those of you who have had to travel. We appreciate your time. We encourage you to make a formal submission. When you do perhaps you could provide the information that the Committee has requested. If Committee members have any further questions they will be put through the secretariat. Are you happy to receive those questions and would you be able to provide an answer within 21 days of receiving them?

**Ms TILLMAN:** Yes.

**Mr MURPHY:** Yes.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**(The Committee adjourned at 2.30 p.m.)**