



## INQUIRY INTO VICTORIA'S RECREATIONAL NATIVE BIRD HUNTING ARRANGEMENTS

### REPORT OF THE LIBERALS and NATIONALS



**Prepared by the Liberals and Nationals**

**August 2023**

**Cover:** Heart Morass near Sale where almost 3,200 acres, worn down by a century of stock grazing and salinity, was brought back to life as a wetland primarily by volunteers. Since the first land was purchased in 2006, over 50,000 native trees have been planted, 20 tonnes of introduced (and invasive) carp have been removed, and seeds have been collected from over 50 native plant species for revegetation, thanks to hunters and the Heart Morass project partners Field & Game Australia, Watermark Inc., Bug Blitz, West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, and the Hugh D.T. Williamson Foundation. Field & Game Australia formed the Wetlands Environmental Taskforce (WET) in 2002 with the purpose of purchasing, restoring and maintaining wetland habitats, rehabilitating ecosystems and restoring biodiversity. Other WET projects include the Australian National Hunting Archive on the role of hunting in Australia's history and culture; the project at Connewarre, where Field & Game Australia volunteers have constructed a centre for research into wetland habitats, waterfowl nesting and breeding habits, as well as educating hunters and the public on the benefits of wetland habitats and hunter-led conservation efforts. (*Field & Game Australia webpage 2023*).

***"Habitat is key - If you have habitat, you have birds."***

Dr Brian Hiller (Professor of wildlife ecology Bemidji State University, Minnesota)

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## SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Summary

Native game hunting in Victoria is a sustainable activity based on science and conducted in a safe and responsible way. Victoria's recreational native bird hunting is highly regulated and under the Sustainable Hunting Action Plan (SHAP), hunter education, animal welfare and research are being strengthened.

The Game Management Authority (GMA) is responsible for regulating game hunting in Victoria. GMA has made significant progress implementing changes based on the findings of the independent Pegasus report in 2017. The GMA has undertaken a comprehensive restructuring and has the appropriate governance and policies in place to manage conflicts of interest. The majority of the GMA's compliance and enforcement resources are deployed ensuring public safety at a range of locations where hunters and rescuers are both in attendance. This is in line with the GMA's statutory requirements.

The majority of surveyed respondents (56% to 61%) support a continuation of duck hunting under new rules to protect native species, including 39% of Labor voters who are opposed to a ban on duck hunting in Victoria. There is strong union support for the continuation of duck hunting. Unionists acknowledge the significant impact on wellbeing that native bird hunting has as an outdoor recreational activity for hunters.

Australia's peak hunting body runs accredited training programs on the use of firearms and game bird hunting, providing a sound pathway to licencing of game bird hunters. Resources are in place to train and assess native game bird hunters in all aspects of the activity and implement any new training requirements that may be required, including training in the protection of cultural heritage. We respect the importance of identifiable Aboriginal Cultural Heritage sites on public wetlands and recognise the value in improving hunter and community education to preserve sites.

Prior to ruling on the annual hunting arrangements, the Victorian Government is provided with output from a scientifically based interim harvest model designed to deliver scientifically based guidelines for the upcoming season. This model uses aerial surveys, priority wetland counts and the amount of water in the landscape over the preceding three year period in south-eastern Australia.

An open duck hunting season lasts no more than 12 weeks between March and June and avoids the breeding and moulting cycle, and typically lasts about 10 weeks, but was only 5 weeks in 2023. For the 2023 duck season, the Minister for Outdoor Recreation ignored the GMA Board recommendations based on the scientific Interim Harvest Model. GMA recommended a full season length season (15 March to 12 June), but with a reduced daily bag limit of only four ducks per day.

Hunting has little impact on game bird populations because mortality impacts from hunting, predation, starvation, malnutrition and disease are not additive but are compensatory. Competition for food is often reduced when hunting or predators remove some animals from the population, and therefore fewer animals die from starvation, malnutrition, sickness or disease.

Victoria's Game Management Authority reports exceptionally high compliance with regulations - 99.9% for duck hunting and 100% for quail in 2022.

In 2019 Victorian hunters contributed \$356 million and 3,138 jobs to the Victorian economy with most in regional Victoria. If native bird hunting is banned, some regional towns that are particularly reliant on hunting expenditure would be adversely affected. The areas of regional Victoria that benefit from native bird hunting include many regional communities that have been adversely affected by contraction in economic activity caused by the Andrews governments forest, energy and water policies.

The Victorian Government receives about \$4 million pa from game licence revenue **plus** another \$4.4 million in hunter firearm licence revenue – total \$8.4 million from 58,000 licenced hunters.

Loss of wetland habitat is the key issue affecting waterbird populations and hunting has a very small effect that is considerably overridden by loss of habitat. Managing environmental flows in the Murray-Darling is required to improve waterbird habitat. We need to explore how we may engineer both improved flood mitigation and harvest the water from damaging peak floods and use it to enhance environmental flows.

In Victoria duck hunting is sustainable and regulated according to an Adaptive Harvest Model based on good science. Hunting does not put a dent in the population given the biology of ducks – they are prolific breeders.

There is no scientific basis for changing the length of the hunting season (as the Minister did for the 2023 season). It is best to just change the hunting bag limit, which has been shown in other countries to be an effective way of regulating hunting.

Ducks reproduce at an early age, have large broods with no density dependence, and are less affected by loss of habitat. Wood ducks are taking over farm dams and golf courses.

Flood and drought cause an 'episodic irruptive boom-bust cycle of waterfowl'. In boom flood times chestnut teal or grey teal or black ducks may double brood and produce up to 18 ducklings to fledging age, that are likely to die from starvation, disease or predation when the bust comes. Regulation of the harvest in the busts periods (e.g. lower bag limits) is an effective way to reduce the impact on core breeding populations.

Native game bird hunting does not pose an added threat to non-target species because licenced hunters are trained to take care to avoid impact on non-game species.

Hunting organisations and animal welfare groups have established and agreed on a Wound Reduction Action Plan. The cohort of invested stakeholders included Field & Game Australia - Victoria, Sporting Shooters Association Australia, Beretta Australia, RSPCA and more. They presented the Plan to the Minister for Agriculture in September 2022, and the newly created, Minister for Outdoor Recreation in December 2022, for approval and implementation.

Field & Game Australia has a long and proud history of educating and engaging hunters to reduce the occurrences of unintentional wounding. Specialists in the fields of ecology and wildlife management agree that this is the most effective way to drive improvements in hunting outcomes.

Protestors should exercise their right to protest from the shore and not directly enter active hunting areas and put themselves and hunters at risk. Protesters should remain at least 100m from any hunter.

The economic benefit from game bird hunting is unlikely to be replaced by nature-based tourism. Nature-based tourism operations like Winton Wetlands are yet to be economically sustainable without significant Victorian Governments grants. Winton Wetlands 2021-22 annual report shows a loss of \$542,000 despite government grants totalling \$1.32 million. The combined impact on the 'public purse' being \$1.86 million in one year.

Volunteer hunting organisations such as Field & Game Australia have demonstrated a great track record in voluntarily improving wetland habitat and breeding of wildlife across Victoria. Examples are Connewarre Wetland, near Geelong and Heart Morass, near Sale. This valuable volunteer resource should be encouraged and supported. These hunter-volunteer conservationists, have contributed a considerable amount to conservation and restoration projects across many Victorian wetlands.

For millennia Traditional Owners hunted for sustenance and for connection to country. In doing so they managed and respected a renewable resource.

Non-native invasive species are a threat to water birds. DEECA and Parks Victoria have been unable to deliver effective control of non-native invasive pests that threaten native wildlife and habitat, due to inefficiencies, including managing a rural operation with a workforce that is predominantly city-based.

## Recommendations

Implement a consistent, balanced, and permanent native game bird hunting season based on a robust and defensible scientific model to set the season and retain Traditional Owner hunting rights.

That the Victorian Government continues the annual recreational native bird hunting open season on public and private land, under regulations administered by the Victorian Game Management Authority (GMA) using the Interim Harvest Model and eventually the Adaptive Harvest Model (within three years). The hunting regulations are based on sound science and the GMA report a high degree of compliance.

The Game Management Authority should continue with its intended purpose as an independent authority responsible for the regulation of game hunting, through research, education and enforcement, to achieve responsible and sustainable game hunting in Victoria. State Game Reserves should continue to be used and maintained for their intended purpose which is sustainable hunting and conservation.

The Victoria Government should optimise the use of the resources of relevant agencies to ensure there is active, adaptive and accountable management on all public land, to address the broader threats of bushfires, invasive species and adverse climatic events such as droughts and floods. Optimising resources includes decentralising the Government's city-based workforce.

The Victorian Government should review the process to report damage or destruction of Aboriginal cultural heritage and introduces additional protections for these sites.

In addition to passing the Wildlife Identification Test, hunters should participate in an Aboriginal cultural heritage awareness education program.

The Victorian Government should immediately approve and fund the implementation of the Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan, which has bilateral support from hunting and animal welfare organisations.

The Victorian Government should continue to use the Interim Harvest Model (IHM) and fully fund the transition to an Adaptive Harvest Model (AHM) within three years.

Future game bird hunting seasonal arrangements should be determined based on the Interim Harvest Model (IHM and eventually AHM) recommendations, and the arrangements announced no later than the 31st of December in the year preceding the upcoming game duck season.

The Victorian Government implements additional measures to restrict the capacity of protesters to hinder the lawful conduct of duck hunters.

That the Victorian Government introduces a new civil offence for non-hunting persons (i.e. protesters) entering a wetland whereby they are within 100 metres of a hunter.

The Victorian Government explores ways to deliver improved environmental flows that enhance waterfowl habitat, and if possible in conjunction with much needed improvement in flood mitigation.

The Victorian Government assist volunteer hunting organisations such as Field & Game Australia with their efforts to improve wetland habitat in Victoria, by way of grants such as funding some of the consumables required.

# 1. About the Inquiry

## 1.2 Terms of Reference

A Select Committee of nine members be established to inquire into, consider and report by 31 August 2023 on Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements, including but not limited to —

- (a) the operation of annual native bird hunting seasons;
- (b) arrangements in other Australian jurisdictions;
- (c) their environmental sustainability and impact on amenity;
- (d) their social and economic impact.

Committee Chair Ryan Batchelor said, "This Inquiry is looking at the operation of annual native bird hunting seasons here in Victoria, as well as arrangements in other Australian jurisdictions." "We'll also examine the environmental sustainability of the practice, it's impact on amenity and the social and economic consequences."

The Committee received over 10,000 submissions to the Inquiry including the 'dumping' of submissions on an 'industrial scale' by those opposed to current arrangements.

## 1.2 Committee Membership

Ryan Batchelor – Chair, Labor Party

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair, Labor Party

Melina Bath – The Nationals

Bev McArthur - Liberal Party

Evan Mulholland – Liberal Party

Georgie Purcell – Animal Justice Party

Jeff Bourman – Shooter, Fishers and Farmers Party

Sheena Watt – Labor Party

Katherine Copsey – Greens Party

### 1.3 Forward by the Liberals and Nationals

The Liberals and Nationals members on the Select Committee Inquiry into 'Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements', were motivated to prepare this Minority Report because of major concerns with the Committee Report.

Our concerns were primarily to ensure balance, equity and fairness - the cornerstone of a democratic society. We have strived to ensure that our findings are based on scientific and socioeconomic evidence and expert opinion backed with factual data.

One of the challenges for rural and regional Victoria has been decisions made in Spring Street based on the demands of minority but noisy activists, focus groups, and electoral expediency. Many of these 'city centric' decisions have resulted in a raft of policies that have had devastating social, economic and environmental impacts on rural and regional communities (e.g. misguided forest, fire, flood and energy policies). We have tried to ensure that the voice of rural and regional Victorians as well as metropolitan Melbourne are heard.

We have tried to ensure that key submissions are used in decision making and that the findings of knowledgeable and experienced experts have been captured. In many cases, rather than paraphrase points made in submissions or hearings, we have quoted verbatim key points, taking care to ensure context.

We have also strived to ensure that our recommendations are consistent with a balanced approach to ecologically sustainable development, balancing the environmental, economic and social dimension of decision making. Without balance you are unable to deliver equity and fairness and you increase the risk of adverse outcomes.

Based on submissions and testimony it became obvious that the cornerstone of conservation of water birds in Australia is **sufficient habitat** and more can be done to improve wetland habitat. We also heard of the **considerable voluntary work undertaken by hunting organisations to improve water bird conservation**.

Rural and regional Australia has always rode on the back of hard working volunteers. At the Inquiry evidence in submissions and testimony spoke of the substantial voluntary contribution duck hunters make to the establishment and maintenance of wetland habitat and breeding conditions for water birds.

This is a prime example of how making something 'valuable' helps with conservation, not just valuable in a monetary sense but valuable spiritually. Because duck hunting is a valuable recreational activity, volunteers pitch in and develop new wetlands and maintain them essentially without using the public purse.

Volunteers have a vested interest in enhancing wetlands, improving conservation outcomes and in ensuring compliance with hunting regulations. Why - because they have a vested interest in being able to continue their recreation. They have 'skin in the game'. Ban duck hunting and you risk losing this. We applaud volunteer effort and call on the Victorian Government to encourage this contribution.

The Victorian Government should not be banning duck hunting, but working out ways to harness hunter contribution to enhance water bird habit and ensuring hunter compliance with regulations.



Melina Bath  
The Nationals

*Melina Bath*



Evan Mulholland  
Liberal Party

*Evan Mulholland*



Bev McArthur  
Liberal Party

*Bev McArthur*



## 2. Introduction

This report has been prepared by the Liberals and Nationals to ensure that sound and balanced commentary, findings and recommendations have not been ignored, and that they rightly inform policy decisions.

We heard time and time again that habitat is the main constraint to the conservation of waterbirds – if you have habitat you have birds. Below are some photos of the Heart Morass before volunteer hunters became involved (2007) and after their efforts in 2023 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Heart Morass before volunteers established the wetland (LHS) and afterwards (RHS)<sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> Source Field and Game Australia.

## 3. Regulation of recreational native game bird hunting in Victoria

### 3.1 Legislative control of native game bird hunting

Hunting in Victoria is one of the most highly regulated in Australia, in relation to firearm ownership and accountability. Subsequently, hunters are subjected rightly to a host of licencing and regulatory scrutiny.

The Wildlife Act sets the rules around how we protect, conserve, sustainably manage and use wildlife in Victoria. The Act outlines the objectives and scope for wildlife in Victoria and a best-practice regulatory framework for achieving its objectives. It recognises and protects the rights and interests of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians around wildlife and their role in decision-making, along with the best way to encourage compliance with the Act and appropriate deterrence and punishments.<sup>2</sup>

In Victoria, native game bird hunting, such as sanctioned duck species and stubble quail, is legal and is controlled by the Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012 which sets out the basis for a legislated season and daily limits on harvest. This legislation stipulates that birds shot in Victoria MUST be collected, and at least the breast meat taken for human consumption. So not only do hunters eat what they harvest – they are REQUIRED to do so by law! Field & Game Australia firmly refutes any reference to hunting as “sport.” This is incorrect and misleading. Sporting shooting occurs when firing at targets for scores, not ducks for food.<sup>2</sup>

The Ramsar Convention 1975 defines WISE USE as ‘the sustainable use of wetland resources in such a way as to benefit the human community while maintaining their potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations. Field & Game Australia and its members understand and comply unquestionably with the intent of the Ramsar Convention 1975 and dedicate significant resources (financial, physical and intellectual) towards its full compliance.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.2 Regulation restricts an ‘open’ duck season to no more than 12 weeks

Public land in Victoria covers approximately 8 million hectares in area, which is approximately one third of the State. It is made up of over 110,000 parcels which form parks, reserves and areas of State Forest.<sup>3</sup>

**State Game Reserves occupy 75,000 hectares or less than 1% of Victoria’s total public land.**

An open duck hunting season lasts no more than 12 weeks between March and June and avoids the breeding and moulting cycle, and typically lasts about 10 weeks, but was only 5 weeks in 2023.

For the 2023 duck season, the Minister for Outdoor Recreation ignored the GMA Board recommendations (based on the Interim Harvest Model) for a full season length with a daily bag limit of four ducks per day, commencing on Wednesday 15 March and ending on Monday 12 June.

**FINDING 1:** The native game bird hunting season is short (less than 12 weeks) and during the ‘open season’ the Victorian public still have access to almost all of the 8 million hectares of Crown land. In 2023 the ‘open season’ was reduced to 5 weeks by the Minister for Outdoor Recreation, who ignored expert opinion and the recommendation from the Game Management Authority to just reduce the bag limit, consistent with expert advice.

<sup>2</sup> Field and Game Australia Submission No 1872.

<sup>3</sup> [www.forestsandreserves.vic.gov.au/land-management/managing-crown-land](http://www.forestsandreserves.vic.gov.au/land-management/managing-crown-land).

### 3.3 Victorian Game Management Authority regulate game bird hunting

In Victoria game hunting is closely regulated by the Game Management Authority (GMA) who reported<sup>4</sup>:

*“We aim to ensure game hunting in Victoria meets community expectations as a sustainable and well-regulated activity. Sustainable game hunting is based on science and conducted in a safe and responsible way.”*

*“As part of the newly funded Victorian Government’s Sustainable Hunting Action Plan 2021-2024 (SHAP), announced in the 2021 State budget, the Game Management Authority (GMA) has a number of responsibilities across the areas of education, animal welfare and research. The GMA is already making progress towards delivering on the SHAP, including developing a suite of education modules aimed at educating and training new hunters on firearm safety, hunting laws and methods. The GMA is also enhancing hunter education for existing experienced game hunters wanting to increase their knowledge of hunting laws, responsible hunting methods and firearm safety”.*

*“Reducing waterfowl wounding is a strategic priority for the Game Management Authority (GMA) and is a key action in the Victorian Government’s SHAP. A draft Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan was endorsed by the GMA Board in June 2022 and has been submitted to government for consideration.”*

In hearings David LAIRD Hunting Development Manager, Sporting Shooters Association Australia (Victoria) supported the waterfowl wounding reduction action plan and the adaptive harvest model:

*“The association does consider the waterfowl wounding reduction action plan is a critical part of the logical path forward for duck hunting in Victoria. It is informed by international best practice, which is not a bad thing, but it is a uniquely Victorian plan developed by an expert panel covering the broad range of interests and chaired by an acknowledged impartial expert. The other critical path forward is the continued development of the interim harvest model leading into an adaptive harvest model.”*

In hearings Lucas COOKE, Chairman, Field & Game Australia commented on the favourable impact of good hunting practises:

*“We have certainly seen in the last 25 years an advancement in information technology in particular; we have seen a lot more emphasis on certain good, high-level hunting practices to ensure that you bring birds in closer and ensure that you do everything that you possibly can to make good decisions.”*

During 2021-22 the Game Management Authority (GMA) provided advice to the Victorian Government on several matters relating to regulation of game hunting, including:

- 2022 duck season arrangements, which included use of the interim harvest model to inform the daily bag limit.
- Closure or partial closure of six wetlands for 2022 duck season.
- Re-opening of one wetland to duck hunting during the 2022 duck season.
- Prohibition of electronic quail callers for the 2022 stubble quail season.
- Reform of the sunseting Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012.

**FINDING 2:** Game hunting in Victoria is a sustainable activity based on science and conducted in a safe and responsible way. Recreational native bird hunting is highly regulated and under the Sustainable Hunting Action Plan (SHAP), education, animal welfare and research are being strengthened.

<sup>4</sup> Game Management Authority Annual Report 2021-22.



### 3.4 Compliance with regulations for recreational native game bird hunting is high

Of the 358 matters assessed by the Game Management Authority (GMA) in 2021-22, those pertaining to duck hunting were only 14% of the total and quail hunting only 2% of the total.

Matters relating to deer and illegal hunting were 49%, kangaroos 8%, animal cruelty/welfare 4%, hunting with hounds 3%, protestors 2% and non-game hunting related matters 18%<sup>4</sup>.

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** The Game Management Authority should continue with its intended purpose as an independent authority responsible for the regulation of game hunting, through research, education and enforcement, to achieve responsible and sustainable game hunting in Victoria.

For the 2022 duck season the Game Management Authority (GMA) reported 99.9% hunter compliance with the legislated daily bag limit based on attending 641 wetlands with numerous wetlands receiving multiple visits and checking 1,253 Game Licences and 979 hunter bags<sup>4</sup>.

For the 2022 quail season the Game Management Authority (GMA) reported 100% hunter compliance with the legislated daily bag limit based on conducting 35 dedicated quail patrols and checking 31 Game Licences and hunter bags<sup>4</sup>.

**FINDING 3:** The Victorian Game Management Authority responsible for regulating game hunting in Victoria report exceptionally high compliance with regulations – compliance was 99.9% for duck hunting and compliance was 100% for quail.

### 3.5 Hunters require game and firearms qualifications and licences

Regulation in place ensure new and existing hunters are prepared and aware of their responsibilities because there is a significant upfront commitment prior to being able to partake in a live field hunting experience. Hunters in general, but in particular those who hunt native game birds, are highly regulated and acutely aware of their obligations. They willingly subject themselves to a rigorous process including:

- Basic firearms licence training course and test which includes a thorough police check and takes a minimum of three months to complete.
- Completion of a 'permit to acquire' in order to purchase and own a firearm which comes with yet another round of validation and an additional 28-day approval period.
- Duck hunters must specifically undergo a Waterfowl Identification Test (WIT) that requires considerable financial cost.
- The time commitment - in excess of 100 hours to prepare - requires a significant investment by hunters.
- Game licence application and the associated costs.
- Once successful, becoming beholden to numerous agencies including Victoria Police, GMA, Parks Victoria and DEECA.

In response to a question in hearings David LAIRD, Hunting Development Manager, Sporting Shooters Association Australia (Victoria) offered information on improvements to firearm training and licensing:

*"We do a lot of education in gun safety. We run a practical firearms training program for new shooters, and that is part of the pathway for people to get their shooters licence. We have been running that for about the last five years. We started it initially as a firearm safety course to teach people how to competently use firearms. Victoria Police then came on board and recognised it as an approved safety course for the purposes of getting a shooters licence.*

*We have subsequently become a registered training organisation, and that course is a nationally recognised course. We also do a lot of training. We run courses for various corporate entities teaching them how to safely use firearms. We are involved in a partnership with the Game Management Authority running hunter education courses with them. We have obviously got the shotgun education program that we have been running for quite a few years, and we have run some pilot programs with GMA on duck and quail hunting and also deer hunting for newly licensed game licence holders.”*

**FINDING 4:** Australia’s peak hunting body runs accredited training programs on the use of firearms and game bird hunting, providing a sound pathway to licensing of game bird hunters.

### 3.6 The science supports current regulation of game bird hunting in Victoria

During hearings in response to this question from Melina BATH: “The interim harvest model you have both worked on and formatted – how robust is the science and are you convinced of the sustainability of this model,” Professor Marcel KLAASSEN offered the following reply:

*“Yes,……. Regarding robustness, I think it is robust. I think we did a good job there.”*

During hearings Professor Marcel KLAASSEN elaborated:

*“In 2021 Richard and I were tasked to develop a model to guide the duck harvesting in Victoria, and as Richard just explained, such a model needs to take into consideration not only the numbers of ducks in Victoria but also outside of Victoria and also the breeding conditions, both in Victoria and outside Victoria, because ducks have wings and they do migrate over long distances.”*

*“Based on the aerial surveys and the so-called priority wetland counts, which are in Victoria – these are counts, just before the hunting season, of a number of wetlands in Victoria – those counts, the aerial surveys, the priority wetland counts and water in the landscape over a three-year period throughout all of south-eastern Australia are being taken into consideration to end up with these five indices. We proposed this model, and it was accepted. So for the 2022 hunting season and this year’s hunting season the model was used to advise, ultimately, the minister to make a decision on the hunting arrangements for 2022 and this year.”*

**FINDING 5:** Prior to ruling on the annual hunting arrangements, the Victorian Government is provided with output from a scientifically based Interim Harvest Model designed to deliver scientifically based guidelines for the upcoming season. This model uses Aerial surveys, priority wetland counts and the amount of water in the landscape over a three year period in south-eastern Australia.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** That the Victorian Government allows the continuation of the annual recreational native game bird hunting open season on public and private land, under regulations administered by the Victorian Game Management Authority.

### 3.7 Comments from Hunters.

Organisations and entities with ‘skin in the game’ can make a profound impact on delivering improved environmental, social and economic outcomes and deliver spill-over benefits to the community as a whole, not just the members of the entity. The Inquiry was presented with evidence of the considerable improvements to the Heat Morass and Lake Connemara undertaken by volunteers belonging to Field & Game Australia and the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia. Testimony was also provided on the importance of hunting as a connection with the land.

### 3.7.1 Comments from Traditional Owners

Rodney CARTER, Chief Executive Officer of **Dja Dja Wurrung Group** made some very important points in the hearings<sup>5</sup>. Mr CARTER believed that others should have the opportunity to hunt:

*“I think – with the brilliant respect that the state has afforded First Nations people – that my descendants and I will enjoy hunting for all time. If the inquiry and the government can somewhat see it in their mind to afford other Victorians the opportunity – and visitors to our homelands – to be able to enjoy something similar, I think truly it can be managed.”*

*“I think more broadly to the importance of being a hunter – a hunter as such holding a very significant place within society, within a family, as a provider of sustenance to people. We also describe ... the importance for us as First Nations people – but extending that to us as humans – of the need for us actually to be in landscape, to be at place, to be connected...”*

Mr CARTER explained to the Committee that hunting created a connection to the environment and a respect for the animals being hunted. He believed it would be unfortunate if Victorians who are not traditional owners would no longer be able to continue the practice:

*“I think it is extremely unusual in that it is a legal or licensed activity at the moment, which for my people, in a sense, is something we will enjoy no matter what. We think it is important in our advocacy and leadership that we support the continuance of something that is culturally significant to us that other Victorians enjoy. There is so little, I think, as Victorians, that we can enjoy of what I and what my ancestors enjoyed.”*

Mr CARTER believed that it was important to educate hunters at wetlands that have Aboriginal Cultural Heritage sites about their importance:

*“I think what happens through the education is just a greater awareness and appreciation of that value that now is a little bit transferable to me as a person and/or a people. So you are there, say, hunting as an example at a state game reserve, now you learn something about cultural heritage. I would like to think then that you are better for that and then indirectly it is better for me and my people because the opportunity might not have arisen otherwise.”*

**FINDING 6:** Hunters identify the importance of being connected to the landscape through an ancient and traditional pursuit.

### 3.7.2 Comments from Field & Game Australia

**Field & Game Australia** strongly advocated for a consistent, balanced, and permanent native game bird hunting season based on a robust and defensible scientific model to set the season. Some key points from their submission<sup>6</sup> are:

- Compelling, independent evidence has been provided to confirm that hunting and conservation can and does co-exist, not only in Victoria, but in the majority of OECD countries across the world. Hunting is embraced by progressive societies and not vilified as an outdated activity or pastime but a necessary practice.
- The Victorian native game bird hunting season is heavily regulated by domestic and international laws and conventions currently in place. Victorian hunters are amongst the most compliant and regulated members of our public.
- Ducks can be legally hunted or controlled in every state of Australia under appropriate permits or exceptions.

<sup>5</sup> Mr Rodney Carter, Chief Executive Officer, Dja Dja Wurrung Group, public hearing, Transcript of evidence Melbourne, 29 June 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Field and Game Australia (2023). Submission No 1872.

- Recreational hunting does not threaten native bird abundance and that, overall, regulated duck hunting is good for populations. It promotes engaged, pro-active hunters who take ownership of the resources and improve animal welfare and management.
- Hunter-led conservation practices benefits all species, flora and fauna, not only native game birds.
- This is why the Ramsar Convention 1975 recognises hunting as a ‘wise use’ of natural environments.
- Victoria’s wetlands are so important that they are internationally recognised under the Ramsar Convention in relation to wetlands. Victoria’s Ramsar sites are home to as many as 1,300 species of native plants and 450 species of native animals, including more than 100 species of waterbirds of which hunters hunt only eight game species.
- Remove the political subjectivity of native game bird seasons and implement a scientific season setting process.
- End the farce of “wildlife rescue” in Victorian wetlands by implementing safe and sound protocols for protesters.
- The Game Management Authority should (like the Victorian Fisheries Authority) proactively grow hunting in Victoria and the associated economic and social benefits (for regional communities).

### 3.7.3 Comments from the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia

**The Sporting Shooters Association of Australia** has a vested interest in maintaining their ‘social licence’ and made specific representations that support good regulation of native game bird hunting. SSAA asked that the Select Committee should:

- Acknowledges that native bird hunting is a well-regulated, beneficial activity that should continue.
- Acknowledges that the Game Management Authority (GMA) has undertaken a significant restructuring since the release of the Pegasus Report in 2017 and that the GMA has appropriate governance and policies to manage actual and perceived conflicts of interest.
- Acknowledges that the Waterfowl Identification Test (WIT) must be successfully completed before hunters are licenced and clarify that the assertion that licenced hunters have not successfully completed the WIT is false.
- Note that modifying seasonal bag limits is the most effective method of manipulating the total harvest and that altering the length of the hunting season has an unnecessary negative impact.
- State that a well-regulated game hunting season in Victoria in the twenty-first century has no demonstrable impact on the populations of game species.
- Recommend GMA develop a transparent and objective procedure for managing the potential impacts of game duck hunting. Stakeholders, such as hunting organisations and Birdlife Australia, should be involved in this process, and closure of public wetlands should be a last resort.
- Recommend that the Minister for Outdoor Recreation immediately endorse, fund and implement the Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan.
- Recommend that the Victorian Government acknowledge Victoria’s position as Australia’s best practice game management leader.
- Recommend the Government continue using the Interim Harvest Model (IHM) and fully fund a transition to an Adaptive Harvest Model within three years. Future seasonal arrangements should be determined based on the IHM recommendations and announced via the GMA website no later than the 31st of December in the year preceding the upcoming game duck season.
- Recommend that the Government restricts protesters’ hindering lawful duck hunting.
- Recommend that future economic reports remove speculative and irrelevant questions about substitutability. Alternatively, the committee could recommend that every government-sponsored industry economic report include similarly framed questions about substitutability.

**FINDING 7:** The Game Management Authority (GMA) has made significant progress implementing changes based on the findings of the Pegasus report in 2017, including a significant restructuring and ensuring appropriate governance and policies in place to manage conflicts of interest.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** That the Victorian Government immediately endorses and funds the implementation of the Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** The Victorian Government continues to use the Interim Harvest Model (IHM) and fully fund a transition to an Adaptive Harvest Model (AHM) within three years.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** Future game bird hunting seasonal arrangements should be determined based on the Interim Harvest Model (IHM) recommendations and announced no later than the 31st of December in the year preceding the upcoming game duck season.

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** The Victorian Government implements additional measures to restrict the capacity of protesters to hinder the lawful conduct of duck hunters.

### 3.8 Training by Sporting Shooters Association of Australia

In response to a question on notice on current training offerings, the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (SSAA) replied indicating a high capability of professional training. SSAA Victoria's training department offers both accredited and non-accredited courses covering a range of needs and recreational and occupation-specific obligations. Courses include:

#### **Recreational**

- Course in Practical Firearm Training (RTO accredited; recognised by Victoria Police)
- Firearm Safety Course (recognised by Victoria Police)
- Introduction to deer hunting (collaboration with GMA)
- Advanced deer hunting
- Introduction to duck and quail hunting (collaboration with GMA)
- Shotgunning Education Program / Gamebird Hunting Essentials
- Waterfowl Identification Course training
- Advanced centrefire rifle shooting
- Advanced shotgun shooting

#### **Occupational**

- Humane dispatch of animals (RTO accredited)
- Use of firearms on an airfield (RTO accredited)
- Practical Firearm Training Course for Airport Officers
- Practical Firearm Training Course for Council Officers
- Practical Firearm Training Course for Zoo Rangers
- Commercial Kangaroo Firearms Proficiency Accreditation Course

#### **Internal**

- Range officer training
- Conservation and Pest Management Accreditation (collaboration with Parks Victoria)
- Thermal optics training (collaboration with Parks Victoria)



In response to a question on notice on the availability of trainers and training locations, the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (SSAA) replied indicating that they have good training facilities:

- SSAA Victoria operates a Registered Training Organisation (RTO). The Association employs an RTO Manager, a Training Development Manager, and an Administration Officer full-time; together with sixteen casual trainers (Certificate IV in Training and Assessment qualified) across their network.
- In addition, SSAA Victoria has a similarly sized pool of experienced trainers who do not hold this formal qualification.
- We currently operate, or have access agreements with, fifteen shooting facilities located across Victoria that are suitable for shotgun training.
- SSAA Victoria's new, purpose-built training centre at the Eagle Park complex (near Avalon Airport) is due to open later this year. Classroom-type facilities are also available at most of the Association's other venues.

In response to a question on notice on the cost of training, the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (SSAA) replied indicating that they offer training at low cost (excluding Waterfowl Identification Test WIT that requires over 100 hours and considerable financial cost):

- As a not-for-profit association, SSAA Victoria offers training to recreational hunters and shooters at a low cost.
- The Association's Practical Firearm Training Program (PFTP), for example, is an intensive, one-day training course aimed at ensuring that new firearm licence holders are suitably skilled to use firearms safely and effectively. PFTP is labour and resource intensive (2 x Trainers, plus 1 x Range Officer administers each practical session). The cost to participants is just \$160.
- SSAA Victoria has a proven history of delivering quality training for recreational hunters at a minimal cost.

In response to the question on notice "*State of preparedness to run additional training programs for Native Bird Hunting should that become a requirement of licensing*", the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (SSAA) replied indicating that they are well prepared to provide additional training programmes:

- SSAA Victoria is well positioned to quickly bring online new training offerings and make them available across metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria.
- Whilst longer lead times are ideal, some courses have previously been conceived, developed, and successfully delivered within just a few months.
- The Association stresses that if additional training programs were to become a requirement of obtaining a Game Licence, the focus should be on 'training and assessment' rather than simply 'proficiency testing'. Best practice training courses, such as the Shotgunning Education Program and Practical Firearms Training Program, go beyond testing a baseline level of marksmanship or theoretical knowledge. Put simply; testing is an event; assessment is an educative process.

**FINDING 8:** Resources are in place to train and assess native game bird hunters in all aspects of the activity and implement any new training requirements that may be required, including training in the protection of cultural heritage.

### 3.9 Protection of cultural heritage values

We respect the importance of identifiable Aboriginal cultural heritage sites on public wetlands and recognises the value in improving hunter and community education to preserve sites.

Mr CARTER from the Dja Dja Wurrung Group in testimony<sup>5</sup> shared his vision of the value of education for hunters at wetlands to recognise and better understand Aboriginal cultural heritage sites.

*“I think what happens through the education is just a greater awareness and appreciation of that value that now is a little bit transferable to me as a person and/or a people. So, you are there, say, hunting as an example at a state game reserve, now you learn something about cultural heritage. I would like to think then that you are better for that and then indirectly it is better for me and my people because the opportunity might not have arisen otherwise.”*

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** That the Victorian Government reviews the process to report damage or destruction of Aboriginal cultural heritage and introduces additional protections for these sites.

**RECOMMENDATION 8:** In addition to passing the Wildlife Identification Test, hunters should participate in an Aboriginal cultural heritage awareness education program.

## 4. Community support for native game bird hunting

### 4.1 Surveys support native game bird hunting

This section draws heavily on considered replies to Questions on Notice supplied to the Committee from the Australian Sporting Shooters Association (SSAA).<sup>7</sup>

In February 2023, before the opening of the season, SSAA commissioned Community Engagement to undertake a survey of 2,003 Victorians of voting age in several electorates held by government members in peri-urban and suburban Melbourne and regional Victoria. RSPCA Victoria commissioned Redbridge to ask 1,908 people the same question in early 2022. These two independent surveys both found majority support for hunting to continue under new rules to protect native species:

- 56% +/-3.2% of respondents supported “new rules on duck hunting to protect native species and allow hunting to continue, such as introducing mandatory training for duck hunting licence holders.” (Community Engagement survey).
- 62% +/-3.2% of respondents supported “new rules on duck hunting to protect native species and allow hunting to continue, such as introducing mandatory training for duck hunting licence holders.” (Redbridge survey).

Both surveys had a minority of respondents who were hunters themselves:

- 15.3% of respondents to the Community Engagement survey reported that they “participate in recreational hunting”. A further 26% said they had friends and family who did.
- 16% of respondents to the Redbridge survey reported “ever participating in duck hunting”.

Other similarities exist between these separate research projects. The Community Engagement survey identified a base level of opposition to hunting of any kind within the community. Approximately 25% of respondents opposed the hunting of “non-native species, like rabbits, foxes, pigs or deer”.

<sup>7</sup> SSAA (2003). Responses to QON. July 2023.

- **26.2% oppose a ban on duck hunting in Victoria** (Redbridge statewide survey on recreational native bird hunting).
- **44.9% of voting age people living in electorates held by government members oppose a ban on duck hunting** (Community Engagement Survey in peri-urban and suburban Melbourne and regional Victoria).
- **Less than 28% of voters support a ban.**
- **Overall, 39% of those people who indicated that they voted for a Labor candidate at the 2022 State election stated that they ‘oppose’ or ‘strongly oppose’ a ban on duck hunting.** A further 29% hold a neutral position.
- **15% of Labor voters stated they would be ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ to change their vote if the Government permanently banned duck hunting in Victoria.**

The last point is corroborated by several unions (traditional Labor strongholds) who provided submissions calling for a continuation of native game bird hunting and were strongly opposed to any ban on the activity.

Barry HOWLETT Communications Manager, Sporting Shooters Association Australia (Victoria) offered the following comment in hearings:

*“We looked at large numbers of duck hunters and looked at marginal seats where they lived, to see that. We basically found that had Labor gone to the 2022 election, for example, saying they were going to ban duck hunting, the seat of Bass most likely, on our figures, would not have gone to Labor.”*

**FINDING 9:** The majority of respondents (56% to 61%) support a continuation of duck hunting under new rules to protect native species and 39% of Labor voters were opposed to a ban on duck hunting in Victoria.

## 4.2 Union Support for native game bird hunting

The inquiry received submissions from many unions in support of the continuation of native game bird hunting.

At the Sale Hearings, Trevor WILLIAMS **Mining and Energy Union** Victorian District President, spoke about the importance of working-class Victorians having access to traditional pursuits on public land:

*“Victoria has had a proud history when it comes to access to public land for recreational activities. That principle has been supported by previous governments, whether they be Labor or Liberal. This has enabled generations of Victorians from working-class backgrounds the freedom to enjoy pastimes, including hunting and fishing.*

*These freedoms would not be possible without access to public land and would only be available to the privileged few. Over the years we have seen a sliding decline in the standard of some of the state (public) game reserves – how they are being managed – with poor access in a lot of cases. Hunters have reasonable expectations that tracks should be properly maintained into these areas. Our members believe hunting, fishing, camping, four-wheel driving and motorbike riding should be encouraged and supported by all governments as a healthy pastime for public land users. We would call on all governments to take a conservative approach when assessing the future of long-term held freedoms that people have had, no matter how small that group may seem.”*

**FINDING 10:** There is strong union support for continuation of duck hunting. Unionists acknowledge the significant benefit of native bird hunting as an outdoor recreational activity for hunters.

## 5. Location and socioeconomics of native game bird hunting

### 5.1 Location of game bird hunting

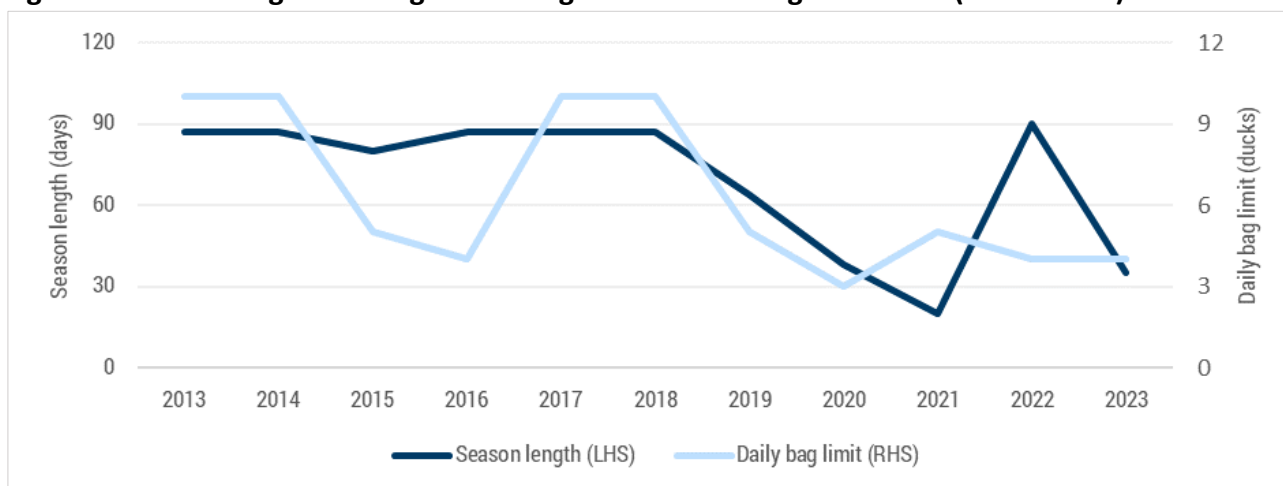
Native game bird hunting is permitted on 199 state reserves, in some wilderness and coastal parks, and on private land with the permission of the landowner.<sup>8</sup> The activity is rural and a significant drawcard for Victoria's regional service industries and draws participants from both rural and metropolitan areas.

The regional LGAs with the highest percentage of hunters include East Gippsland, Wellington, Latrobe, Shepparton and Geelong. Within Melbourne, Brimbank City, Hume City and Melton Shire have a relatively high concentration of duck hunters.<sup>8</sup>

### 5.2 Game bird hunting season is short but avoids summer and snow season

An open duck season typically lasts for 12 weeks between March and June and avoids the breeding and moulting cycle. However, the Game Management Authority (GMA) may shorten or cancel a season, set a daily bag limit for hunters, or prohibit shooting of specific game bird species for conservation purposes. The last full (12 week) game bird hunting season occurred in 2022, and before that, in 2018. In 2023 the Victorian Government shortened the season to five weeks, with a bag limit of four birds per day. For the decade 2013-2023, the average game bird hunting season was 69 days<sup>8</sup> (**Figure 2**).

**Figure 2: Season length and bag limits for game bird hunting in Victoria (source PBO)**



**FINDING 11:** An open duck hunting season lasts no more than 12 weeks between March and June and avoids the breeding and moulting cycle, typically lasts about 10 weeks, but was only 5 weeks in 2023.

### 5.3 The number of game licences and licence revenue

There were 58,016 fully licenced game hunters (58,332 including provisional licences) in Victoria on 30 June 2022. Of these, 27,810 were licenced with an entitlement to hunt game birds. Victoria receives 4 million dollars in game licence revenues and about another \$4.4 million in hunter gun licence revenue (**Table 1**)<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Parliamentary Budget Office submission 3422.

<sup>9</sup> Derived from GMA (2022 Game licence statistics, summary report 2022 & Vic Police webpages assuming 1.5 firearms per shooter and by applying 2022-23 fee of \$15.23/unit.

**Table 1: The number of game licences and game and firearm licence revenue<sup>9</sup>**

| Category  | Licences (No) | Fee (\$/yr) | Game Licence Revenue (\$000/yr) | Gun Licence Revenue (\$000/yr) |
|---|---------------|-------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Deer (Stalking)                                       | 27,699        | 60.92       | 1,687                           | 2,093                          |
| Deer (Stalking & Hounds)                              | 2,770         | 60.92       | 169                             | 209                            |
| Game Birds, including Duck                            | 11,083        | 60.92       | 675                             | 837                            |
| Game Birds, excluding Duck                            | 1,089         | 60.92       | 66                              | 82                             |
| Deer (Stalking) & Game Birds, including Duck          | 9,712         | 91.38       | 887                             | 734                            |
| Deer (Stalking & Hounds) & Game Birds, including Duck | 2,085         | 91.38       | 191                             | 158                            |
| Deer (Stalking) & Game Birds, excluding Duck          | 3,442         | 91.38       | 315                             | 260                            |
| Deer (Stalking & Hounds) & Game Birds, excluding Duck | 181           | 91.38       | 17                              | 14                             |
| <b>Total all licence categories</b>                   | <b>58,061</b> |             | <b>4,007</b>                    | <b>4,387</b>                   |

**FINDING 12:** The Victorian Government receives about \$4 million pa from game licence revenue **plus** about another \$4.4 million in hunter firearm licence revenue from 58,000 licenced hunters.

#### 5.4 Socioeconomic contribution of game bird hunting according to RMCG

Victorian Game Licence holders hunt to spend time in places special to them and to spend time outdoors and contribute to regional economies across Victoria. In 2019 these hunters contributed \$356 million and 3,138 jobs to the Victorian economy with most in regional Victoria. The RMCG report is based on 1,671 responses. Hunters took an average of 6 hunting trips during 2019<sup>10</sup>.

The RMCG estimates of economic contribution would have been higher if based on a full 87 day season and normal 10 bird per day bag limit. (RMCG's estimated economic contribution was based on the 2019 season of only 65 days and bag limit of only 4 to 5 birds per day, and hunters took an average of 6 hunting trips).<sup>10</sup>

The majority or 69% of expenditure was located outside Melbourne in regional Victoria. The Local Government Areas with the highest gross economic contribution were Mansfield (\$12M), East Gippsland (\$11M) and Latrobe (\$11M). The towns with the highest hunting-related expenditure were Mansfield (\$21M), Horsham (\$11M), Wodonga (\$10M) and Bendigo (\$9M).<sup>10</sup>

The areas of regional Victoria that benefit from native bird hunting include regions that have suffered considerable socioeconomic hardship, as a result of Andrews Government policies that have contributed to thousands of job losses in these regions. Jobs have been lost as a result of closure of power stations and coal mines, reduced access and eminent closure of native forests for timber production and reduced water availability for agriculture.

**FINDING 13:** The areas of regional Victoria that benefit from native bird hunting include many regional communities that have been adversely affected by contraction in economic activity caused by the Andrews Government's forest, energy and water policies.

The breakdown in contribution between hunted species was \$65 million for ducks and \$22 million for quail.<sup>10</sup>

RMCG also estimated the net economic contribution by assuming that if hunting was banned some of the game hunting economic contribution would flow to other outdoor activities or household expenditure and subtracted this sum from the gross economic contribution. RGCC note that it is difficult to predict where hunters would spend their money and modelling of net economic outcomes are uncertain<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> RMCG (2020). Economic contribution of recreational hunting in Victoria. Final Report, Department of Jobs Precincts and Regions. June 2020. The study is an action under the Victorian Government's Sustainable Hunting Action Plan.

RMCG noted that the gross contribution provides a clear picture of the importance of hunting to regional and town economies. If hunting expenditure were replaced by other expenditures, some towns that are particularly reliant on hunting expenditure would be adversely affected<sup>10</sup>.

In this Report we focus on gross economic contribution because we also believe that estimates of net economic contribution are uncertain and they are based on assumptions around 'substitutability' that are unknown or uncertain, such that estimates of net economic contribution cannot be relied upon.

**FINDING 14:** Victorian hunters contributed \$356 million and 3,138 jobs to the Victorian economy with most in regional Victoria in 2019. If native game bird hunting was banned some rural and regional towns particularly reliant on hunting would be adversely affected.

## 5.5 Socioeconomic contribution in Wellington Shire

Cr Ian BYE, Mayor of Wellington Shire offered the following commentary on the importance of duck hunting to the Wellington Shire economy and reducing duck damage to farmer's crops:

*"As we stated in our submission, the Sale Field & Game branch has the highest membership of any Field & Game branch in Victoria. The branch is not just a shooting club. They have been active for many years in helping preserve the Heart Morass wetlands."*

*"In Wellington we receive a significant community benefit from duck hunting each year."*

*"Hunters travelling to our region provide significant economic advantages via accommodation, purchase of fuel and hunting supplies and additional ad hoc purchases in small communities closest to their hunting area."*

*"Speaking to many duck hunters, in 40 years they have never seen the number of ducks that are in the area this particular season. Wellington is one of the largest agricultural areas in the state. The devastation has been felt by many farmers, with ducks destroying pastures and crops."*

*"In Wellington we have never had problems with duck hunters and tourists visiting our beautiful wetlands and waterways. They can act together quite well."*

*"We must keep advocating for the most appropriate outcome for our community, which we believe is to support duck hunting as a longstanding sport which also supports the local environment and agricultural practices."*

## 6. Native bird ecology

### 6.1 Habitat is the key driver for waterfowl populations

Professor Richard KINGSFORD is Director of the Centre for Ecosystem Science at the University of New South Wales, and has undertaken the longest waterbird surveys in the world, where he has surveyed 50 species across about a third of Australia. Professor KINGSFORD was involved in studies on impacts of lead shot, and chaired a national task force which recommended the phase-out of lead shot for steel shot. He also led an independent inquiry into duck hunting in New South Wales in the 90s. During the hearings Professor Richard KINGSFORD's take home message based on his considerable scientific experience was:

*"The fundamental issue here is that we have been losing waterbird habitat, wetland habitat, over decades as a result of increasing extractions and regulation of the rivers for the Murray–Darling, and we see that in the impacts on freshwater organisms that rely on those flows."*

*"At the same time, we also investigated whether there was any effect of hunting on those species, and we found a very small effect, which was considerably overridden by the loss of habitat effect."*

During hearings Brian HILLER, Professor of wildlife biology at Bemidji State University, Minnesota made the following comment:

***“Habitat is key. If you have habitat, you have birds.”***

## 6.2 Ensuring enough habitat, not banning hunting is the key to waterbird conservation

In response to the following question from Melina BATH: *“Professor, your data is often quoted as a reason to ban recreational game bird hunting. As a scientist, do you believe banning recreational hunting will improve overall waterbird population sustainability?”* Richard Kingsford offered the following answer:

*“My overall message is really the way you best cater for conservation of game species and other waterbirds is to ensure they have enough habitat. Currently we are not doing that, and that is by far the biggest driver of these long-term declines.”*

In response to a question from Bev McARTHUR: *“So how would you advise a government about managing the habitat better if habitat loss is the main issue why bird populations are declining?”*, Richard KINGSFORD offered the following answer:

*“I would fundamentally advise the Victorian government to engage strongly in environmental flow management in the Murray–Darling. I think in the past few years we have not seen that. If we were really looking after wetland and waterbird habitat, we would be doing that.”*

Following on from a question during hearings from Sheena WATT on whether there was breeding abundance seen in particular species, or was it right across the board as a result of extra rainfall during 2022, Richard KINGSFORD offered the following response:

*“.....there is little doubt that all of the species were breeding, apart from those that do not breed in Australia.....and that breeding index was up as well.”*

*“I do not want to be totally doom and gloom, because I think there are some wonderful things that are actually happening out there, and there are great communities involved in this and very committed governments, but we do need to do more. But to your good question about these big wetlands, that is where a lot of the action is, and our ability to protect those and allow them to flood and get the water that they need to create the habitat for all of these different organisms we share the planet with is really important.”*

*“Sure. All of the above. Some of them have national parks and reserves; some of them, like the Gayini wetlands, are primarily managed by the Nari Nari Tribal Council, led and supported by others. There are some areas that are managed by Bush Heritage Australia, Australian wildlife – so private conservation areas. Another fundamental part of the package is the management of environmental flows by state and Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder. A lot of that water that has been brought back as part of the Murray–Darling Basin plan is fundamentally important in terms of creating the habitat or restoring the habitat that used to be there.”*

**FINDING 15:** Loss of wetland habitat is the key issue effecting waterbird populations and hunting has a very small effect that is considerably overridden by loss of habitat.



### 6.3 Impact of water harvesting on waterbird habitat

During hearings Richard KINGSFORD, Director of the Centre for Ecosystem Science at the University of New South Wales said <sup>11</sup>:

*“And I guess the take-home message was that we have had a 72 per cent decline in waterbird abundances in the Murray–Darling, which was different to the northern Lake Eyre basin where we have similarly been monitoring the birds. The fundamental issue here is that we have been losing waterbird habitat, wetland habitat, over decades as a result of increasing extractions and regulation of the rivers for the Murray–Darling.”*

*“The Lake Eyre Basin starts in western Queensland. There is no major irrigation or hydro-electricity, so the flows and the rainfall translate into habitat. Therefore that water flows across that landscape and all the waterbirds use that, as they would have done for millennia, and they breed in the same sort of numbers that we would have seen in the past.”*

*“At the same time, we also investigated whether there was any effect of hunting on those species, and we found a very small effect, which was considerably overridden by the loss of habitat effect.”*

*“We have done lots of other work to show that essentially what is happening is we are getting a long-term decline in the amount of water that gets to the end of a river system.”*

*“Our data seems to indicate that by far the biggest effect in terms of history is the effect of the building of dams and extraction of water from rivers.”*

**FINDING 16:** Managing environmental flows in the Murray-Darling is required to improve waterbird habitat.

Scope may exist to explore the potential of harvesting the damaging peak flood flows during *La Niña* to improve environmental flows, particularly in *El Niño*. Following floods in 2010 and 2011 a Parliamentary Inquiry<sup>12</sup> suggested some strategies for dealing with damaging flood flows. Some of these or other flood mitigation actions perhaps may deliver spin off opportunities for environmental flows.

**RECOMMENDATION 9:** The Victorian Government explores opportunities to deliver improved environmental flows in conjunction with much needed improvement in flood mitigation.

### 6.4 The science does not support banning duck hunting

When asked during hearings what would be the impact of banning duck hunting and how the management of the wetlands would continue, Richard KINGSFORD said:

*“there would be some impact but not a major impact, because it is all about habitat and it is availability (of habitat) that is important. I think there is also some local conservation by duck hunters and others looking after wetlands, which is also very important.”*

In response to questions during hearings from Bev McARTHUR, Richard KINGSFORD offered the following:

*“We have got more and more sophisticated in terms of translating that data into decision-making, and the adaptive harvest model is the most recent sophistication of that. Certainly it gives me a lot more confidence than I had in the past that we are moving to a more rigorous basis for managing duck hunting.”*

<sup>11</sup> Inquiry Transcript 26 May 2023

<sup>12</sup> Environment and Natural Resources Committee (2012). Inquiry into flood mitigation infrastructure in Victoria. Parliamentary Paper No.169 Session 2010–2012.



In response to a question during hearings of whether regulated recreational game bird hunting is sustainable, Professor Marcel KLAASSEN from Deakin University replied:

*“Yes. “Yes. I have said a couple of times already that any management of wildlife – this is not just related to a duck harvesting, needs to be associated with monitoring. You can have models, but you also need to have a check on models.”*

During hearings Professor Marcel KLAASSEN offered the following comment on the impact of hunting on duck populations:

*“I can refer here to a study that Richard did looking at the effects of various drivers in duck populations. He found the major effect was water and the landscape, and there was a tiny effect from hunting. Of course when you hunt animals, it has an impact on the population – numbers go down. **Now, given the specific biology of ducks, it does not really put a dent in the population.**”*

During hearings Lucas COOKE, CEO Field & Game Australia, offered the following comment:

*“There is a long-term decline (waterbird numbers) in eastern Australia. A very large amount of eastern Australia does not have hunting. **Trying to blame hunting for a long-term decline is a fallacy. Long-term decline is being caused by habitat loss quite often or largely in a state like New South Wales that does not have a recreational duck season.** So any attempt to pin a long-term decline in waterbird numbers on hunting is a fallacy. We would argue it is grossly misleading to the public, with 66 species of non-game waterbirds being counted in that long-term decline in waterbirds, that you are trying to blame game bird hunting.”*

**FINDING 17:** In Victoria duck hunting is sustainable and regulated according to an adaptive harvest model based on good science, and hunting does not put a dent in the population given the biology of ducks – they are prolific breeders.

Brian HILLER Professor of wildlife biology at Bemidji State University, Minnesota, in response to a question on notice, advised that **hunting has little impact on game bird populations, because mortality impacts from hunting, predation, starvation, malnutrition and disease are not additive but are compensatory.** Competition for food is often reduced when hunting or predators remove some animals from the population and fewer animals die from starvation, malnutrition, sickness or disease because of the interaction with predation (and hunting)<sup>13</sup>:

*“Most game animals are relatively short-lived, have high reproductive rates, and have relatively high overall mortality rates. In the situation where game populations are hunted, the animals removed by hunting actually may create more opportunity for the remaining individuals to have a greater likelihood of survival. Most of the species of waterfowl that are listed as game species and are regularly available for harvest have breeding strategies as described above. As a result, when conditions are favourable for breeding they take full advantage and often produce multiple broods. When these conditions are present, the mortality via harvest by hunting is most likely compensatory for the population and reduces competition among the remaining individuals & increases their likelihood of subsequent survival.”*

*“The impact of the hunting harvest is minimal on the core breeding population. The animals that are shot would have likely died from some other source of mortality. When environmental conditions are less optimal and breeding rates decline, the total population also likely declines and harvest may have a greater impact on survival rates. Overall, in normal to good conditions hunting harvest for most hunted species (especially Grey teal, Pacific black duck, Wood duck, Pink-eared ducks, and Chestnut teal) will likely have minor to no impact on the population.”*

<sup>13</sup> Hiller, B J (2023). Submission in Support of Continued Native Game Bird Hunting in Australia, Additional supplemental information as requested by the Committee. Prof Hiller cited Bolen, Eric G. and William L. Robinson. 2003. Wildlife Ecology and Management, Fifth Edition.

*“More research is needed into the potential impacts of hunting harvest on species such as Hard head ducks and Mountain ducks.”*

**FINDING 18:** Hunting has little impact on game bird populations, because mortality impacts from hunting, predation, starvation, malnutrition and disease are not additive but are compensatory. Competition for food is often reduced when hunting or predators remove some animals from the population and therefore fewer animals die from starvation, malnutrition, sickness or disease.

## 6.5 The science does not support shortening the duck hunting season

In response to questions during hearings from Melina BATH on how robust is the science and are you convinced of the sustainability of the interim harvest model, and why a recommendation of the model is to generally not shorten the seasons, Professor Marcel KLAASSEN from Deakin University offered the following comments:

*“With a mechanistic model you know exactly how a system works, and so whatever happens you can make predictions. But this is a statistical model, so it is based on patterns that we have seen in the past and you extrapolate from those patterns.”*

*“On average hunters go out four times during a season to hunt – and irrespective of the length of the season, they do not change it much. So, yes, **you can change the length of the season, like we have done this year, but scientifically there was not really a good basis for it.**”*

*“So let us keep it simple and only change the hunting bag, because also that has shown in other countries to be an effective way of regulating hunting.”*

Professor Marcel KLAASSEN offered the following comments on length of season:

*“But by and large the hunting season takes place in a period in which there is very little reproduction going on – very, very little. To change the hunting season based on small variations that you have when they reproduce or not I do not think is sensible.”*

Professor Richard KINGSFORD offered the following comments on length of season:

*“The history of duck hunting in Australia – the timing of it was determined primarily on, as Marcel said, the breeding season. The breeding season is in spring, primarily, in the south-east of the continent. Some birds will occasionally breed in a wet autumn, but not many.”*

*“The other driver was what is called moult. These birds lose their flight feathers and cannot fly. So the timing was meant to occur so that they were able to be undisturbed in that period, and in general that occurs reasonably well.”*

*“If you have got a long season and you cut it by a week, three weeks, two weeks or whatever, it does not necessarily have the effect of halving or cutting by that same amount the amount of take, because you are not affecting those major points when the duck shooting occurs.”<sup>14</sup>*

**FINDING 19:** There is no scientific basis for changing the length of the hunting season, so it is best to just change the hunting bag limit, which has been shown in other countries to be an effective way of regulating hunting.

<sup>14</sup> Opening weekend and long weekends.

## 6.6 Ducks are prolific breeders and there is no density limit to breeding

In response to a question from Jeff BOURMAN on if the abundance of wood duck, black duck and grey teal (that make up made up 85% of hunters' bags) were at risk from regulated duck hunting in Victoria as it works now, Professor Marcel KLAASSEN offered the following reply:

*“Just generally, for ducks, they are very resilient. They reproduce at a very young age, possibly even within a year, notably here in Australia, and when the conditions are right they just keep on breeding – many species of ducks. They also have large broods. When opportunities arise for reproduction they reproduce, and there is also no so-called density dependence observable in ducks, not only in Australia but just generally. So it is not that they hit a limit; it is really that when there is a good environment for them they breed, and they breed and they can bounce back quickly.”*

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

And Professor Richard KINGSFORD offered the following reply:

*“wood ducks – and I published on this – have certainly been the least affected of perhaps all of the duck species because they have taken over farm dams and golf courses and they breed in all sorts of places that they probably did not breed in in the past. We still believe that in the big systems they have been impacted by the loss of habitat with river regulation, but they are one of the species that are certainly a lot less affected than others.”*

*“Certainly Victoria has been the state with the most amount of duck hunting occurring and has more duck hunters than South Australia and Tasmania – the other two. The Northern Territory is the other jurisdiction that has hunting. New South Wales has pest mitigation as well, but I would suspect that Victoria will still dominate in terms of a relative national scale.”*

**FINDING 20:** Ducks reproduce at an early age, have large broods with no density dependence, and are less affected by loss of habitat, with wood ducks taking over farm dams and golf courses.

## 6.7 Breeding cycle of waterfowl

In response to a question in hearings from Melina BATH on ‘episodic irruptive boom-bust cycle of waterfowl’. Dr Brian HILLER replied:

*“Yes. It is sort of similar to what I just mentioned in that when you have large rain events or large flood events across a landscape, that is when the birds are going to take advantage of essentially additional habitat that was not there prior to the rain. When that happens – again, similar to what Dr Kingsford was talking about earlier – flooding events come and the birds go and breed. And they did, and they have done that for millennia. What happens when all those extra birds are produced – and again, if you have chestnut teal or grey teal or black ducks or some others that are double brooding in some cases, they might produce 15, 16 or 18 ducklings that survive to fledging age. Well, that is fine during this boom period, right? But when that water recedes – and again, if you look back through the BOM data on waterfall and rain abundance, you can see where the boom years are and where the bust years are – when the bust comes, you are going to shrink back to your core breeding population. As you were just mentioning, one of the things in terms of a cautionary approach when those busts happen is to be more conservative in your approach to the harvest. You do not want to harvest the core breeding population; you want to harvest the stuff that gets produced above that. That is really where that boom-bust comes in. That boom produces a lot of extra birds that at some point – when the bust comes – are going to die. The question is simply: how, and what is going to be the cause of mortality? The duck does not particularly care if it is by shotgun or by starvation or by bacteria or predation or whatever else. That is not relevant to them. Honestly, from a management standpoint, we try and control the things we can control. One of the few things we have control over is harvest, right? So we*

try to regulate the harvest as a result. When the bust comes, we regulate the harvest to reduce the harvest of core breeding populations.”

**FINDING 21:** Flood and drought cause an ‘episodic irruptive boom-bust cycle of waterfowl’. In boom flood times chestnut teal or grey teal or black ducks may double brood and produce up to 18 ducklings to fledging age that are likely to die from starvation, disease or predation when the bust comes. Regulation of the harvest in the busts reduces the impact on the core breeding population.

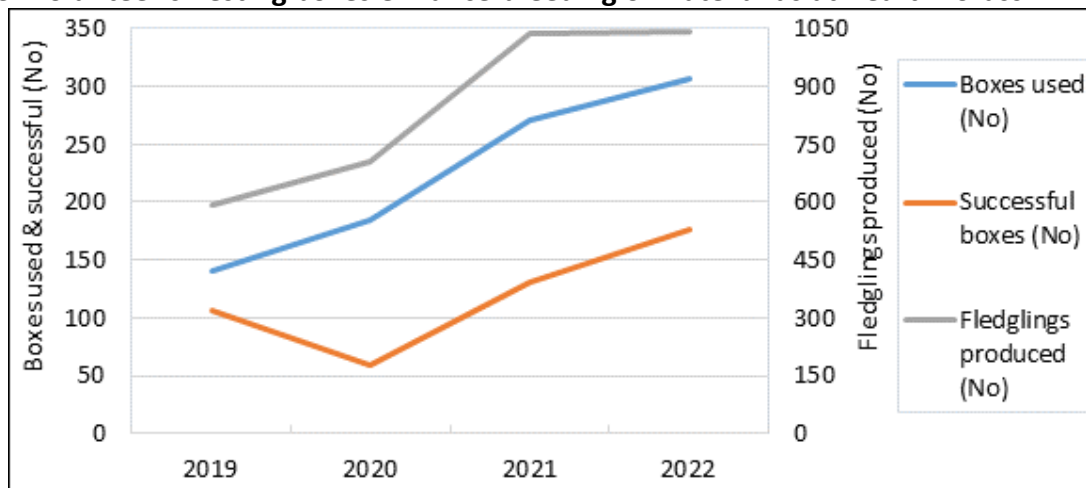
## 6.8 Volunteers enhance wetland habitat and breeding of waterbirds

In response to a question in hearings from Melina BATH on artificial nesting boxes, Dr Brian HILLER replied:

“These are artificial nest boxes that are erected by the Field & Game association at Sale. They have over 500 of them currently scattered around Heart Morass in the Lake Wellington area. So my interest in that was: what is coming out of them from a biology standpoint? What additional birds are being produced if these things were not here? And so I instructed them and sort of gave them some guidance on how they might be able to collect data so that they could have a better understanding of what their work was actually accomplishing and if it was accomplishing anything.”

“We started the work in 2019, which was sort of the end of the bust period. That bust period, again, you shrink back to your core population, and your core population at that time – we had relatively few boxes being used, but the boxes being used had a 75 per cent success rate. So if a bird nested in the box, 75 per cent of those boxes actually produced at least one duckling. That is considered a successful nest. And in that case, I want to say we had about 730-something ducklings that were produced that year. In each of the past three years where we have had these boom periods we have had a lot of excess birds on the landscape” (Figure 3)<sup>15</sup>.

**Figure 3: Volunteer’s nesting boxes enhance breeding of waterbirds at Heart Morass**



<sup>15</sup> Derived from Hiller, B (2023). Response to Question on Notice 7 June 2023.

## 6.9 Impact of duck hunting on non-target species

In response to a question in hearings from Georgie PURCELL: “Do you think that duck shooting poses an added threat to species that are not on the game species list that are already struggling due to the other factors”, Professor Richard KINGSFORD offered the following reply:

*“But generally they are fairly small numbers in the big scheme of things because people are not doing that. I do not think non-target species is an issue.”*

In response to a question in hearings on non-target species Danny RYAN, Chairman Field & Game Australia offered the following comments:

*“The hunting community is much interconnected. We have a large amount of members not only nationwide but with the majority in Victoria, and we constantly get reports in the lead-up to the season in particular, because that is always an issue that the hunting community looks at and tries to second-guess and work out where they will be going and what potential closures there may be. And then in turn, in our lead-up discussions with the GMA we often bring up those particular points, particularly where they are large quantities of protected birds or congregations of protected birds.”*

**FINDING 22:** Native game bird hunting does not pose an added threat to non-target species because Field and Game Australia liaise with GMA and licenced hunters take care to avoid non-target species.

Non-native invasive pests pose a threat to non-target species and we need more efficient and cost –effective management and control of non-native invasive pests. The Victorian Government should optimise resources within DEECA and Parks Victoria, which are highly centralised with too many people working in the CBD of Melbourne and too few people delivering real outcomes in the field.

**FINDING 23:** Non-native invasive pests are a threat to native birds and DEECA AND Parks Victoria workforce is too city-based to deliver effective control of non-native invasive pests that threaten native wildlife and habitat.

**RECOMMENDATION 10:** The Victoria Government should optimise the use of the resources of relevant agencies to ensure there is active, adaptive and accountable management on all public land, to address the broader threats of bushfires, invasive species and adverse climatic events such as droughts and floods. Optimising resources includes decentralising its city-based workforce.

## 7. Concerns about native game bird hunting

The debate over native game bird hunting in Victoria, Australia, and elsewhere, revolves around a set of multifaceted concerns, which can be broadly categorised into environmental, ecological, ethical, social, and economic aspects. Here are some of the reasons cited by opponents of recreational duck hunting along with commentary provided by experts that refutes many claims.

### 7.1 Ecological concerns - hunting does not put a dent in waterbird numbers

On the decline in waterbird numbers, the Committee heard overwhelming advice from multiple experts that hunting is not a concern at the population level for native game birds. The evidence from Australia’s leading experts on Australian wetlands and waterbirds that hunting has a “very small” effect on duck populations, and possibly a positive effect on non-target species populations due to hunter led habitat conservation and restoration.

Professor Richard KINGSFORD – leader of Australia’s longest running and most comprehensive wetland survey was un-equivocal in this. He states:

***“The fundamental issue here is that we have been losing waterbird habitat, wetland habitat, ... At the same time, we also investigated whether there was any effect of hunting on those species, and we found a very small effect, which was considerably overridden by the loss of habitat effect.”***

Professor Marcell KLAASSEN also contributed when asked “what part does hunting play in the long-term numbers of those (game) species”:

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

Professor Richard KINGSFORD, when asked directly: “As a scientist, do you believe banning recreational hunting will improve overall waterbird population sustainability?” replied:

*“Look, I am a conservation biologist, so I believe in trying to do the best things in terms of the conservation of species. **My overall message is really the way you best cater for conservation of game species and other waterbirds is to ensure they have enough habitat.** Currently we are not doing that, and that is by far the biggest driver of these long-term declines.”*

*“Hunters can and do have a positive effect on conserving and restoring habitat – and in fact, with some surety around seasons can and would do even more. **Banning Recreational game bird hunting WILL NOT cease the decline in waterbird numbers, in fact, like observed in NSW – it will likely lead to further loss of habitat, and species decline.**”*

**FINDING 24:** Conservation biologists conclude that banning recreational game bird hunting will likely lead to further loss of habitat and species decline.

## 7.2 Disturbance to breeding – the hunting season is outside the breeding season

The Committee heard of concerns that the hunting season can disturb breeding waterbirds. When asked about this – Professor Marcel CLAASSEN said that:

***“...by and large the hunting season takes place in a period in which there is very little reproduction going on – very, very little. To change the hunting season based on small variations that you have when they reproduce or not I do not think is sensible.”***

Australian Ducks and Quail are not migratory. They are what is sometimes referred to as “conditionally nomadic”. So they move around the country in response to localised or national conditions, not with a season as in northern hemisphere birds. Migratory shorebirds that visit Australia generally reside in coastal regions. **The most important coastal habitats are already closed to recreational hunting.**

In dry years when inland waterways become vital to these birds, adaptive harvest models and sound scientific management of hunting areas can provide safety networks as required. **Provision of quality habitat and food sources is the most important aspect of protecting our migratory birds.**

## 7.3 Misidentification of Species

With several duck species and other waterfowl in the region, there's the possibility of hunters misidentifying and shooting protected or threatened species. When asked directly if he thought hunting posed a risk to threatened species, Professor KINGSFORD replied:

*“If you do not mind me responding, Marcel. I did at one stage – it was some time ago in New South Wales – look at the issue of non-target species, which is separate to wounding. There are two issues that you have talked about. One is what happens to those birds that are shot which should not be shot, like*



*the freckled duck and blue-winged shoveler. I think those species are suffering the same decline, so any loss of those species is of concern. But generally they are fairly small numbers in the big scheme of things because people are not doing that. I remember some horrific times when I was doing surveys of duck hunters in the 80s, where all sorts of birds were being shot, and it was just horrible. We would get a boatload of parrots and spoonbills and swans – a whole range of things. Thankfully that has completely changed, in my opinion. We do not see nearly as much of that, but it still sometimes occurs because we get rogue elements of people out there. **I do not think non-target species is an issue.***

#### 7.4 Climate impact on habitat loss

In response to the question when asked: “Specifically, ... what do you think the impact of that (climate change) will be on duck numbers?” Professor Marcel CLAASSEN replied:

*“I am an optimist, and maybe others will consider that to mean that I am naive. But I do see that there is more attention for these problems. ... we also have climate change to take into consideration, so yes, fluctuations are likely to be higher. ... (but) **not necessarily for ducks, because they are quite a resilient species, so they can go through troughs, provided that they are well managed when they are going through those troughs.** For other waterbird species it might be more problematic. Notably for species that are already present in low numbers it does not look good.”*

#### 7.5 Biodiversity – hunters have improved biodiversity

The Committee heard that recreational duck hunting poses no risk at all to biodiversity due to the fact ducks are among the most adaptable and resilient of Australia’s native waterfowl.

In fact, hunter led wetland conservation efforts like that of Field & Game Australia’s Connewarre wetland centre and Heart Morass provide much needed habitat for over 1300 species of plants, animals, and insects, **increasing biodiversity in those areas.**

#### 7.6 Ethical and Animal Welfare concerns ignore population dynamics

The Committee heard of concerns of animal welfare at an individual bird level, but ecologists and biologist supplied information that hunting provides a welfare benefit at the population level by contributing to habitat and ensuring birds have safe places to breed, nest and raise young (all critical on the welfare scale).

The Committee was presented with the argument that not all birds shot are killed instantly; many are wounded and suffer prolonged pain or slow deaths. However, Dr Brian HILLER, a professor of wildlife biology at Bemidji State University, Minnesota said:

*“That boom (in Australian climate conditions and breeding) produces a lot of extra birds that at some point – when the bust comes – are going to die. The question is simply: how, and what is going to be the cause of mortality? The duck does not particularly care if it is by shotgun or by starvation or by bacteria or predation or whatever else. That is not relevant to them. Honestly, from a management standpoint, we try and control the things we can control. One of the few things we have control over is harvest, right? So we try to regulate the harvest as a result. When the bust comes, we regulate the harvest to reduce the harvest of core breeding populations.”*

## 7.7 Morality of Hunting

The Committee was presented with the argument that people feel that killing for sport or pleasure, rather than for survival or sustenance, is ethically questionable. In fact the term “sport shooting” was used deliberately and emotively by those opposed to hunting. Hunters, however, presented that Victoria already has laws requiring ALL harvested birds to be collected, and for at least the breast meat to be salvaged. Duck hunters hunt for food. Part of a growing trend in responsible food sourcing involved people taking responsibility for where and how their meat is grown and is harvested. Again, Dr Hiller noted that:

*“In addition to hunting ducks, I also hunt deer, turkeys, geese, grouse, and doves. I also keep and eat fish that I catch. I also forage in the forest for wild edibles such as mushrooms. I also grow my own vegetables. My family also cans/preserves our own salsa. I help friends raise and butcher chickens. Sometimes, I even have to resort to going to the grocery store for some of my food. My point here is that I hunt to participate in collecting my own food locally from wild, free-range, organic sources based on what is seasonally available and abundant.”*

A very small number of Australians and Victorians do not consume animal products but the majority of Victorians do. The majority that consume meat such as hunters and the general public have a moral decision to make on where they get their meat from. **A minority group assuming moral responsibility on another and prohibiting hunting on morality grounds is itself immoral and undemocratic.**

Certainly while presenting to the Committee on the morals of game bird hunting Dr Holly SITTERS response shows that her moral or professional objection with game bird hunting is not specific to game birds, or scientifically based. – she is in fact opposed to ALL lethal control of animals – even of feral pests. When asked “So we should ban, do you think, all forms of hunting?” Dr Holly Sitters replied “Yes”.

Those opposed to hunting native game birds in Australia on moral grounds, **must by needs oppose ALL hunting, and fishing, and animal agriculture. This particular argument is opposed by the Liberals and Nationals and it is clearly outside the terms of reference and scope of this committee to consider.**

## 7.8 Wounding and protestor behaviour

Wounding is an unintentional consequence of hunting. All hunters aim to dispatch their quarry as quickly as possible. Ideally, every shot bird would be immediately dispatched. However, the fact is that despite best efforts, unintentional wounding may occur. Hunters would argue that whilst wounding could occur as a result of infrequent behaviour, it is never “intentional.” The intent is always to dispatch the bird.

Field & Game Australia has a long and proud history of educating and engaging hunters to reduce the occurrences of unintentional wounding. Specialists in the fields of ecology and wildlife management agree that this as the most effective way to drive improvements in hunting outcomes.

Hunting organisations and animal welfare groups have established and agreed on a Wound Reduction Action Plan. The cohort of invested stakeholders included Field & Game Australia - Victoria, Sporting Shooters Association Australia, Beretta Australia, RSPCA and more. They presented the plan to the Minister for Agriculture in September 2022, and the newly created, Minister for Outdoor Recreation in December 2022, for approval and implementation.

**Finding 25:** The Committee notes that hunting organisations and animal welfare groups have established and agreed on a Wound Reduction Action Plan. The plan has been in the hands of the Victorian Government since September 2022.

**RECOMMENDATION 11:** The Victorian Government immediately approves and fund the implementation of the Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan, which has bilateral support from hunting and animal welfare organisations.



The Committee agrees with the view that protestors can exercise their right to protest – but should not be able to directly enter active hunting areas and put themselves and hunters at risk. Any persons protesting must remain at least 100m from any hunter.

Protesters get in the way of hunters trying to dispatch their quarry, putting themselves and hunters at risk. Complete data from the 2022 duck hunting season identified that 38% of the infractions were incurred by protestors and anti-hunting protestors themselves, including major breaches of the following sections of the *Wildlife Act 1975* such as<sup>6</sup>:

- S58C - Offence for certain persons to enter on or remain in specified hunting area and
- S86 - Notices prohibiting, regulating or controlling the taking, destroying or hunting of wildlife.

**RECOMMENDATION 12:** The Victorian Government implements additional measures to restrict the capacity of protestors to hinder the lawful conduct of duck hunters and introduce civil offence for persons entering a wetland whereby they are within 100 metres of a hunter.

## 8. Scientific benefit of hunting

The committee heard from Professor Marcel CLAASSEN that:

*“My research and that of others in this space – Agriculture Victoria, for instance – make use of the services, if you like, of hunters that help them in collecting samples for avian influenza research. I have been doing the same, so they form an important part of my research, but I am not exclusively relying on those samples, and I think the same applies for Agriculture Victoria. By the way, the same is also happening in other states. Tasmania importantly rely, for their avian influenza monitoring, on hunted ducks.”*

**While these and other studies could continue without the assistance of recreational hunters, the access for science to reliable biological samples would significantly reduce or would need to be replaced by other methods.**

## 9. Misleading testimony by The Australia Institute

The examination of The Australia Institute’s submission shows there are valid concerns regarding its credibility. It contradicts itself, with conflicting and misleading economic comments. It has also failed to provide alternative evidence to convincingly support its claims and has failed to highlight the limitations of its own research. Furthermore, The Australia Institute appears to have attempted to discredit a report based on a false claim of its origins. The Australia Institute has shown itself to not have a credible, coherent economic argument for the banning of native bird hunting by contradicting itself and giving misleading testimony (**Appendix 1**).

## Appendix 1: Misleading testimony by the Australia Institute

### a) Introduction

The Inquiry into Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements has examined the potential economic costs of ending Duck Hunting in Victoria. One of the submitters in favour of banning native bird hunting is The Australia Institute, represented at the hearing by Rod Campbell and Elizabeth Morison.

We raise concerns with the credibility of The Australia Institute, given conflicting testimony was provided by its representatives.

There was also a concern that The Australia Institute witnesses gave misleading statements. They suggested that a report showing the benefits of duck hunting season was commissioned by the Game Management Authority when in fact it was the Minister for Agriculture who commissioned the report.

Additionally, we are of the view that The Australia Institute has used economic evidence and statistics in a misleading manner which leads to questions over its credibility.

### b) Misleading economic testimony

In The Australia Institute's opening statement to the committee, Elizabeth Morison, provided evidence that duck and quail hunting results in an economic benefit:

*"Based on calculations from RM Consulting Group, duck and quail hunting results in economic activity of between \$4 million and \$11 million each year."<sup>16</sup>*

This net economic benefit is based on spending by hunters, such as on travel, accommodation and other spending in the regions less what they may spend on unknown substituted activities in unknown locations. The Australia Institute uses this unreliable net economic benefit as evidence that the economic benefit of native bird hunting is very low.

However, Rod Campbell contradicts Elizabeth Morris's earlier claim in The Australian Institute's statement by claiming that the argument for banning duck hunting is that it imposes a large cost on Victorians, which suggests its view is that native bird hunting is a net economic negative. In response to a question as to why native bird hunting should be banned, Rod Campbell states:

*"Because it imposes a cost on a large number of Victorians."<sup>17</sup>*

The Australia Institute's arguments are inconstant. On the one hand it is willing to use a report as evidence that native bird hunting provides a small economic benefit and therefore it should be banned, (the methodology used is inappropriate). Then on the other hand, it claims that native bird hunting imposes a cost on Victorians and therefore it should be banned.

We observe that whilst The Australia Institute is willing to refer to its own dated research funded by the RSPCA, it did not refer to the welfare benefits of hunting.

The Australia Institute has been misleading by holding out the RMCG modelling as a best-case scenario despite the fact it does not consider the welfare of hunters. This is akin to claiming that the benefit of the Fitzroy Gardens is small because only occasionally someone buys a coffee from a local café because they can sit in the gardens.

Additionally, there are significant concerns with the use of the criterion validity (CV) of willingness to pay method in the type of research used by The Australian Institute. There are potential for biases including design bias, strategic bias and hypothetical bias. Notably, meta-analyses have shown the hypothetical bias effect to be significant, particularly for environmental and conservation issues.<sup>18</sup>

Despite claiming that native bird shooting provides little value to Victorians, The Australian Institute makes no attempt to value the other benefits of native bird hunting, as outlined by the Sporting Shooters Association Australia:

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<sup>16</sup> Submission, The Australia Institute.

<sup>17</sup> Hearing transcript.

<sup>18</sup> Lucy Kanya, Sabina Sanghera, Alex Lewin, Julia Fox-Rushby, The criterion validity of willingness to pay methods: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the evidence, Social Science & Medicine, 2021.

The social interaction of hunters with friends, family, and local communities is greatly enriched by duck hunting. Common motivations for bird hunting include sourcing free-range game meat, physical exercise, maintaining a connection with nature, mental well-being and positive social interaction with friends and family.

According to statistics, hunters have better mental and physical health than non-hunters. This is because hunters tend to have a tangible and genuine connection with nature. Most people say that connecting with nature is important to them. Hunters actually participate in nature, making their connection even stronger.<sup>19</sup>

### **c) Misleading report origin claims**

The Australia Institute in its submission to the inquiry seeks to call into question the validity of the report from the RMCG into the economic benefits of duck hunting. The claim by The Australia Institute is because the Game Management Authority (GMA) uses that report to back up the GMA's view on the benefits of duck hunting, that this report from RMCG is more appropriate to advocacy for hunting than to inform policy.

The Australia Institute claims that this report is favourable to the GMA and their interests, and even goes so far as to state:

*"... in research commissioned by Victoria's Game Management Authority (GMA) and written by RM Consulting Group (RMCG) in 2020."<sup>20</sup>*

It seems to suggest that because GMA commissioned the report it should be looked at sceptically. However, this claim is debunked by the Member for Eastern Victoria, Jeff Bourman, who highlighted that this report was not commissioned by the GMA. Instead, it was commissioned personally by the then Minister for Agriculture, Jaclyn Symes:

*"It was done by the department, and I have it on extremely good authority that it was actually commissioned by the minister herself at the time, who is now the Attorney-General."*

Rod Campbell's belief that the research is more appropriate to advocacy is an interesting claim, and calls into question how seriously The Australia Institute's submission should be taken by the inquiry if it does not understand the origin of a report that it has used to base some of its arguments on and has suggested that readers should be sceptical of, on the false basis that it was commissioned by the GMA.

### **d) A deeper dive into the statistics on duck hunting**

On the front page of the submission from The Australia Institute, it quotes a statistic that 0.17% of the population engages in duck hunting, down from 1% in 2012. However, context must be applied. Since then, the Victorian Government has been making it harder for people to engage in duck hunting. John Byers, a life-long hunter, referred to the Minister having evidence to support a full-length season:

*"The fact that the minister had the available science in her hand to say that we could have had a full-length season ..."<sup>21</sup>*

A full-length season in 2012, was 87 days - almost 3 months - while in 2023 the season is just 35 days.<sup>22</sup> The statistic referred to by The Australia Institute could suggest that the Victorian Government by making it harder to engage in duck hunting is reducing participation. Therefore, it is worth noting that these statistics provided by the Australia Institute may be correlated to more restrictive policies of the Victorian Government rather than a loss of interest in the activity.

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<sup>19</sup> SSAFE Submission.

<sup>20</sup> Australia Institute Submission, pp1.

<sup>21</sup> Submission, John Byers.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/hunting/duck/duck-season-considerations/historical-summary-of-seasonal-arrangements>.