LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY

(Reference: Inquiry into Petition 17-23: Indian (Common) Myna Control)

Members:

DR M PATERSON (Chair)
MS J CLAY (Deputy Chair)
MR E COCKS

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 23 APRIL 2024

Secretary to the committee:
Mr J Bunce (Ph: 620 50199)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

WITNESSES

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 11.19 am.

BUCHLER, MR DAN, Administrator, Canberra Indian Myna Action Group Facebook page
HANDKE, MR WILLIAM, President, Canberra Indian Myna Action Group
BARGE, MR RAYMOND, Vice-President, Canberra Indian Myna Action Group

THE CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity's inquiry into petition 17-23: Indian (Common) Myna Control. The committee will today hear from the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group, the Animal Defenders Office, Animal Liberation ACT, and the ACT government.

The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal People, and the committee wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution that they make to the life of this city and this region. We would also like to welcome and acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending or online today.

The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. They are also being web-streamed live. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if you could say, "I will take that as a question on notice." That helps the committee to confirm questions.

We welcome our first witnesses today, from the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded under parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the pink privilege statement on the table. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. It would be great if each of you could acknowledge the witness statement and that you accept the implications of that statement.

Mr Buchler: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Mr Handke: I acknowledge and accept the privilege statement.

Mr Barge: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. We will go questions. To start, we have had the declaration of the bird as a pest species, but following that there has been some commentary that perhaps myna birds are not such a pest. I put to the action group: what are your views of the myna bird being a pest? How serious a pest may it or may it not be?

Mr Buchler: I might answer that and Ray and Dan might follow if I miss anything. Our position is based on international science, but most importantly, in terms of the ACT, the science of Chris Tidemann, Stuart Pell and, more recently, Kate Grarock. That indicates that mynas have had a deleterious effect on quite a range of small birds and some medium sized birds in the ACT. That is drawn from the data that the Canberra Ornithologists Group have collected over a substantial period of time. It was the very first comprehensive assessment of the impact of mynas on biodiversity in the ACT and

pretty well in Australia. It confirms the information that had been coming out in research across the world. Some of those documents and the basis of the findings are in our submission but also in the submission of the Invasive Species Council. The impact on bird species is quite profound.

What we do not know is the impact on other species, like small animals, insects, reptiles, arboreal mammals, bats and stuff like that. There has been no research on that in the ACT. We know that some species, like the Cooraboorama raspy cricket, the Perunga flightless grasshopper, the golden sun moth and the grassland earless dragon, triggered the cull of kangaroos. We know from observation that mynas, being omnivorous, are voracious feeders of insects, particularly grasshoppers and things like that, so small animals are also at risk, but we do not know the extent of that.

As well as the environmental impact, they are a pest for so many Canberra residents in terms of the loss of social amenity. There is the raucous noise at roosts, the fouling of backyards and the displacement of small birds from their gardens. Those are the concerns that so many Canberrans approach us about in terms of being involved in a community program. It is a pest animal from our perspective, from the science and also from the lived experience of Canberrans. Ray and Dan might follow on.

Mr Handke: This is not scientific at all, but I can tell you that I was in Melbourne last week and I did not see anything but mynas and pigeons. The evidence is that mynas drive out native birds, and it is very clear in Melbourne and numerous other towns across the eastern seaboard that that is the case. If I went to Sydney, I would have experienced the same thing. Mynas and native birds just do not mix.

Mr Buchler: It is also the case, from the experience of our Facebook group and elsewhere, that, once the mynas are removed, the native birds come back. This is not only experienced in Australia but also around the world. They have this impact. The loss of urban amenity is important, but science also shows that birds and bird songs improve mental health. So it is more than just an environmental issue; it is also a mental health issue.

THE CHAIR: The myna was declared a pest species. How important is it from your perspective that we follow that up with pest control?

Mr Handke: At the time, we thought the declaration was a most profound decision by the minister. We had been agitating for that for some time, and we saw an opportunity here early on, as Canberra was essentially an island of infestation. There was an opportunity to drastically reduce myna numbers with an integrated control program, with the government, the community and business working in partnership to reduce myna numbers. When the minister made that declaration, we thought that, again, the ACT would be leading Australia in management of the environment. Our hopes were dashed because, subsequent to that, there was no specific action by the government to approach this from a landscape perspective.

At the moment, the community group is doing all the control activity, but we need government to partner in this. Only the government is capable of leading and coordinating a landscape-scale effort to control what we see as a serious pest. It is only the government that can undertake control measures on public land and at public

institutions and provide information and communication to businesses and to government organisations, like schools, hospitals and things like that, on how they can manage, control and reduce the incidence of mynas in their areas. To us, government has a significant and pivotal role in this.

One of the other things that we had hoped was that the government, having led the way on this, would then engage with the local councils around the ACT—the Palerang council, the Yass council et cetera—and actually take a whole regional approach to dealing with this pest. When we first started, as I said, Canberra was an infestation island. Mynas were not in Yass and they were not in Goulburn, but now they are there. We had an early opportunity. When Dr Dick Schodde, who is the head of the bird collection at the CSIRO, saw our initial impact on myna numbers, he thought—back in 2006, 2007 and 2008—that there was a real opportunity to eradicate mynas from Canberra, but it did require government to work in partnership with the community.

MS CLAY: I really appreciate the work that you are doing and that you have come forward to talk to us today. We have a lot of submissions on this, and, to summarise, most of the community submissions agree that mynas are a major problem and are increasing in number, but, when I looked at the studies that people were citing, including the ones that you have discussed today, I found that is not what the studies were clearly saying. The Grarock one is interesting, but the one that leapt out at me most was the COG study, the Canberra Ornithologists Group study. That is cited in the government's submission, but I read that separately because it was on our page. It was a 1998 to 2019 study. I think we are talking about the same study. It actually said that, of the seven non-native species, four showed a significant decrease in numbers, including the common myna. Is that right? We hope that we will have a chat to COG later. Their long-term study seems to say that the number of mynas is decreasing, whereas the community submissions seem to say that they are increasing.

Mr Handke: In our submission, we go to that very point. There is the *Long-term trends in act woodland birds* study over a period of time, and one of the locations surveyed was Mulligans Flat. I am conscious of how this operates to a certain extent. There were 15 locations identified in that report. There were 142 sites and a lot of those were in Mulligans Flat. A number of them, as in Mulligans, are adjacent to urban areas—that is, Harrison, Bonner, Forde and now Throsby, where we are trapping. The report itself does not detail exactly where those numbers come from, so we cannot dissect it and work out whether the increases and the subsequent decreases related to a location adjacent to urban areas where they might have been trapping.

But you do notice that, in that survey period—if you follow the graphs of that survey period—there were a couple of upticks and a couple of big downticks. The big downticks coincide with the time that CIMAG has been operating. I have no idea whether there is a direct causal relationship or not, because we just do not have that dissection of information, but it is wrong to say—and the document itself does not actually say this—that the number of mynas had significantly reduced. It actually has different words about that.

MS CLAY: I have a direct quote. It says:

> No non-native species were found to have increasing trends. Of the 7 non-native

> species, 4 showed significant decreases: House Sparrow, Common Myna, European Goldfinch and Common Starling. The remaining 3 are marginal woodland species.

I think that is a direct quote in this context, but I am very happy to be corrected if I have misinterpreted. Thank you for the additional information. A huge number of community members are reporting more myna birds. That is clearly what we are seeing. I live in Canberra, so I know that just from being a human being around here. I do not know if you had a chance to read the government's submission. I wonder if that is why they have come back with setting out their next steps. I will get the words right because it matters. They have funding for an invasive species impact assessment to determine which species are most threat in the ACT. We will be seeing the minister later today. Do you think that is a useful approach, and, if so, what would CIMAG want to see go into the front end of a study like that to make sure that what came out at the back end is useful?

Mr Barge: Before you do that, could I just note that one of the submissions, which you would have seen, is from Philip Veerman. He was the compiler of the original Garden Bird Survey. He noted:

> … the myna reduction programme has slowed the increase and likely substantially reduced numbers of mynas from what would otherwise have happened.

He went on to say that the fact that some hollow-nesting native birds "are still doing adequately" may not have been the case without the myna reduction program. Some of the so-called evidence that they are not a threat now does not take into account the fact that there has been a trapping program going on for 16 years, reducing the numbers and keeping them in check.

MS CLAY: There is mixed evidence in the submissions. There might be one citing an RSPCA statement, but we have other submissions stating that the trapping activities lead to a temporary dip and then a rapid replacement. I actually do not know enough about the field; I am simply looking at the submissions that have come in. What I am saying is that, based on the submissions to this inquiry, we have had reports that the number of myna birds is increasing, reports that they are decreasing, reports that trapping is the reason that they are decreasing, and reports that trapping at the level that is being conducted leads to temporary localised population decreases and then rapid replacement numbers.

These are the things that I have read in the submissions. I am trying to get my head around it. I will get back to the original question. The government have said that their next step is to do an invasive species threat study. Is that useful and, if it is useful, what would need to go into a study like that to make sure that it actually is useful?

Mr Buchler: Could I make a comment on that?

MS CLAY: Yes.

Mr Buchler: It seems to me that there is enough evidence around the place to suggest myna birds are invasive. We know they are prolific breeders. We also should acknowledge that any environmental programs should be based on a precautionary

principle. If we do not act now, if we wait for study after study after study to take place, the number of these birds will continue to increase, because we know they are prolific breeders. If we look at the numbers, one breeding pair can reproduce three times a year and have up to eight chicks per time, so they can outcompete the native birds. This is a very dangerous situation.

To sit around, wait, do another study and another study, and be indecisive in taking action is only going to make the problem worse and is only going to make it more expensive. I cannot see the logic in doing studies when we know we have a community based program in the ACT to do something. We cannot nip this thing in the bud. It is too late for that. But, if we do not do something now, it is going to get harder and harder and more expensive. We have this program, we have people on the ground to do something, we have a plan. To say—as the directorate or the minister has—that we should wait until we have a strategic plan on invasive species is probably misplaced because each invasive species is different and needs to be handled differently. We cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach. We have a size which fits myna birds. I think we should take what we have and try to do something now. To delay is only going to make matters worse, because we know these birds will continue to increase in number and the problem is going to get worse. I think we should adopt a precautionary principle here.

Mr Handke: If the government will undertake such a study on the impact of invasive species, I welcome that. Like Dan said, that should not preclude government being involved in control activity right now. But there are a lot of unknowns. We do not know, as I said, the impact of mynas on things like rare and endangered insects; we do not know the impact on arboreal mammals, bats, skinks or small reptiles. A focus on the impact of those animals would be important as well. We do know the impact on people in terms of the loss of social amenity. Even getting some yardstick on that would be very important as well. All these things are worth exploring, but we certainly would not hold up a landscape approach until an 18-month or two-year study comes out and says: "Oops! We should have done something."

I think we should adopt what Professor David Lindenmayer says: "Regard as guilty until proven innocent, not benign until proven to be a danger." That is the yardstick by which we should approach any invasive animal, and that is the yardstick by which the federal government, through AQIS, approaches a whole range of potential risks to our biodiversity. We should be doing the same here: have a proactive approach while we do further studies.

Mr Barge: Could I also add that, as far as I know, the Indian myna is the only pest on that long, long list—I do not know how this proposed survey will ever get down to that level of detail—that is capable of being managed at a community level by the community. For a relatively small investment, the government can achieve a lot by mobilising the community. It is not going to do that with feral pigs; it is not going to do it with rabbits; it is not going to do it with myriad other feral grasses that we have growing throughout Canberra. That is not going to happen, but with mynas it is possible. There is a lot of goodwill already existing in the community to do that. If you just sit around and wait, that community interest will dissipate.

Mr Handke: The final point on that is that we regard it as now being at a tipping point,

so, if the ACT government does not participate in a controlled program when the opportunity presents itself, what we will see, as we are now seeing with other invasive weeds and pest animals, is that either it takes a lot of funds to control it or it is way too late and we just have to accept that this is now the norm. The loss of biodiversity in the ACT by taking that approach across all invasive species is quite considerable.

We had hoped that the declaration, and particularly the response to the petition, would have given the government the opportunity to provide a lot more money to the environment directorate. They desperately need it. They are clearly underfunded and understaffed to undertake the important work that they have been charged to do. We had hoped that the government had seen this opportunity to provide more funds to the Conservator and his team to undertake this work.

MS CLAY: I could not agree more.

MR COCKS: Could I very quickly ask a supplementary question on that. It sounds like you are advocating that, instead of taking a risk based approach that focuses on treating the worst possible problems, there is value in an early-intervention approach that stops the problems becoming so bad that it costs a lot of money to fix them.

Mr Handke: Yes.

MR COCKS: In terms of prevalence, the ACT government submission has a strong focus on the issue of common mynas being concentrated around urban and suburban areas. It seems to me that, as with other invasive species, we have seen problems concentrated in urban and suburban areas spreading beyond those areas. Is that something that you can see happening with mynas?

Mr Handke: Yes. It is certainly the case. As I mentioned earlier, when we first started this program, mynas were not in Yass, they were not in Goulburn, they were not in Dubbo, they were not in Tamworth et cetera. In the last 15 years, we have seen the march of the mynas across western New South Wales. They are now in Mildura. They had not been there before; they had concentrated on Melbourne. It is about the pressure of population and the need for food sources that moves invasive animals out of urban areas and into peri-urban areas and woodlands.

This bird is known around the world as an invasive species, not just in urban areas but throughout woodlands around the world, and that has been the experience here. We have now seen them in Namadgi and we have seen them in Tidbinbilla. These birds do not necessarily live just around houses and urban areas. They are a pioneer bird that will fly a long way.

One of the research projects from New Zealand indicates that a ship 50 kilometres out to sea was passing mynas. They fly a long way to get from one spot to another, and the same is happening here in our woodlands and in our peri-urban areas. The fact they are now not threatening the superb parrot in Goorooyarroo is a good thing, but it may not last forever, and the experience is that it will not.

MR COCKS: From what you have written, there does seem to be a definite impact in those urban and suburban areas. The fact that there is a concentration in urban areas

does not mean it is not having an impact. Would that be a fair—

Mr Handke: ACT biodiversity does not just exist in the nature reserves; it exists in urban areas—in hollows in trees, along the street, in people's backyards. That is habitat for a whole range of animals, sugar gliders included. We should not just see biodiversity as a nature reserve thing, nor should we see the threat only from the perspective of endangered species. These birds can be deleterious to a whole range of small birds, as found by Dr Grarock and as found overseas.

Urban areas are important habitat. While there is a concentration in the urban areas that is being reduced by community members trapping, it is not sufficient; we need to do more. The government need to back this with their own activities and by supporting the community and supporting business, and actively controlling mynas around schools.

One of the things that concerns me is that mynas, because they are commensal birds, live in close association with people. They feed around their sites, they roost around schools, they are under shelter sheds et cetera. The risk to school kids and human health is undocumented and unknown, but we know that mynas can have high infestations of bird mites. We have heard the experiences of people who have suffered from that as well. So the commensal nature of mynas means that there is a potential risk to human health which is undocumented and unknown. That should be one of the aspects that a research project on invasive animals should be looking at.

Mr Buchler: I could make a point about the government submission. They say—as part of the justification for the current status quo, which is basically to do nothing—that the government have decades of experience in managing invasive species. With respect, they have not had experience in managing myna birds. That is why we are here. CIMAG has had almost two decades of managing myna birds. The CIMAG website and the CIMAG Facebook group are go-to places for people who want to learn about myna birds, both domestically and internationally. We have a reservoir of expertise within the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group. We are not going to be here forever. The myna birds may be, but we will not be. Once this pool goes—

Mr Handke: I am sorry to hear that, Dan!

Mr Buchler: We are all in our 70s and 80s and it is only a matter of time. We need to get something stable, something steady. We need to draw on this expertise while it is available, otherwise this opportunity will be lost.

MR COCKS: Thank you.

Mr Handke: Madam Chair, there is one issue that perhaps Ray would like to raise.

Mr Barge: I am conscious of the time, so I will be brief.

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Mr Barge: I know you are seeing the Animal Defenders Office and also the government afterwards. Both are going to come down against euthanasia by using carbon monoxide. They made that very clear. This does not appear to be based on anything apart from a

good feeling or something like that, or so-called animal rights. Our approach of using a car exhaust was endorsed by the RSCPA at the start of CIMAG. They endorsed the animal welfare protocol which all members were required to sign. That requires the humane treatment of birds. It was based on scientific studies that were conducted at the ANU, looking at various methods. It showed that using a car exhaust was fast and relatively pain-free for the birds. There is no other approach that meets those requirements. The other one that they recommended is carbon dioxide, which basically suffocates birds. They struggle. Basically, it is like drowning.

I do not know where the RSCPA and the government are really coming from, but it is not based on science. We feel that outlawing the use of carbon monoxide in Canberra would be detrimental to the program. In fact, it would probably end the program, and it seems to be totally unjustified.

MS CLAY: I noticed your animal protocol. You said it was RSPCA endorsed. I wonder if you should update that, given that the RSPCA does not endorse it anymore. I will leave that with you. I read the study. It had the two methods: carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide. Your protocol recommends both, and the studies are saying that only carbon monoxide is humane. Do you think your protocol needs a bit of updating?

Mr Barge: Sorry?

MS CLAY: Your protocol recommends two methods of humane killing: carbon monoxide—a car exhaust—and carbon--

Mr Barge: No.

MS CLAY: I had a little look this morning and it leapt out at me. It said it is RSCPA endorsed and it has the two methods. That did not sound like what I understood to be CIMAG's position. I will leave it with you. Do not even respond. You might look at it and send us a written response. Maybe go and check because it did not look like it matched current—

MR COCKS: It is something that, I would assume, you could come back on, on notice.

MS CLAY: Yes. Double-check that and then maybe come back to us if you think that needs to be—

THE CHAIR: But carbon monoxide is your recommended method, based on the evidence?

MS CLAY: That is certainly what I have heard. Yes.

Mr Handke: It is recommended by the research study at the ANU. We are conscious that, with the uptake of EVs and diesel vehicles, which are not suitable for euthanising with carbon dioxide, there is an opportunity for the government to establish disposal depots around Canberra, as is done in Wollongong and Bayside, in Victoria, where local people who are unwilling or unable to euthanise them at home can go. In some of those places, we think it should not be a requirement. People will find that the requirement to do that—to take birds in their car to a disposal section—will be totally inconvenient for

them and will stop them from being involved in the program.

THE CHAIR: I am sorry, but we will have to wrap up this session.

Mr Handke: Can I table these documents, please, Madam Chair?

THE CHAIR: Yes, please. That would be great.

Mr Handke: It is the draft management plan that CIMAG had pulled together and provided to the government following the declaration, but nothing came of that. We had also prepared an opening statement, but I think the conversation has covered those points. I would not mind tabling that as well, if I could.

THE CHAIR: Yes; that would be great. Thank you all for your attendance at the hearing today.

Mr Handke: Thank you, committee. I thank you again for the opportunity that you gave us and for this whole initiative. We see this as an important issue. It goes to the heart of making Canberra a sustainable and liveable city. Thank you.

Short suspension.

HERMES, MR NEIL, President, Canberra Birds

THE CHAIR: We open this session with Mr Neil Hermes, President of Canberra Birds. We welcome you today. Could you please acknowledge the privilege statement.

Mr Hermes: I acknowledge the privilege statement. I am here in my capacity as President of Canberra Birds, which the Canberra Ornithologists Group was recently renamed as, but I also represent myself, in a private capacity, having previously been a parks manager and having extensive experience in animal management programs, including as an adviser to the commonwealth on feral animal control programs.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We will begin. The government's submission clearly states:

> … the government's position that Common mynas whilst being a pest have a negligible impact on the environment, agriculture, or threatened species …

Could I have your comment on that, please?

Mr Hermes: The Canberra Ornithologists Group has had the position over the past couple of decades that we support the really powerful work that CIMAG has been doing in terms of controlling an invasive species, the common myna, in the ACT. We have supported that. And we acknowledge the huge amount of voluntary work that has been done by citizen scientists, in effect, to remove mynas, as well as the impact that has had on the numbers of birds observed in surveys over the past couple of decades, with a reduction in the number of birds to a very low level in many places.

However, the Canberra Ornithologists Group's position has always been that we should do these programs, acknowledging the efforts that people are making to reduce the number of mynas. For public programs, the emphasis should be on programs that have a scientifically based evidence approach to the work and are also sustainable in the long term. It is fair to say that the Canberra Ornithologists Group's position has been to be concerned that the current program may not have that at its heart.

I should say that I was in Canberra when the first mynas were released in 1968, and I wish we had killed those two birds at the time, but we did not, and we have seen this huge expansion of the birds. However, despite their abundance, the evidence that they cause significant impact on endangered bird species—and I can only speak about other bird species—is relatively thin. Whilst the reduction in the number of mynas is to be applauded, the scientific evidence is not there that they have had a massive impact on other birds, particularly endangered birds. So our position is that we acknowledge the hard work. We recognise that the parks service does not have as much money as it should have. In an ideal world where we would have lots of money, we might continue to do programs where we did not have all the evidence. However, when priorities have to be set, we would like to see all feral animal projects based on clear evidence and clear sustainability.

MS CLAY: Thank you for coming in. I am really glad we could talk to you. I tested the prevalence data and the harm data with our last witnesses. This committee has seen a lot of community reports that the number of myna birds is increasing, but then, from other submissions, we got pretty mixed views. I will talk to you about the one that COG

participated in. That is the best one to put to you and it was the starkest one to me. It was the Canberra Ornithologists' report, *Long-term trends in ACT woodlands birds*, from a survey that was conducted over a long period of time. It finished in 2019, I think—1998 to 2019. That study indicated that the number of common mynas was decreasing. I put that to CIMAG because we have had all these conflicting things. CIMAG's view of that was that, if they were decreasing in number, that was directly as a result of CIMAG's trapping efforts, but we did not really get too many clear answers. What is your view on it? Are the numbers increasing or decreasing or is it not possible to say?

Mr Hermes: The study that you refer to is ongoing and it is one of the most remarkable long-term citizen science projects in the city and around the country, along with a couple of other studies that the Bird Club has been doing since the 1960s. That particular study you refer to is the woodland study, which is the study of the birds in the peri-urban areas that we have done for the last couple of decades. That has shown that the number of noisy miners has declined in those peri-urban areas. That is what that study shows and that is clear. Whether there has been a contribution because of the number of birds being removed in the urban areas is up to some sort of interpretation. However, the Canberra Ornithologists Group's position is that we are not concerned, at this point, in the expansion of Indian mynas into rural areas and national parks.

However, I would just make one point about it, and that is that we never know with exotic species. We are never quite sure whether they might suddenly work out a way of expanding. Mynas were introduced into Australia back in the late 1800s. They did nothing. They sat around the Sydney Cricket Ground for decades, and then suddenly they exploded. They got the genetics right. That is what invasive species tend to do. It could be that they suddenly do work out how to invade our national parks, but at this point there is no evidence to show that they have and, in the context of limited resources and potentially other high priorities, that is how the Canberra Ornithologists Group got to its position on Indian mynas at this point.

MS CLAY: The government say in their submission that their current position is that they have 2023-24 budget funding for an invasive species impact assessment to determine which species are most threat to the ACT. Does that sound like a sensible approach? If so, what do you think needs to go into that study to make sure that it is really useful?

Mr Hermes: We believe it is the appropriate approach. Mynas have been in the city for decades. We do not believe that we are at a moment in time when a critical decision has to be made quickly. We are aware of a whole range of invasive species programs that are done. Recently in Tidbinbilla they had a massive program on deer and pig control, and yet a week ago I saw deer walking along the main road of Tidbinbilla. We are aware of parks services' issues in terms of getting the priorities right and having the resources to do that work, so we would encourage that study to be done. One of the things that we would like to see come out of that study would be to identify where you get the most impact for the worst species in the shortest time. The most impact in the shortest time is to actually eradicate an animal, if that is possible. The ACT parks service eradicated rabbits from Bowen Island when it was part of the ACT, at Jervis Bay, back in the eighties. They have eradicated foxes from Mulligans Flat.

If you can remove a feral animal and it costs you a lot of money, that could actually be your highest priority. My personal argument would be that we could remove all the peacocks from Narrabundah tomorrow. That would be an eradication program, and they would be priorities for me, and peacocks could suddenly become a problem in Callum Brae and other places. So it would be a question of identifying the specific threats of the invasive species that we had and then matching that up against the resources needed to do it, and you might well find that a small amount of money on a certain species is actually better spent than a large amount of money on just, essentially, a maintenance program.

It is complicated, especially when you have resource limitations, but the priority for us would be to identify within that study not just which are the worst and prioritise them but also work out where, over a five- or 10-year period, you would get the most bang for your buck in terms of an actual reduction in threat to the ACT, acknowledging that we are just an island in the middle of New South Wales.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

MR COCKS: I am very interested in the impacts within the urban and suburban areas as well as parks, and some of those green spaces within the urban footprint as well—places like Red Hill, where you have gang-gangs and things like that. Is there any evidence around what the impact of the Indian myna is in those types of spaces around the ACT?

Mr Hermes: On those species, no, and in Red Hill probably also no. The issue is that we do not have the studies to show that. For gang-gangs, superb parrots and other hole-nesting species, we do not have the studies. They tend to be very specific in terms of hollows. It turns out that superb parrots are desperately finicky about the hollows they will use, and they will not necessarily be ones that mynas use. And we do not have the studies to show that it does not matter. So we might be removing mynas but not for any significant result in terms of increasing the number of gang-gangs. It might be doing something else for gang-gangs that is much more important. I would say that there is some evidence to show that Indian mynas have replaced the hollows that they used in the peri-urban areas with the hollows that starlings were previously using, so we just have one exotic species replaced by another in many places. We have not got the studies that show that the myna itself, on its own, has had an impact on species that we are particularly concerned about.

MR COCKS: So is it a question of just a lack of evidence and a lack of research currently? Certainly, the community perception is that, when the mynas arrive, suddenly there is a drop in the number of other bird species you see in your backyard.

Mr Hermes: I will go back to the evidence. The evidence we have is that there is no such link. People will make those observations, but it could well be that the number of red wattlebirds has increased in their garden or the number of noisy miners, which are a native honeyeater, has increased in their garden and that has contributed to it. It is true that some small birds have disappeared in gardens. It could be to do with the number of cats in your yard. So, as to the impression that people have about a garden full of Indian mynas being the cause of the demise of, say, blue wrens or whatever, there is no evidence to show that linkage.

MR COCKS: You touched on the noisy miner issue. Are they similar species? Is it easy for someone like me to actually tell the difference?

Mr Hermes: No; they are not similar in any sense, except that their names are confusing. Just for the record, the Indian myna is an exotic bird introduced from Asia. It was introduced because it is a talking bird and it is an aviary bird. The noisy miner, which is a honeyeater and is an Australian bird, gets its name because it mines the flowers. That is how it got its name. It is a nectar eater. Having said that, the noisy miner, the native bird, along with the red wattlebird, is quite aggressive in gardens, and, as gardens develop and become more attractive for birds, it can often increase the number of those birds, which will then keep small birds out. We would not want to just jump to the conclusion that, because there was a certain number of Indian mynas and fewer others in a yard, they were the cause. The main issue with Indian mynas is that they nest in hollows, and the question is: are they displacing native hollow-nesting birds? We do not have the evidence.

THE CHAIR: I have a supplementary. In the 2012 paper by Kate Grarock, *Is It Benign or Is It a Pariah? Empirical Evidence for the Impact of the Common Myna* (Acridotheres tristis) *on Australian Birds* is the heading "Impacts on Small Bird Species", regarding mapping at a population level. It says:

> … after Common Myna establishment, growth in abundance of these bird species declined significantly …

The paper also says:

> Our analysis suggests that the Common Myna had a negative impact on the long-term abundance of some cavity-nesting bird species and some small bird species. These species include … Cockatoo, … Rosella, … Kookaburra, … Fairy-wren … Willie Wagtail—

and a few others. It goes on to say:

> To the best of our knowledge, this finding for the Common Myna has never previously been demonstrated at the population level.

This seems very robust and Canberra orientated research which is saying that what they have mapped at a population level is a decline in native bird species when the myna comes into play.

Mr Hermes: We would also have data which shows a similar pattern. The question is: are mynas causing it? That is the question that you would ask. Cavity-nesting is probably the main issue, and we have not got the studies to show that Indian mynas displace gang-gangs or superb parrots from nests or make them any less abundant in areas. Circumstantial evidence would show the superb parrots are doing quite well in Gungahlin, in an area where mynas are relatively common. From what I have been saying today, there is nothing from my point of view to suggest that we should necessarily lessen the efforts that people are making, because it does reduce the number of birds and they are an invasive exotic species.

The question, as I understand it, is: what should the government be doing about it? We

are talking about government resources. Whether you want to volunteer and do something as opposed to whether taxpayer money is being used for a project is different. We think that should sit at a higher bar. We should be using any rare money that we have for exotic animal control on the ones that are most likely to give us the most results. At this point, there are lots of community assessments about mynas and a lot of effort on mynas, but we do not have the data. You cannot see the value-for-money proposition in it if you have alternatives, and a study would show us the alternatives that we could have for that money.

MS CLAY: Neil, it sounds like you landed at the end saying that a study to look at the threats of all invasive species to the ACT is probably the most rigorous way to work out how to spend government funds.

Mr Hermes: Sure. I should say that it will be done. There will be gaps in knowledge in that study, and we are hoping assessments will be made in that study to look at things, but I really do believe that it needs to actually go the extra step and assess the priorities that are needed. We do not want a report that says that there are all sorts of problems. What we need is a report that says, "There are all sorts of problems and, on the balance of what we know today, the priority areas are the following," to give government, the park services and others the best guidance on where we might spend the money.

I have been involved in lots of programs in park services for decades, and money has just been wasted. It has been spent because it looks good. Public money is being used to do pointless activities. We should be spending money, and we should spend more. I actually think that the biggest problem for many of our native species, and in particular our threatened ones, are exotic animals. They are the big threat. Cats and foxes are high on the agenda there. We need to understand that we are going to make a report that is limited in its scientific rigor because we do not have the data, but it makes the best guess as to what the priority should be in terms of those funds—that is the important thing—and to not just keep spending money on things that happen to be rolling programs.

MS CLAY: Two of the other big threats that came up in submissions were climate change and urban encroachment into new areas. Are they—

Mr Hermes: My personal view—and I will say that a second time—my personal view is that there is not much point in worrying about climate change. We have lost things because cats and foxes have eaten them first. Sure, we can worry about what might happen in 10 years or 20 years, but we need to do things about the threats that we know happen today and tomorrow, and happen overnight. I applaud the government in its actions on starting the cat containment programs. We need to work on the things that we know are affecting our endangered species now so that we do have something to protect in the longer term.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: We will finish now. The committee would like to thank you very much for your time today.

Mr Hermes: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

Short suspension

WARD, MS TARA, Volunteer Managing Solicitor, Animal Defenders Office

THE CHAIR: We welcome Tara Ward, from the Animal Defenders Office. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Can you please confirm that you understand the implications of the statement and that you agree to comply?

Ms Ward: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS CLAY: Thank you for your submission. We have heard from a couple of other witnesses this morning and there have been a lot of submissions to this inquiry, which you would have noticed. We have had a lot of community submissions saying that there are too many myna birds and there needs to be community and government control through some kind of killing program. We heard from Canberra Ornithologists, who actually said that there was not an evidence base to show that Indian myna birds were causing problems for native birds. He was quite clear on that. You have a lot in your submission but, amongst the elements in your submission, you said that it is not consistent with the evidence that there needs to be killing, and then you have led us through some of the regulatory implications of that. Would you like to speak to that?

Ms Ward: Thank you; yes. I did have a statement prepared, but is that not the format?

THE CHAIR: We will just ask questions and you can table your statement with the secretariat.

Ms Ward: Thank you.

MS CLAY: But also please say anything that you think needs to be said when you are answering your questions.

Ms Ward: Of course, yes. Back to the question which was?

MS CLAY: We seem to have mixed views on whether there is an evidence base that says we need to be killing myna birds, whether that is by community groups or by a government killing program. The RSPCA has sort of pulled back from endorsing community killing. You have actually taken us through quite a lot of the regulatory and risk problems with myna bird killing. Can you take us to whichever bits you think are most important?

Ms Ward: There are a few concerns, especially starting from the question of evidence. I am sure you will have heard from and will hear from experts regarding whether there is sufficient objective and scientific evidence going to the issue of whether trapping and killing myna birds by community organisations actually produces environmental outcomes rather than just that outcome of potentially reducing numbers in specific locations.

The other question of course going to the evidence is whether there is the evidence about the humaneness, if I can use that term, of the killing by community organisations. There is one community organisation that I am aware of here in the ACT that uses one particular method, and that is gassing using the car exhaust fumes. I did see in a number of submissions that this was referred to and taken as a given that it was humane. I think the evidence is quite strong that it is not humane, and it is not endorsed by animal welfare organisations, including RSPCA Australia. If we look at our own regulatory framework here in the ACT, I think there would be considerable risk that even using that method could bring the person engaging in that activity under the Animal Welfare Act, whether it is the core animal cruelty offences, given the nature of those offences and the lack of sufficient justification for engaging in those activities.

The other concern that I would have is that the community killing of these sentient animals, who are just as deserving of the protection that our Animal Welfare Act affords other sentient animals, be it our dogs and cats at home or our possums and other sort of treasured wildlife, is that it is completely unmonitored. Part of the reason for that is that it falls outside of the other regulatory schemes. These could be the animal trapping framework and the animal research framework, which have in place some checks and balances. But, when you have members of the public in their own backyard trapping and killing sentient animals, it is completely unmonitored, there are no reporting requirements and there are no random audits or inspections by authorised officers. So it goes completely under the radar. As I said in the submission, even though we are not an enforcement agency, we nonetheless have people bringing their concerns to us. We have heard some quite alarming accounts of how these birds are killed in the backyard under the radar.

MS CLAY: In 2019, the ACT recognised the sentience of animals.

Ms Ward: That is correct, and the definition of "animal" certainly specifies birds and does not distinguish between types or species of birds. So, whether you are an introduced bird or a bird of an introduced species or a native species, the Animal Welfare Act affords its protection to you.

MS CLAY: I had a look at CIMAG. CIMAG is the only organisation that we are aware of that runs and promotes a community killing organisation. We think that is the only one we are dealing with. I had a look at their website this morning, and I checked with them about this. They recommend two methods on their website, which are carbon monoxide, which is the car exhaust, and carbon dioxide, which is a cylinder method. That is on their website, but I think they are only telling people to use the car exhaust method in their proactive communications. I was a bit concerned that the RSPCA once upon a time did consider this humane and has since stepped back from that. Does Animal Defenders consider a car exhaust killing program to be humane?

Ms Ward: We certainly do not, and that is based on the view expressed by RSPCA Australia, which has also expressed that view. I did look to see whether there were any sort of other regulatory schemes or jurisdictions elsewhere that dealt with this issue, and I came across a publication on the management of vertebrate invasive species from an animal welfare perspective by the EU, and it listed modified atmospheres, which I think amounts to the same thing—it is the gassing of animals—with particular reference

to myna birds. It rated the potential for suffering as mild to extreme, saying that the fact that the birds are potentially conscious for a relatively long time means that they can suffer considerably in this process. That is certainly a concern.

We would question the whole rationale for killing them at all, especially when you have untrained members of the public with no veterinary skills and no veterinary nursing skills engaging in this activity of killing sentient animals. We all know that the definition of a humane death is losing consciousness instantaneously and then death occurring before the animal regains consciousness. What monitoring of that is there in any of these methods being undertaken in people's backyards?

THE CHAIR: Do you think it would be more appropriate that, rather than having the community conduct controlled activities, the government does this?

Ms Ward: I think the need for it needs to be established first. We would question that. Where you are talking about the precautionary principle, I know it is usually applied in an environmental context but we also apply that in the context of dealing with sentient animals. When you are "inflicting irreparable harm", which is the phrase used for the environment, on animals—and we are, because we are talking about killing them; depriving them of their life, which matters to them—there needs to be a strong justification for that. In the absence of that, we would say focus on non-lethal methods of control. I would suggest that it at least be investigated whether this should come under the animal research framework, for example. Where are the academics studying this so that it then comes under that framework? I am on an animal ethics committee at a university, and I know how rigorously controlled, scrutinised and monitored that is.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any other issues with other pest species that the government currently controls?

Ms Ward: Several, for similar reasons. We are talking about dealing with sentient animals. In the case of, say, the eastern grey kangaroo, which I know is a very contentious issue, that is a native animal but we would apply the same sort of approach to that, in that there needs to be a strong justification for considering control methods at all and, where control methods are considered necessary, they should be non-lethal control methods.

They are sentient animals who exist in complex family structures. So, even if you take out certain individuals, you are nonetheless affecting those who remain behind. The consequences are severe for those individual animals. When we are talking about animal welfare, we are talking about the impact on individual animals. I read in some of the submissions on the myna birds that when we are talking about welfare, we have to talk about the impact on a whole species. That is not animal welfare. Animal welfare deals with the impact of human action on individual animals.

MR COCKS: I know that you do not want to talk about the kangaroo control program, but I would like to--

Ms Ward: I would actually love to, but I know this is about myna birds.

MR COCKS: I would like to understand how carbon monoxide compares with the

other approaches to euthanising animals which are employed. Clearly you have some significant concerns about carbon monoxide, but how does that compare with things like a 1080 poisoning program or the clubbing approach that you see with joeys? Could you just rank the hierarchy of those? Also, is there a gold standard best?

Ms Ward: For a lethal control method?

MR COCKS: Yes.

Ms Ward: The Animal Defenders Office does not endorse any lethal control methods, because it lacks that ethical foundation. It is depriving that sentient creature of the thing that matters the most to them, which is their life. Regardless of how that animal got there—whether we put the animal there, or the animal is native to this area but in apparent numbers that give concern—these ethical issues are such that we do not endorse lethal control.

When we are talking about lethal controls, some would be worse than others. The 1080 is horrific. I think everyone would agree with that. The clubbing of joeys is appalling; that we in the 21st century could accept such an appallingly cruel and brutal and violent method against the most vulnerable. You are talking about young, sentient, juvenile to infant animals. The carbon monoxide method for killing myna birds would still be at that sort of cruel end of the spectrum, because of that potential for the birds to regain consciousness and also be conscious before they lose consciousness and die. There has been evidence—and perhaps my colleague from Animal Liberation will speak more on this—about the gassing of pigs, for example, that shows what a horrific method that is for killing sentient animals.

MR COCKS: Understanding that there is not a method you could endorse, is there a least worst option?

Ms Ward: The definition of "humane death" in this context would be—I hope to get the wording right—the instantaneous loss of consciousness and then death occurring before consciousness is regained. Your classic example is the shooting of an animal in the correct target area, which on these animals can be very small. Usually, it is the brain. But then you have got to consider what has led up to that. If we are talking about, say, the brumbies—which is another example that is very much in the headlines at the moment—I think one out of 300 brumbies was actually shot in the target area in the recent aerial shooting of brumbies in Kosciuszko National Park. They were chased by up to three helicopters for nine minutes, which I think is something equivalent to three Melbourne Cups. So the lead-up to that instantaneous loss of consciousness would also have been terrifying for the animals—and to terrify an animal is an animal cruelty offence.

MR COCKS: It sounds like you are saying that there are a bunch of trade-offs that would need to be considered in any sort of program.

Ms Ward: At least that.

THE CHAIR: The ACT government submission says it aligns with recommendations from the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries and endorses humane

euthanasia methods such as cervical dislocation or injection by a barbiturate. I was wondering what your views would be on cervical dislocation on myna birds as a humane euthanasia.

Ms Ward: I think "humane" is the wrong word to use with that method. The problem is that currently members of the public are undertaking that method. I know from my experience on an animal ethics committee that that method is particularly controlled or scrutinised. It can only be undertaken by researchers who have undertaken a lot of training in that method. To contrast that very controlled environment to a situation where it were to be allowed that members of the public could engage in that, I would say that almost every time that would be an animal cruelty offence.

THE CHAIR: CIMAG had a proposal that there were basically points that the ACT government could have where members of the public could bring the birds and the birds could be disposed of in a professional manner. Would that be something that you would support?

Ms Ward: So who would do that?

THE CHAIR: The ACT government.

Ms Ward: Who in the ACT government? You would need vets, I presume, to do that. Either they are going to just load their existing vets up with more work, particularly—

THE CHAIR: But do you not see it as important, because it would stop the inexperienced community euthanasia of the birds?

Ms Ward: I would not endorse the method at all. That is where I am coming from. If we were in a situation where that was going to be the way and the accepted method for dealing with these birds, you have to think of the logistics. Who would do it? Already the vets out there are struggling. It is often difficult to take injured wildlife that we want to rescue and rehabilitate to vets, because they will not take them in or they are overloaded or they just cannot deal with it. There are other questions like who pays for it et cetera. If they want to employ more vets to do this particularly brutal task, then the government could look into that.

MS CLAY: I think the government quote, though, was about appropriate expertise or required qualifications.

Ms Ward: I read into that it would have to be some sort of people with the right expertise, be it vets or animal researchers.

MS CLAY: Which is what CIMAG said, "If there was a collection point where community members could bring birds so they could then be euthanised by people with appropriate expertise—

MR COCKS: No; it was "appropriately trained".

Ms Ward: It would be a question of numbers—the numbers that they would need to be to have any kind of impact. That is a lot of cervical dislocation.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your attendance at the hearing today. If you want to, you can give the secretariat your opening statement or any other evidence.

Ms Ward: I do not need to. I had it just in case. In other jurisdictions you have to sit there and read it out.

THE CHAIR: No worries. Thank you for your time today.

Ms Ward: Thank you.

Short suspension.

DREW, MRS CAROLINE, Committee Member, Animal Liberation ACT

THE CHAIR: I now welcome Ms Caroline Drew, from Animal Liberation ACT. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the pink privilege statement on the table. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Can I confirm for the record that you understand and accept the privilege implications?

Mrs Drew: Yes, I do; thank you.

MR COCKS: We have just had a bit of a conversation about the different options that are available to the government and to community groups around controlling myna birds and other species. It looks to me like Animal Liberation ACT's position is that there would be no acceptable approach—that euthanasia should not occur of any species. Is that correct?

Mrs Drew: That is correct, although I would not use the word "euthanasia", which I have put in my summary, because euthanasia is generally related to taking a pet to the vet—and excuse me if someone has already done that—and it has an embedded meaning of love, kindness and caring towards the animal who is about to be euthanised or is euthanised. Whereas myna birds are classified as pests along with other pests and do not have that attitude towards them at all, so it is simply slaughter or killing, not euthanasia. There is a difference because there is a difference in approach and attitude towards the animal.

Yes, we are against it because there are other considerations that a government have at their disposal. For example, in all the literature I have read to date—even though there is not a lot studied on the myna bird; so there is a bit of lack in that area—has said quite clearly that myna birds do not like native forests; they like to live on the edge closest to the suburbs. In Canberra, as you probably already know, most of the inner reserves are facing the back of a suburb and so myna birds might exist in that trail. Generally there is a fire trail or a transport trail. That is why a bird like the myna bird would be very attracted to that area, because it likes the more suburban, organised and tidy area, even though it is not a very tidy bird. That is what it is attracted to the most.

MR COCKS: If a species like the myna bird requires control because of the impact they are having on things like biodiversity, including within our suburbs and urban areas, is there an alternative approach that your organisation recommends?

Mrs Drew: There are two things. One would be to research myna birds a lot more comprehensively than has been researched and not to cherry-pick—and we are all guilty of this at times—the research but to read broadly and deeply as much as we can, and then to produce more research on the particular animal; in this case, the myna bird. That would be one thing. There is very little we know about it and, therefore, our approach is going to be guided by very little information about that animal.

The other thing—and this is a big picture idea—is to look at the way Canberra is developed as a capital city and then look at how suburbs interact with reserves and vice

versa, because it is not only myna birds that have to live within that interaction; other animals, including native animals, have to as well. So we might have to rethink the way that we actually develop Canberra as a capital city in terms of having wildlife bridges and not having reserves isolated from one reserve to the next reserve. There is no networking between the reserves at all or there is very little, and most of it is interrupted by roadways, buildings and so on.

Even though that is a future picture, I think both of those need to be paid attention to. If we were just going to focus on welfare and management of welfare, some might argue that we humanely kill the animal and reduce their numbers and manage them that way. That in itself is a short-term vision, and we need to look to the long-term vision. Birds, as Isabella Caplan said, adapt easily and can move from one continent to another even without humans. So we have to think about how wildlife can move from one continent to another, whether they are natural born into the area or not, and take that into account when we are building our suburbs and building our cities.

MR COCKS: What I am struggling to understand is how that future development strategy would mitigate the impact of any species on existing biodiversity.

Mrs Drew: We do not know for sure until we try and do it. We need to build up our native supply. If we look at the reserves within Canberra—not thinking Namadgi and so on—they were all just sheep territory. Even when you walk on them now, you can still smell the sheep from those days when there were a lot of sheep in this area. They have been deforested quite significantly—and we can also pick that up. We need to rebuild our ecosystem from the ground up, which I know that the department is attempting to do in certain parts. For example, Mulligans Flat is a really interesting reserve for that reason, where they are attempting to replant and rebuild to see if they can grow a reserve better than they grow at the moment.

The myna bird, particularly, only likes suburban settings. We need more native gardens. If we look at Whitlam, for example—because I live very close to it, when a new suburb is developed in Canberra all that seems to happen is that the whole thing is bulldozed, then concrete and bitumen is laid down and then there are the lights and then the houses. There is no greenery; it is all gone. All the trees, the grass and all habitat to whatever creatures that used to live there has all gone. That is not a way to build a suburb. It really is not. We still haven't learnt our lesson around even something as simple as that.

Animal Liberation follows compassionate conservation. That big picture will help us in the future work out how to live with other animals, whether they are introduced, they are declared pests or they are native wildlife. It is a matter of trying to live together with other species and not always reacting in a violent manner and saying, "No; we have to control that interaction by killing x amount of this animal or that animal." In the long run it does not work; they just adapt. For example, myna birds are known to not go near traps because they learn that traps are bad. Myna birds are very, very intelligent. They know how to count. They know how to talk. They mimic, not just through stimulation but also through cognitive memory, speech and other species' calls as well. So they are extremely intelligent. We forget that animals are often much more intelligent than we allow for them, and we don't factor that into what we are doing. We do not think that the animal will adapt to whatever we do now and will still be there or still come back and may still be a problem. So we have to think on a bigger scale than we are in terms

of a limited fashion—

MS CLAY: Your submission quoted the RSPCA 2024 stance:

> … in the case of common mynas there is not general agreement about the need for culling. We believe that—based on current knowledge about the impact and preferred habitat of common mynas—trapping and killing by community groups should not be encouraged.

That certainly reflects what you have said today. Do you see a problem from a welfare perspective if we are encouraging community groups to do something where there is no good evidence base and there is quite a lot of evidence that it causes harm to sentient creatures? Is that a problem?

Mrs Drew: It is a problem, only because, again, certain aspects of that are not being thought through. One that I wanted to raise today was that it is a short-term approach to an issue that does not come to an end, particularly with birds, because they are highly adaptable and extremely intelligent. As many researchers have suggested, they are probably as intelligent as any mammal on this earth at this stage.

In some ways I would reference the idea of family violence within humans—and, again, my apologies if this is upsetting to people. That is a learnt trait. There is a lot of research around violence being a learnt trait. If a government is allowing community groups and members of communities to actually kill an animal, what we are doing is perpetrating the idea that being violent is okay. And we disagree with that completely, as a group.

As you have probably heard, there are also welfare implications. When I did some research on the idea of welfare practice I found that it is very varied across the country. For example, veterinarian associations look at welfare in terms of domestic animals and taking care of them physically whilst they are alive and then taking care of them at the end through euthanasia if need be. Other welfare standards related to industry groups that have a much more pragmatic way of looking at welfare—for example, whether an animal has a particular size cage or the right size cage—and then they are slaughtered. So there is no care and concern except for whether or not the animal is viewed as a product—so whether that product will actually make the money that they are looking for.

In terms of welfare practices, it is really an ethical decision and the way that you approach an animal and whether you see the animal as an object. I think Kaplan said that that changed in the 20th century. She is a bird expert. I think we still see animals as automatons or machines, because, on the one hand, we have animals divided up into different classifications and, on the other hand, we have this attitude towards pets, this attitude towards industrial or animal agricultural animals, this attitude towards wildlife animals and we have another attitude towards ferals and particular ferals and so on. So we have many different types of welfare practices or standards, and it depends on which one the myna bird will fall into. I have searched high and low for a particular code of practice, but it seems to come back to either medical research and the code of practice they use and/or pest control. Even PestSmart, which is a very big organisation, does not actually have anything up there for myna birds.

MS CLAY: We heard from CIMAG that they consider gassing to be humane—gassing with an exhaust pipe—and they have a certain way that they tell their members to do it. Do you consider that to be humane?

Mrs Drew: Animal Liberation does not. It causes asphyxiation. In terms of gassing, asphyxiation is brought about through loss of consciousness. Whether one comes before the other, no-one is really sure. I think if we were to consider what it might be like to asphyxiate, because a human animal is very good at imagining things, then we do not think it is a very humane way of killing an animal at all. I think it is sort of accepted because we often think, "Oh, well, it only lasts 20 seconds," or "They will not know that it is going to happen." But these animals we are talking about are very aware. A psychology theorist said that all avians—that is, all birds—have internal awareness. Having internal awareness allows you to imagine what could happen in the future. So animals do think about the future. If you are in that 20, 30, 40 or however many seconds or minutes that death is supposed to take place in, I cannot even begin to imagine how the birds may be internally feeling and thinking about this.

MS CLAY: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: You were saying earlier that we need to learn to live with all species, including invasive species. If your stance is that the government has a lot of control and protection measures around cats, foxes, pigs, deer and active rabbits, do you support that there is a need for control of those animals?

Mrs Drew: As an organisation, no, we do not. We take the compassionate conservation line and philosophy, which is looking at animals or species as individuals and then looking at how those individuals interact with other species and individuals, including ourselves. We argue that it is a very easy answer to say, "Okay, let's manage this animal by simply killing x amount every year and then we have ticked that box." That is all we ever do; we just tick a box and say, "Okay, x amount are dead. We have done our job for this year. Next year we'll do the same: kill x amount of animals and tick that box." That is all we seem to be capable of. We are capable of a lot more, but we need to take that cognitive step—that mental step—towards looking at the whole picture and not just looking at animals in isolation in terms of isolated species but as individuals who interact with other individuals.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I think we might finish up our session then. We would like to thank you very much for your submission today and for taking time out of your day to give evidence.

Mrs Drew: And thank you very much for asking us to come along.

Short suspension.

VASSAROTTI, MS REBECCA, Minister for the Environment, Parks and Land Management, Minister for Heritage, Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services and Minister for Sustainable Building and Construction
WRIGHT, MS FIONA, Acting Deputy Director-General, Environment, Water and Emissions Reduction, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate
HANCOCKS, MR BRUCE, Director, Agriculture, Biosecurity and Invasive Species, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate
RAYNER, DR LAURA, Senior Ecologist, ACT Parks and Conservation Service, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate
IGLESIAS, MR DANIEL, Executive Branch Manager, City Presentation, Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate

THE CHAIR: I welcome, from the ACT government, the Minister for the Environment, Parks and Land Management, Ms Vassarotti, and officials. I ask you to acknowledge the privilege implications of the privilege statement.

Dr Rayner: Yes, I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Mr Iglesias: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Wright: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Vassarotti: I have read the privilege statement and acknowledge it.

Mr Hancocks: I also acknowledge the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: We will take it in turn to ask some questions.

Ms Vassarotti: I have an opening statement, if that is okay.

THE CHAIR: Maybe table the statement, if that is okay.

Ms Vassarotti: Okay.

THE CHAIR: My first question relates to the evidence that we are relying on. I will speak to the government's submission regarding the prevalence and distribution of common mynas in the ACT. It says a comprehensive analysis was conducted by Grarock based on a 41-year dataset. It is a detailed analysis of the populations of birds in the ACT and speaks quite clearly to the impacts of myna birds when myna birds enter the jurisdiction and the impact on other bird species. I am questioning the government's use of the data and the summary of this particular report.

Ms Vassarotti: Thanks very much for the question. I will go predominantly to Dr Rayner, who is one of our senior ecologists and who has done a lot of work in this area, to speak to some of the detail of the research and the work that has happened within ACT government.

Certainly, from our interpretation of the evidence, there is strong evidence that common

mynas prefer urban areas, and we have seen quite a significant decline in the number of peri-urban woodlands. We have been looking particularly at environment and agricultural impacts of common mynas, in comparison to other species. It goes particularly to the issue of competition for things such as hollows that are highly valued by our native species.

As we have talked about in our submission, there seems to be limited competition between common mynas and native birds for nesting sites, and we really have not observed any impact on threatened hollow-nesting bird species, such as gang-gangs and superb parrots. We have not found evidence of it having an impact on agricultural production or matters of national environmental significance. I will hand over to Dr Rayner, who has done a lot of work in this area.

THE CHAIR: I would like to put to you the 2012 research finding that says that "after common myna establishment, growth in the abundance of this bird species"—and they are talking about small bird species, but it also speaks about larger bird species later—"has declined significantly".

Ms Vassarotti: Again, I might hand over to Dr Rayner. We have been looking particularly at the impact in urban areas as opposed to peri-urban areas, where we are seeing—

THE CHAIR: I am more interested in the impacts on the small bird or large bird species.

Ms Vassarotti: Okay. I will hand over to Dr Rayner to talk to that.

Dr Rayner: The reference that you are referring to, by Dr Kate Grarock, is a thesis, and she has produced multiple publications from that thesis. You are correct that there were some impacts detected—interactions between common mynas and native bird species. The native bird species that are typically interacting with common myna, and sometimes negatively impacted, are urban adapted species and they are highly common, and almost all are demonstrating long-term, significant, increasing trends.

They are not species about which we have concerns, from a conservation perspective, and they are urban species. Dr Grarock found, I think, that three of them were hollow users. The impact of mynas predominantly through the interactions at nest hollows is the concern we have, when it comes to mynas. Their interactions, in terms of their distributions and densities, is a very fluid thing. The eight native species that were impacted, the small birds that you are talking about, were all in urban environments and all are subject to decline from multiple threatening pressures. They are not competing with common mynas for those resources. There are interactions that happen in these ways.

Another thing that is worth looking at, in terms of the data, is that common mynas have a strong short-term response to weather conditions, so their densities fluctuate in a way that a lot of our native species do not. In wet conditions, common mynas can increase in abundance, but they typically come back down. We have very strong evidence to show that the overall trend of common mynas has been one of significant and very severe decline.

THE CHAIR: Can you table that?

Dr Rayner: Yes; it should be in our statement. It is the sixth strongest declining species in the ACT of 168 species that have been analysed, and that is over the last 20 years.

THE CHAIR: You can table that data?

Dr Rayner: It is published.

MS CLAY: Is it the woodland birds one?

Dr Rayner: That is right, the COG woodlands bird report.

THE CHAIR: Which one?

Dr Rayner: It is the report by Canberra Ornithologists—Canberra Birds, I believe, is the name they are using now. It is titled *Long-term trends in ACT woodland birds* and it is over the last 20 years.

THE CHAIR: Can you speak to why we only worry about the impacts on birds once they have declined in population by so much that it becomes a concern, and we work to protect them? As you were saying, these other bird species are declining in numbers, for a range of reasons, but we are not proactively doing anything to protect them.

Dr Rayner: I would argue against that statement. We do a lot to protect birds that are showing trends of decline or common species that we are concerned about. We have birds that we consider to be on a watch list because we think they are vulnerable. In the same report that I have just mentioned, we went through a very detailed process of understanding the traits of bird species that make them vulnerable to different pressures. We have identified the small birds that are particularly vulnerable, and we have identified the canopy-using species that are particularly vulnerable.

We focus on the best opportunities we have to protect and recover those species, and that is typically in our conservation estate. In the urban environment there are limitations on how much conservation impact we can have on species that are the ones that we are concerned about.

I strongly disagree with the statement that we only manage for threatened species or species that are declining. We protect our endangered ecological communities and we take on policies like the mature native tree key threatening processes and action plan to make sure that we are establishing that canopy and the resources that they need. A lot of action and research happen on the woodland birds that we know are vulnerable, including any vulnerability to the common myna.

MS CLAY: We have had a lot of submissions to this inquiry, which you would have seen. We heard quite strongly from community members and from CIMAG this morning, the community action group, that myna birds are increasing. I also noticed the woodland birds survey, and we had the pleasure of asking Neil Hermes about it. I read to CIMAG the quote that myna birds were declining, and they did not really agree with

it.

Neil Hermes' very strong view was that there was absolutely no evidence that mynas were increasing. He also made a pretty impassioned plea to us that government funds should be spent with a good evidence base. I drew his attention to the government's submission about the invasive threat study that would be done to look at all invasive species and asked whether he thought that was a good idea. He seemed to think that it was. Is that why you are going for that whole species-whole environment approach rather than looking only at myna birds?

Ms Vassarotti: Absolutely; what is driving our approach to managing our ecological communities is that we need to be much more strategic in how we are responding to these issues, whether it be in terms of habitat restoration or invasive species management. The number of threats that we see to our ecological communities means that we need to be really strategic in relation to that. We have a lot of invasive species. It is not just bird species; it is weed species as well. In order for us to get the best impact for our resources and effort, it is important to take this approach around an invasive species strategic plan.

One of the things we have noted with managing our ecological communities is that, if we respond in a more integrated way, it will have multiple benefits. One of the real concerns is that, with setting up action plans for particular species, it means we are doing a very narrow band of work. We are not able to look at it in a more integrated way.

The other challenge is that currently we have, I think, 300 species that we have identified as pest species. It is just not feasible to develop an individual action plan for every one of those species, particularly when we know that the same action will impact on a range of species.

One of the things that is particularly notable around Indian mynas is its impact as a nuisance species. That is one of the reasons why I was keen for Mr Iglesias to come along today, in terms of how we respond in urban areas around nuisance species which will not just have an impact on one species, such as the Indian myna, but a range of species.

MS CLAY: I have noticed in the submissions, and on this issue over the years, that the RSPCA used to endorse control and that it has stepped back from that endorsement. Some witnesses like Neil Hermes suggested that cats and foxes were a much greater threat to our woodland birds. He re-emphasised that we did not have any evidence to show that myna birds are.

We certainly have a disconnect, in that some people in Canberra definitely think that myna birds are the biggest threat right now. How do you manage that? Do we need more evidence? Do there need to be more conversations? Is one side right or one side wrong? How do you manage that disconnect?

Ms Vassarotti: From a government perspective, we recognise that there is a range of threats to our habitat, and we are trying to respond to a range of issues. This is a good issue, in that there is very strong community engagement around the issue of Indian

mynas. We have seen high levels of community engagement in terms of responding to this issue.

We really embrace the fact that citizens get involved. We are keen to engage with the community in terms of where that best effort, that incredible volunteer effort, should go. It is absolutely about information and continuing to provide evidence. This is a good example, though, of a disconnect between some very strong evidence that we have from the community and the scientific perspective, and not being able to quite connect it to people's emotional response to a species that they do see a lot, particularly as they are moving through the urban area.

You mentioned the RSPCA. Certainly, this is a concern for us, from a government perspective, in terms of humane methods of responding to common mynas. I have had a number of conversations with CIMAG in particular and I have encouraged them to engage with the RSPCA in terms of what can be the more humane methods of managing particular species. I will throw to Dr Rayner, who is able to draw on some evidence that is well known, around the current—

Dr Rayner: The key point is that there has been a lot of work done that looks at the humaneness of control methods for birds. There is work, for example, on plotting different control approaches on matrices about humaneness and suffering. We know from that work that cage trapping that also involves handling that then leads to destroying the animal with carbon monoxide is the least humane and involves the most suffering for an animal.

MS CLAY: That is not what the CIMAG submission says.

Dr Rayner: The reference I use is from the New South Wales CRC. I can provide that reference.

MS CLAY: That would be good; thank you.

Dr Rayner: I have it in paper form, but I can send it through.

MS CLAY: That would be great; thank you.

Mr Hancocks: The lack of support by CIMAG for euthanising is not just because of the humane aspect, but also because of the lack of evidence base for the impacts on these birds. Killing, without that support for an impact that you are trying to avoid, is a significant issue for them.

MS CLAY: We did hear that from ADO and the Animal Liberation Alliance, both of whom said they would not support killing in any situation. They also said that, first, you need an evidence base, before you even proceed from that step. I think there is a bit of agreement on that.

Dr Rayner: When we are talking about culling programs, it is important to keep arguments around humaneness separate from arguments around animal ethics. The point that Mr Hancocks is making is a really important one, in that the same study by Dr Grarock showed that there is negligible impact of these control methods after 40

years on the broad population of myna. It is ineffective at a broad scale, so it is a really important ethical question to ask. Is it appropriate that we are destroying these animals for what appears to be no real conservation gain?

MR COCKS: There is an important question around evidence, and a lot of what we are getting to is different perspectives on the evidence. We have heard a lot from you around lack of evidence. Is there good evidence that mynas are benign in the environment?

Ms Vassarotti: Certainly, the perspective that I have taken, when I declared common mynas to be a pest animal in the ACT, was that the impact was primarily around a nuisance impact, and there was a need to put in a number of controls in relation to that. In terms of the impact on the environment, I will look to Dr Rayner to talk about how we would specifically address that issue. In terms of the threats that are facing particularly our endangered ecological communities, in the hierarchy of those threats, common mynas are not rating as a priority.

MR COCKS: I understand where you have assessed things. The question is: is there good evidence that they are benign?

Dr Rayner: I will not underestimate the intelligence of anyone in the room. Dr Grarock produced a paper stating that their impact is not benign, so there is evidence that they are not benign. What is important is that the conversation today, and the argument that we work our way through at present, is about whether a non-benign impact is one worthy of action. It is declared a pest animal for good reason. It is an invasive species, albeit a very slow invader. Dr Grarock also showed that.

MR COCKS: Yes, I saw that evidence.

Dr Rayner: But it competes for resources in a system where resources are scarce, and it is present in our environment as an exotic animal, so it will be part of the system.

MR COCKS: Has there been any assessment of the biodiversity impact within the urban setting? The government submission is very careful to note that the prevalence is very highly concentrated in the urban setting. One of the great things about Canberra is the amount of green space, and the biodiversity within our urban and suburban areas. Has there been any assessment of what impact the myna has within those settings?

Dr Rayner: The best evidence that we have, the best research done to date that I am aware of, is by a researcher named Lowe, who studied the species in 2011. Their conclusion—I will read out a couple of statements that I have brought along today—is that "common mynas have little competitive impact on resource use by native birds in the urban matrix". Another conclusion that they drew from their research was:

> … the substantial efforts currently directed towards culling of Common Mynas in heavily urbanised environments is misdirected, and resources would be better directed to improvement of natural habitat quality in these areas if the purpose of control is to enhance urban bird diversity.

MR COCKS: Has there been any assessment of the impact on non-bird species? For

example, we heard concerns today around the golden sun moth. Has there been an assessment of other species?

Dr Rayner: In the ACT or more broadly?

MR COCKS: In the ACT, in particular.

Dr Rayner: In the ACT, I would have to take that on notice and look a little further into it. I know there are concerns around our invertebrate community. I know there would not be any research specifically on common myna impacts on the invertebrate community, but I would imagine there has been some research done on predation of our invertebrate communities, predation of our threatened herpetofauna—lizards.

I am also aware that the primary threats to our invertebrate communities come through pressures such as grazing, soil degradation and weed incursion. Even when we get to predation, we find predation by all manner of animals. We have a huge number of raptors in the ACT and very agriculturally adapted species like kestrels that would be having a significant impact. Again, the most likely impact will be on the urban edge, and that is not where our endangered ecosystems occur.

MR COCKS: In that context of the urban-suburban impacts, I want to give Mr Iglesias a chance to talk about the nuisance impacts of these birds.

Mr Iglesias: I think herein lies the explanation as to why so many people feel so strongly about these birds, because they are in the urban environment. They are in our backyards. They are in our front yards. It is often a misdirected conclusion to conclude, "These animals must be having an impact; I'm seeing them everywhere." It is this natural bias that people might have because they are seeing them in their neighbourhoods.

Having said that, without a shadow of a doubt, there is an impact on amenity. Pest birds in general will get into all sorts of situations where you might not predict that they would be. In some areas—we dealt with one last week in the Tuggeranong bus exchange—they are getting in under the eaves in large numbers, specifically in the evenings, and they make a hell of a racket and a hell of a mess.

Our response is very site specific. We will look at that situation and apply some well-tried techniques to keep them out of those sorts of areas. We deploy daily, sometimes twice daily, crews to clean and keep public areas clean. Something as simple as keeping a good regime on bin emptying will discourage Indian mynas and will have a real impact on the negative interactions people might have with a particular bird.

Whilst we do not deploy specific control measures in the urban environment—that has never been a priority for us—we do prioritise the individual incidences where they do become a problem. You can generally say that for a lot of invasive species in the urban environment.

THE CHAIR: Going back to the evidence discussion, the government references three papers—the Grarock one, the Canberra Ornithologists woodlands birds survey, and the Lowe paper. The Lowe paper is a study of a 10-kilometre radius site in Sydney, so that

is not an ACT-based study.

The Canberra Ornithologists Group, in their woodlands bird survey, explicitly state that this is not based on ecological criteria which an academic survey might focus on. They state that the analysis was constrained by time and funding for a professional analyst. But the Grarock paper uses the ornithologists' data and scientifically analyses it, and it does say that there is a problem and declining native bird populations. Do we need more evidence and research conducted that is up to date and that is academic, in order to understand the impact of these birds?

Ms Vassarotti: Again, I will ask Dr Rayner to talk about the quite extensive work that occurs, particularly through our researchers, in terms of understanding the impacts of species locally.

Dr Rayner: The first thing I would like to state—without self-promoting too much—is that, in my own capacity, I evaluated lines of evidence for looking at population trends and for coming to conclusions about conservation of woodland birds. When the Canberra Ornithologists Group's woodlands bird dataset came out, I basically ranked, on a whole suite of criteria, the strength of rigor. I called it inferential rigor, which meant: how much can you learn and understand from this particular dataset? The dataset we have in Canberra is one of the best in Australia. I believe it came out at number two or number one. The basis for population assessment in Canberra is some of the best you will find anywhere in Australia. That does not need to be explored more deeply.

In addressing the comment about it being a project that was constrained, as in the report and that analysis, it was done by an incredibly skilled analyst at the ANU, and it was a process that took about three years. It was not a quick job; it took us a long time to get it very accurate and very strong, because we knew the impact it would have in terms of strategic conservation decision-making. There have been decades of consistent, repeated work done by the community.

THE CHAIR: It is not published, though. The paper by Grarock uses that data, which I accept might be incredibly rigorous, but it analyses it scientifically and comes out with a different conclusion. Do we need to do more scientific evidence analysis of that work that the Canberra Ornithologists Group has been doing?

Dr Rayner: I would question what aspect needs to be researched. There is—

THE CHAIR: Myna birds.

Dr Rayner: What aspect of myna bird ecology is being asked about, for more information? In addition to Dr Grarock's work, I published four papers on the population trends of species in the ACT, using that same dataset. There is more work published than just Grarock's thesis.

In that same analysis, we were able to show this effect of weather on mynas. These are attributes of a species that are unlikely to change. Species have ecological traits. You will not find a bird that is highly mobile and becomes sedentary. You will not find a bird that uses hollows that stops using hollows.

There are certain elements of the ecology of mynas that we do not need to study further. We know that they are communal nesters. We know that they respond positively to wet years. We know that they are generalist species and will use gutters to nest in, as much as they will use a tree. Aspects of the ecology do not need to be studied further. They will not change.

I would argue that the rigor of the report that COG produced is as good as any scientific study. But it can be published. I do not see the need for it in this case.

THE CHAIR: We are making government policy decisions. The sentence here says, "prevalence and distribution of common mynas," so the problem is that everyone is trying to understand this. When none of the reports, except for one, is scientifically published, we do not have a really strong evidence base for some of the statements that are being made.

Ms Vassarotti: I think it would be useful to understand more about those statements where you are asserting that there is a different position. It might be useful to go through those. In terms of trying to understand some of your questioning, there might be a bit of a misunderstanding in terms of some of the work of—

THE CHAIR: The ACT government submission says:

> In conclusion, research indicates a negligible impact of Common mynas …

This was on parrots and gang-gangs, but the submission also states:

> … negligible impact on the environment, agriculture, or threatened species in the ACT.

Ms Vassarotti: Again, I will look to Dr Rayner to answer. In terms of our analysis of the scientific evidence, that is a statement that does stand. Dr Rayner could speak to the scientific basis on which those statements are made. I feel that they are statements that, certainly, the government would stand by. We think that the evidence very clearly backs it up. Obviously, we need to go into a little bit more detail to make those links, so that you have a higher level of confidence around that.

Dr Rayner: With the lines of evidence that we have, we have published trend indices, as of 2014, that state they are declining. That was from my thesis.

THE CHAIR: That is not used in the government submission, though. Can you table that as well?

Dr Rayner: Yes. We have the work of Dr Grarock, which analysed 40 years of data, saying that the control methods that have been implemented are ineffective.

THE CHAIR: It also says that, since the introduction of mynas, there has been a significant decrease in the population numbers of other native species.

Dr Rayner: I have reviewed Dr Grarock's thesis, and the impact on trends of native bird species that was detected from her work was primarily on rosella species, about

interrupting their breeding habits. There were 13 species, I believe, that were identified as having declining trends over the same study period. There is another large number of declining species in the ACT. The relationship between the myna and those native birds is—

THE CHAIR: Is stated, yes.

Dr Rayner: Is stated—

THE CHAIR: "After common myna establishment, growth in the abundance of these bird species declined significantly." That is on the small bird species. It says: "Our analysis suggests that the common myna had a negative impact on the long-term abundance of some cavity-nesting bird species and some small bird species."

Dr Rayner: The small bird species that I am aware of are the striated pardalote, the rufous whistler, the willie wagtail, the grey fantail, the magpie-lark, the exotic house sparrow, the exotic common blackbird and the silvereye. Is that the reference you have as well?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Dr Rayner: I would like to come back to you with the conclusion from the trend analysis that we have undertaken. I would need to double-check the evidence, but most of those species are not species that we have concerns about, in terms of their long-term trajectories in Canberra.

THE CHAIR: Again, it goes to the conclusion of the government submission, which says that they have a negligible impact on our environment. They might have a negligible impact on the threatened species that you are talking about, but they do not have a negligible impact on the environment.

Dr Rayner: If you were to find that those species are in fact stable or increasing, I would say the impact is negligible, because they are persisting, and persisting well.

THE CHAIR: The mynas?

Dr Rayner: No, the small bird species that are related to common myna abundances. It is critical that we think about these small bird species in woodlands. In the urban environment, they may be displaying different trends. What is really critical is that they are persisting in habitats where we are managing for them as well.

MS CLAY: Did you say that the Grarock published paper was based on the long-term wildlife dataset?

Dr Rayner: We did, yes.

MS CLAY: If we do not value the long-term wildlife dataset, the Grarock research would not be useful—

THE CHAIR: This is the scientific analysis of it. It states in the woodland survey that

they did not have the capacity to do the analysis, which is here. But we are neglecting to acknowledge this analysis which is scientifically published in a journal.

MS CLAY: Minister, with the overall study for the species that are under threat in the ACT, the big picture study that you have funding to receive, what do we need to do to make sure that that study is really useful—that we set it up the right way at the front end and make sure that we get actionable, well-funded things that we can do at that back end, so that we are improving the ACT's environment?

Ms Vassarotti: In terms of the study that you are speaking to, this is the invasive species strategic work that is happening. We are trying to take an evidence-based, strategic perspective on how we manage the plethora of invasive species that we need to manage in our urban, our peri-urban and our rural environment. I might look to Mr Hancocks to talk about the criteria around how we are setting up that work, and particularly speak to the front-end work, which we agree is important, to make sure we are putting our resources into the areas that really count.

Mr Hancocks: This is a piece of work that we are quite excited about, in order to understand the impact of all of those things that are here now that did not used to be here, so that we can zero in on our finite resources, in getting that return on investment and lower their levels to something where they do not create that impact.

It is about the scope of looking at everything that is here, across all species, across aquatics, insects, diseases and everything else. It is about looking against the ACT's relevant wellbeing domains—health, access and connectivity, which is more around the amenity-type piece, environment and climate, and to understand, create and develop criteria against all of those collective impacts, and find out what is of most concern to the people of the ACT.

There is considerable work by our consultancy group on developing that methodology of how you compare one impact to another, that these species can cause. We are very much looking to have public engagement around that process. One of the key things we want around this is a good understanding by all about what we are factoring in, in terms of impacts. Ultimately, it is about that shared responsibility, which CIMAG have strongly embraced, and to have that redirected towards these agreed priority species, for these shared understanding reasons, because of the significant impacts caused.

All along the way, since the inception of this concept, we have shared this knowledge with CIMAG. We have very much invited them to be part of that as a process. It will be broader than, obviously, just one species, but that is as it should be, as we look across these values that we have. That is something that is going on at the moment. We have a public survey out at the moment, to get an understanding of what people are particularly concerned about and discover some information that we may not be aware of that we think needs to be considered as well.

There will be a further iteration; we are looking at a webinar or something that can be as inclusive as possible for everyone to understand how we have got to a point of reaching that valuable methodology that we will look to consistently apply for years to come, about how we establish what is the most important, impact-wise, of species. With the opportunity to critique things, we want a genuine buy-in for the public, and that is

the only way we get that.

MS CLAY: Has CIMAG already had input or has there just been an approach made to them?

Mr Hancocks: It has been flagged with them before we started the report. A survey has specifically gone to them, and we are offering them a one-on-one interview, knowing that they have expertise in a specific area of invasives, to provide that direct feedback as well.

MS CLAY: Another comment they made, when I asked them what they thought about this study—and they did not mention that they were involved; I am really pleased to hear that they are—was that you do not need to wait to take action for a study. It is a reasonable point. It sounds like the government action is more in the TCCS phase, but can you tell me about the actions that are happening now?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes. I will look to Daniel, but I also want to note what was triggered when I declared it a pest species. That also triggered some particular actions, particularly around sale. It means that people are now prohibited from keeping or selling Indian mynas in the ACT. This is particularly around controlling where Indian mynas will be. That is the key thing that occurred with the pest species declaration. Mr Iglesias, do you want to talk about, not at an individual species level, some of the actions taken?

Mr Iglesias: Generally speaking?

Ms Vassarotti: Yes.

Mr Iglesias: I think that is the key. Our engagement is at a site-by-site level where we know, for example, that a particular population of birds are causing amenity nuisance value. We might get that reported by the public or by store owners. We might get reports of sparrows or mynas getting into bins or into hoppers. It is very site specific. It is not systematic. It is not as if we have a program that we roll out across the city in a systematic way, because we are responding to individual instances of priority.

We do have other programs, however, that do, as a secondary benefit, work towards increasing the resilience of, say, small birds in urban environments. We work closely with EPSDD, with the urban parkcare network that we have, where we encourage canopy, mid-canopy and low-level canopy that directly assists small birds and directly helps with providing habitat. We have planted over 50,000 trees between 2021 and 2024 in the urban environment. That invariably assists native as well as non-native species.

Our responses are site specific, in summary. They are not systemic, and we do other activities that benefit and improve the resilience of the environment to be effective in the urban area.

MS CLAY: Where are we up to on practical implementation of our cat containment and our fox control? Those have come up regularly as a threat.

Mr Iglesias: Cat containment? I would have to take that one on notice, Ms Clay.

MS CLAY: Yes, that is okay. I am sorry to give you homework, but it comes up a lot.

Mr Iglesias: That is okay. I can get back to you on that one. Was foxes the other one?

MS CLAY: Yes, fox control. Cats and foxes are often cited as the two greatest threats.

Mr Iglesias: Yes, foxes are notoriously difficult in the urban environment. We do not have the tools available to our colleagues in protected areas. They tend to be very clumsy at best. We might advise people, "Don't put food out; think about where they might hide." We have had reports of people saying that foxes have successfully bred a family of young ones between a retaining wall and a bin, so they are notoriously difficult to manage in the urban environment.

MR COCKS: We have had quite a discussion around what the government is doing and ought to be doing. This is a unique urban area, in that we have a really strong community group taking proactive steps to try and contribute, and try and help to keep the invasive species numbers down. One of the big concerns that is not always voiced outright but comes through some of the comments is that they are worried about their efforts being either shut down or made not feasible. Is there any intention from the government to prevent CIMAG from continuing with the program as it is now?

Ms Vassarotti: I want to reiterate how the passion and the commitment of the CIMAG group are really admirable. They have been working really hard for a long period of time. As a government, we want to acknowledge that. Certainly, we engage regularly with CIMAG. I meet with them quite regularly, and I know they are in very regular contact with the directorate.

We have certainly voiced some concerns in terms of the control methods, and we have encouraged CIMAG to engage with RSPCA, particularly on some of the control methods that are used. There is certainly no intention for us to do any strong intervention. As we work through the invasive species strategic plan, we would love to be able to harness community effort and passion, and actually see that being used in areas where we know there is a greater impact in the community. That may be something that groups such as CIMAG are not interested in taking up, but with a lot of these efforts, whether it is in terms of weed control or in terms of responding to particular issues, there is a very strong recognition by government of the importance of community involvement, engagement, community volunteers and citizen scientists.

MR COCKS: Is there any intention of changing or intervening in what CIMAG is doing as it stands?

Ms Vassarotti: No.

MR COCKS: One of the other observations I would make is that telling people that they are focusing on or doing the wrong thing and that they should be doing this other thing that the government thinks is more important is not usually a great way to get increased community participation.

Ms Vassarotti: As I expressed, in terms of going from an evidence base and looking at what strategies are in place, we are keen to engage with community. They may wish to

or decide not to engage on those particular activities, and that is the beauty of a democracy.

MR COCKS: Usually, making things easier for people to do good things is more of a helpful way to go. On the issue you have raised around the method of euthanasia: is there a better alternative that will not make it more difficult for the community to do this?

Ms Vassarotti: That is the reason why I have encouraged CIMAG to engage with RSPCA to explore some of those methods, given that it is not ACT government that is undertaking those control activities. It is the community group that is undertaking those activities.

MR COCKS: If you are encouraging them to do that engagement, there is a bit of a suggestion that they are doing the wrong thing now.

Ms Vassarotti: We have talked about the evidence around the concerns that we have around the humaneness of particular control methods.

MR COCKS: What is the alternative that you suggest?

Ms Vassarotti: We are not undertaking control activities for this species, because of the evidence.

MR COCKS: But you have made a judgement around one method not being appropriate or not best practice. What is the alternative that you are suggesting, or are you just saying that what that group is doing is not the way that it should be done, without providing an alternative?

Ms Vassarotti: We are encouraging the community group undertaking control activities to engage with experts and the evidence in terms of ways to do it. As you note, this is not a government program; this is not something that the government is doing. We are saying that, in terms of responding to invasive species, we are undertaking a process in terms of identifying what is the best way to put the control methods. We are engaging with groups such as CIMAG to develop that methodology and approach. I think that is a very appropriate place for government to be putting their effort. Implicit in your commentary is that it is a government's role to determine what is the most humane way to control a population of a species.

MR COCKS: That is not what I am saying. Minister, I said that the government has told CIMAG that, by implication, they are not doing the right thing.

Ms Vassarotti: We have suggested—

MR COCKS: You have suggested that they engage with another group. That is the government intervening, and it is the government suggesting that the current approach is not appropriate.

Ms Vassarotti: We are raising concerns about the current approach, Mr Cocks.

MR COCKS: That is correct; so that is the government intervening. What does the government suggest as the alternative?

Ms Vassarotti: We have raised concerns. We have suggested engaging with this issue as an important issue. That is as far as we have gone at this point, because we are putting our resources into responding to a strategic approach. I do not know what else to say.

Mr Hancocks: It is a really difficult one because it involves many members of the public, without training, with the responsibility of killing an animal, and finding something that is safe to employ. That is why things like the current method, using exhaust emissions from a vehicle, are dangerous, if someone misapplies them. There are other methods as well, like cervical dislocation, wringing of necks and things, which are employed; but, if you do not know what you are you doing, that can cause significant pain to the animal as well.

I believe that, historically, there has been some injecting or euthanising of birds that has been done by RSPCA. That was some years ago. That was not something that could continue; it was under previous RSPCA leadership. It also became too much for people working there; it was against their principles, and they felt that conflict about euthanising birds within an area that was about rescuing and nurturing animals. It was also about the sheer numbers coming in, and the resource requirement to do that.

There are other options out there. There are options that are considered acceptable by our New South Wales counterparts for euthanising birds. But they all come with complexities regarding actually knowing what you are doing. Knowing how to implement something which is comfortable for any member of the public to employ is challenging.

Ms Vassarotti: We do not have a position on how they should be euthanised.

THE CHAIR: Minister, your media release in 2021 said:

> I would like to extend my thanks to the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group and other community groups who have gathered information on effective, humane and long-term control methods of Indian Mynas for several decades.

Do you disagree with that statement?

Ms Vassarotti: I stand by those comments. I think that the evidence and the research have evolved. With scientific endeavour, things evolve, and we take the evidence as that occurs. Again, as I have said today, we do recognise the efforts of groups such as CIMAG.

Dr Rayner: Dr Grarock's work is, I would argue, the most rigorous work that we can reference on myna impacts and management anywhere in Australia. She was able to undertake those analyses not just because we had a very active ornithologists group that collected bird data but because CIMAG collected the tracking data. They have provided a huge evidence base for us to undertake those analyses and learn about how to manage this bird in the system.

It is a reality that, as part of what we have learnt from their work, as well as the work of countless other people, controlling populations through trapping is not having an effective impact on the broader population of mynas, in terms of driving their decline or eradication. We have also had to review our efforts in terms of the humaneness of control programs, which is something we should continually do. It is not like you should just do it once.

THE CHAIR: All of this evidence that we are using is relatively old, before the 2021 media release. Again, this media release says—and these are your words:

> In urban habitats, they are considered a threat to the long-term survival of native birds and other animals like the sugar glider, which depend on tree hollows for survival.
>
> They are very aggressive and intelligent, known to evict native birds such as kookaburras and parrots from their nests, dumping out their eggs and even killing their chicks.

The evidence base that we are relying on has not changed between your media release and now. It is a completely different set of sentiments, words and position from you, as minister. Can you speak to why this is so contradictory?

Ms Vassarotti: I am not sure that it is contradictory, because we have talked particularly in terms of species that are seen as continuing to be persistent. There has still been an impact. Again, looking to Dr Rayner, our understanding around management and the range of threats and impacts, particularly on our threatened species, has significantly shifted over the last three years. We are seeing significant impacts, particularly on our threatened species. We are seeing more invasive species move in.

THE CHAIR: Minister, I will stop you there. Your words and stance have completely changed. This media release talked about this destructive bird and how it is threatening our native species, and now this submission says that it has a negligible impact.

Ms Vassarotti: Again, I will ask Dr Rayner to speak.

THE CHAIR: Minister, these are your words.

Ms Vassarotti: All right. My thinking and the advice that has been provided to me have evolved.

THE CHAIR: And completely changed.

Ms Vassarotti: They have evolved. While there is a recognition of the impact of this species, particularly as a nuisance species, in terms of my personal understanding, the advice that has been provided to me has evolved, particularly in terms of the threats to threatened species and particularly on the peri-urban environment.

I think that it is beholden on our elected officials to draw on the evolving advice of our scientists. As the minister for the environment, that is something that I stand for. I will shift my position with changing evidence. As someone who trained as an academic, I

would assume that you would do so as well.

THE CHAIR: Can you please table the evidence that has shifted the government's opinion from 2021 to 2024?

Ms Vassarotti: Dr Rayner has noted a number of research pieces—

THE CHAIR: That are all dated in the early—

Dr Rayner: A key part of what is impeding this conversation is the fact that a lot of the evidence we have collected is not yet published. We are having a debate around peer review here, and I can appreciate that people might be critical of evidence that might be brought to light or information that we are using to make decisions about strategic conservation action that is not in the published literature. I can appreciate the concerns around that. However, there is, in my opinion, a huge lack of evidence that suggests that the impacts are there. There is a huge burden of proof that sits on the government to demonstrate non-impact and almost a complete absence of evidence that suggests impact.

I appreciate the evidence that has been raised through Dr Grarock's paper in terms of correlations among species. However, we are trying to work in an environment where we are drilling down to mechanistic drivers of threat. There has been a huge amount of evidence gathered in the last five years or so—maybe 10—that is drilling down to mechanistic impacts of common myna on our native biodiversity and its—

THE CHAIR: Can you table it?

Dr Rayner: I can table it, but it will not be peer reviewed.

THE CHAIR: Anything more, because the communities out there are completely struggling with this—

Ms Vassarotti: Dr Paterson, the evidence has evolved.

THE CHAIR: Yes, but what is the evidence?

Ms Vassarotti: My position has evolved.

THE CHAIR: Can you please table it?

Ms Vassarotti: Dr Rayner has already taken on notice that she will table that evidence.

Dr Rayner: Further evidence.

Ms Vassarotti: Further evidence.

Dr Rayner: The trend report that you have stated repeatedly is not published is strong evidence, incredibly strong evidence, that this species, common mynas, is in significant long-term decline in this region. When we are considering all of the impacts from all of the pest animals and all of the responsibilities we have, a pest animal or pest species

that is in long-term, significant, severe decline is unlikely to be one that we prioritise for our resources.

THE CHAIR: We will end the hearing now. I would like to thank you all for your time and for your evidence. The hearing is closed.

The committee adjourned at 2.04 pm.