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SUBMISSION: INQUIRY INTO ENVIRONMENTAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Legislative Assembly Environment & Planning
Committee

Submission prepared by Dr Megan Davidson, CEO

Date: 14th April 2020

Wildlife Victoria Inc.

About Wildlife Victoria

Wildlife Victoria has provided the Victorian community with a Wildlife Emergency Response service for over 30 years. Every year thousands of native animals in Victoria become sick, injured, or orphaned, often as a direct result of human activity. If left unassisted, these animals may suffer and die in pain or of starvation.

Our Wildlife Emergency Response Service receives notifications from members of the public via our emergency phone and online reporting system. We receive more than 80,000 requests for help a year and help over 50,000 animals. When a member of the public contacts us about a sick, injured, or orphaned animal, our Emergency Response Operators provide advice to help the caller manage the situation appropriately, and when necessary, arrange for a trained volunteer to attend. They also liaise with other organisations to ensure the best possible outcome for the animal.

The rescue service relies on an extensive state-wide network of rescue and transport volunteers, veterinarians who provide pro-bono services for wildlife, and the licenced carers and shelters who accept animals into their care for rehabilitation and release.

In addition to the rescue service, through our education programs and activities we help wildlife by providing people with the knowledge and skills they need for peaceful and positive co-existence with wildlife, and by facilitating positive community attitudes toward wildlife.

We advocate for wildlife whenever their welfare is under threat or compromised. We support efforts by government, community groups and individuals to ameliorate threats to wildlife, particularly those that are caused by humans.

Our Submission

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure.

As a wildlife rescue organisation, we see the impact of human activities on wildlife every day. We see the impacts of government policy on wildlife and on the lives of people who appreciate and care for wildlife.

Our submission will focus on the implications for wildlife of increasing human populations and their domestic animals in bushland reserves and parklands.

The welfare and life and death interests of native animals must be considered alongside access by a growing population for recreational purposes. We make recommendations that will safeguard wildlife while not impinging unnecessarily on people's access to natural and created green spaces in the environment.

Dog attacks on wildlife

After car strike, attack by domestic dogs is the most common cause of wildlife being admitted to veterinary hospitals and clinics. In a Queensland-based study¹ 9.2% of admissions were due to dog attack, with a mortality rate of 72.7%. Similar results were found in Tasmania² where urban and suburban bushland reserves were identified as the locations where wildlife is most risk from dog attack.

The Wildlife Victoria Emergency Rescue Service receives many calls from the public about attacks on wildlife by dogs. Up to 26th September this year, we have received 377 calls. In 2019 we received 457 and in 2018 525 calls relating to dog attacks on wildlife. Of course, most attacks will not be reported either because they have not been witnessed, or the animal was already dead, or the dog owner chose not to seek help for the injured animal. The true scale of attacks by domestic dogs on wildlife is unknown. The traumatic impact on children and adults who witness dog attacks on wildlife should not be underestimated.

The most common animals reported attacked by dogs are:

- Ringtail Possums
- Brushtail Possums
- Echidnas
- Wombats
- Koalas
- Flying foxes
- Wallabies
- Kangaroos
- Black swans and other birds
- Bluetongue lizards and other reptiles.

An unprecedented boom in dog adoptions has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. With a growing population, and growing popularity of dogs as pets, we anticipate the impact of domestic dogs on wildlife will become even worse unless measures are taken to reduce the risk to wildlife of attack by domestic dogs.

¹ Taylor-Brown, A., Booth, R., Gillett, A., Mealy, E., Ogbourne, S.M., Polkinghorne, A., et al. (2019). The impact of human activities on Australian wildlife. PLoS ONE 14(1): e0206958.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0206958>

² Australasian Science, July/August 2019 <http://www.australasianscience.com.au/news/january-2012/domestic-dogs-are-bigger-problem-cats-our-native-wildlife.html>

Recommendations:

1. Install effective Signage

Good signage has these features:

- Says what is required (e.g. dogs must be on a lead, or dogs not permitted past this point)
- Explains why (People generally do not understand the impact of dogs on wildlife and are more likely to comply if they understand the reason for the rules)
- The nearest "off-lead" area is identified
- Reinforces the rule that unless there is a sign indicating an "off-lead" area, dogs must always be on-lead

Signs should be prominently located in all bushland reserves, public gardens, along rivers and wetlands.

2. Provide more fenced dog-exercise areas

Fenced dog-exercise areas are common in many countries, but Australia has been slow to adopt these. Fenced areas ensure that off-lead dogs are not a threat to wildlife and also that dog is in a safe environment.

3. Create no-dog zones in sensitive wildlife areas

Particularly sensitive areas should be **no-dog** zones, with good interpretive signage, fences and spring-back gates so that people who enter must make an explicit decision to break the rules.

No-dog zones should be created in, near or around:

- Wetlands (water birds are very vulnerable to dog attack)
- Penguin colonies
- Beaches during times when ground-nesting birds are breeding
- Flying fox colonies

4. Establish dogs on-lead as the norm

Too often people erroneously think they can have their dog off-lead unless there is a sign saying "on-lead". This needs to be reversed – people should have their dog on-lead unless there is a sign saying "off-lead" permitted. Such a cultural change will take a concerted public education campaign to achieve.

5. Increase Monitoring and Compliance

At present there is little effort made in monitoring and compliance with dog rules and by-laws and this may be contributing to widespread non-compliance with signage relating to dogs on-lead or no-dog areas. Monitoring and compliance activities needs to have sufficient visibility to drive behaviour toward compliance.

Trail bikes, mountain bikes and off-road vehicles.

Trail bike and mountain bike riders who create their own tracks and build unofficial jumps within bushland reserves impact heavily on wildlife but also on other park users. These activities destroy habitat and create erosion that damages bushland and waterways. Fast-moving bikes also pose a threat to walkers.

Trail bikes and all-terrain vehicles damage habitat by compacting soils, destroying vegetation and disturbing wildlife.

Recommendations

1. Provide official mountain bike trails

Providing official trails for mountain bikers will minimise adverse impacts on wildlife habitat of unofficial tracks and trails. Official trails should be designed to minimise impacts on wildlife and their habitat.

2. Education

Engaging user groups is vital to reducing illegal and anti-social behaviours in bushland reserves and parks. Peer education and opportunities to engage in habitat restoration may be useful to better connect young men with the natural world in a more constructive way than simply “using” nature for their personal enjoyment. Many users do not appreciate the adverse impacts of their activities on wildlife and their habitat.

3. Increase Detection and Deterrence

Regular and visible patrols, remote monitoring by drone, installation of CCTV, signage that encourages reporting of illegal and anti-social behaviours, and enforcement action where this is an available option.

Fishing and Hunting

Hunting (by firearm or bow-hunting) poses risks to other bush reserve users and can result in injury and death of native wildlife. Other users (bushwalkers and birdwatchers) may avoid areas where hunting activity occurs for personal safety fears and to avoid the trauma of seeing wildlife killed.

A good example is the recent report on the Tower-Hill reserve where hunting is reported to be permitted to continue, despite strong opposition from the community, and resulting in this remaining a less than desirable destination for other users who are in the majority.

It is a regular occurrence for the Wildlife Victoria Emergency Rescue Service to receive reports of kangaroos with an arrow in them.

Fishing can be damaging to the environment through waterbirds taking baited hooks, but most often from discarded hooks and lines causing entanglement and death of wildlife.

Entanglement in fishing hooks and lines are a frequent cause of injured wildlife reported to the Wildlife Victoria Emergency Rescue Service. There were 298 reports in 2018, 255 in 2019, and 195 to date in 2020. Over 60 species were reported, the top 6 most reported birds are:

- Swans
- Seagulls
- Pelicans
- Magpies
- Cormorants and darters
- Ducks

The mammals most often entangled are Flying-foxes (line and hooks in trees overhanging rivers), and seals.

Recommendations

1. Limit fishing zones

Fishing activities should be limited to specified zones. At present the norm is to fish anywhere unless signage indicates otherwise. This should be reversed to “fish only where signage says it is permitted”.

While campaigns such as the “Close the Loop” campaign have reduced fishing dangerous rubbish at jetties, lost hooks and lines typically occur where overhanging trees and submerged snags make the loss of hooks and lines into the environment a frequent occurrence and impossible for the angler to remove. Rivers and lakesides are the highest risk locations.

Fishing should never be permitted in and near penguin, seal and flying fox colonies.

Fishing zones should be shown on mobile apps (such as Vic Fishing and GoFishVic) and these apps should include education about the adverse impacts of lost hooks and lines on wildlife.

People who find the sight of marine creatures being caught and killed distressing can then more easily avoid these locations.

2. Eliminate hunting of native species

The activity of hunting should be limited to non-native species, and hunting should not be permitted in areas where this activity would discourage or disadvantage other users.

An example of this is Tower Hill Reserve, where the broader community wants hunting excluded so that the area is a safe and welcoming destination for all members of the community.

3. Replace duck-shooting season with an annual Birding Festival

The annual duck-hunting season should be ceased and replaced with an annual bird-watching festival to bring large numbers of people to regional Victoria. Birdwatching, or Birding, is a popular activity that has enormous potential to inject significant spending into regional areas, but has not been effectively promoted in Australia to date. Overseas examples demonstrate the great economic potential of this benign recreational activity.³ The map of birding festivals across the world shows not a single event in Australia.⁴

³ [The Biggest Week in American Birding](#)

⁴ [Birding Festivals and Events](#)

APPENDIX

Images of wildlife attacked by dogs (we have chosen to NOT show the most gruesome photos, that include limbs chewed off)



Echidna



Brushtail possum



Koala



Ringtail possum



Brushtail possum



Bluetongue Lizard