



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SENATE

**RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT REFERENCES
COMMITTEE**

Reference: Commercial utilisation of native wildlife

ALICE SPRINGS

Tuesday, 5 August 1997

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

CANBERRA

SENATE
RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Members:

Senator Woodley (Chair)

Senator Calvert	Senator Crane
Senator Bob Collins	Senator Foreman
Senator Conroy	Senator Heffernan

Participating members

Senator Abetz	Senator Gibbs
Senator Bob Brown	Senator Lundy
Senator Brownhill	Senator Margetts
Senator Chapman	Senator Murphy
Senator Colston	Senator Murray
Senator Cook	Senator O'Brien
Senator Eggleston	Senator Tambling
Senator Ferris	Senator West

Matters referred for inquiry into and report on:

- (a) the potential impact which commercial utilisation of native wildlife might have on the Australian environment;
- (b) the current and future economic viability of these commercial activities; and
- (c) the adequacy of existing Federal Government regulations and controls to ensure biodiversity of any native species commercially utilised.

WITNESSES

GAMBOLD, Mr Nicholas John, Land Assessment Officer, Central Land Council, 33 Stuart Highway, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 293

HARRIS, Alderman Geoffrey Donald, 6 McKay Street, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 0870 307

HILLERY, Ms Melinda Jane, Convenor, Arid Lands Environment Centre, Gregory Terrace, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 317

ROSE, Mr Bruce Owen, Manager, Land Management, Central Land Council, 33 Stuart Highway, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 293

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Present

Senator Woodley (Chair)

Senator Ferris

Senator Foreman

The committee met at 12.11 p.m.

Senator Woodley took the chair.

CHAIR—Today the committee holds its fourth public hearing on the subject of the commercial utilisation of Australian native wildlife. The first hearing was held in Canberra on 2 December 1996 and hearings were held in Brisbane and Cairns during the first week of July this year. The committee also conducted a number of inspections in the Brisbane and Cairns regions. Tomorrow the committee will hold a hearing in Darwin and next week hearings and inspections will be held in Perth and Adelaide.

This matter was referred to the committee by the Senate on 30 October 1996. To date the committee has received over 330 submissions, many of which have had lengthy and comprehensive attachments. I might add that the ones I have read are very substantial.

The committee's terms of reference are broad ranging and require the committee to look at all aspects of the commercialisation of Australian native wildlife. On 27 May 1997 the committee tabled an interim report which noted that, because the subject was a complex one and because some aspects of it were of considerable concern to many people, the committee have decided to conduct an extensive program of public hearings and inspections throughout Australia. This hearing today is part of that program. The reporting date for the inquiry is the last sitting day in February 1998.

Before we commence taking evidence, let me state that this is a public hearing and as such members of the public are welcome to attend. For the record, all witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to submissions made to the committee and evidence given before it. Parliamentary privilege means special rights and immunities attached to the parliament or its members and others necessary for the discharge of the functions of the parliament without obstruction and without fear of prosecution. Any act by any person which operates to the disadvantage of a witness on account of evidence given by him or her before the Senate or any committee of the Senate is treated as a breach of privilege.

[12.13 p.m.]

GAMBOLD, Mr Nicholas John, Land Assessment Officer, Central Land Council, 33 Stuart Highway, Alice Springs, Northern Territory

ROSE, Mr Bruce Owen, Manager, Land Management, Central Land Council, 33 Stuart Highway, Alice Springs, Northern Territory

CHAIR—You are very welcome. It is good to have you here. I have read your report with great interest, and my copy has got underlining and stars and things all over it. I am not sure if I will get time to ask all the questions. If you have an opening statement we would be happy to hear that and then we will continue with some dialogue.

Mr Rose—I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity for the Central Land Council to present some information to this hearing. I have a summary of some of the issues that we raised in our submission and want to reiterate here. I will quickly go through some of the background which we think is very important in understanding the land council's position.

Central Land Council is, as you are aware, a statutory body set up under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. It is composed of 83 delegates who are elected from communities throughout the region. From those 83 Aboriginal delegates an 11-member executive is elected, and those are the key policy making positions of the Aboriginal land council. The executive delegates power to the director of the land council, who directs day-to-day activities of staff.

The constituents of the Central Land Council have not been specifically consulted on the question which is the main focus of this hearing. However, there are a number of ongoing issues and work the land council has been doing with land-holders which impinge on these issues and which we want to present today.

The Central Land Council is largely in support of the submission which was provided by the Northern Land Council, which is a much more detailed submission than the one we have provided to the hearing. However, there are some significant differences that we would like to point out. Specifically, they relate to environmental limitations of Central Australia and of the arid zone—particularly the capricious rainfall, low soil fertility and low species density that we have in Central Australia, which make some of the recommendations from the NLC report less relevant here.

The Central Land Council has a large land management section, which supports enterprise activities from Aboriginal land-holders in the region as well as providing other services including land assessment, resource assessment, assistance with land use planning and assistance with contact with outside interests on Aboriginal land. The principal land uses in the region remain those which are based around traditional land use and

management of bush resources. These activities have a high social, cultural and economic return for the community and for out-stations throughout the region.

There are limited opportunities, however, for commercial land use across the region. There is high unemployment in remote Aboriginal communities. Pastoralism is generally a very marginal activity in the Central Australian environment. There is low agricultural potential, there are some other potential commercial uses such as tourism, and of course mining is an important land use in Central Australia. However, there is very limited opportunity for communities to develop commercial enterprises of their own. Added to that, within Central Australia the bird and mammal fauna is widely recognised as being characterised by species decline, and in many cases the loss of species, so we have quite a severe limitation on what sorts of activities can be undertaken in Central Australia.

However, within this context the land council recognises that the commercial utilisation of native wildlife on Aboriginal land could present an opportunity for sustainable enterprise development for Aboriginal people. The Central Land Council sees the following areas of opportunity for Aboriginal people.

There is potential for programs utilising the selection and live capture of breeding stock by Aboriginal people under the guidance of wildlife experts, as the collection of breeding stock would be more financially rewarding than the sale of stock on a per animal basis.

Aboriginal people and their organisations have highlighted the need for research on issues such as species decline, and are collaborating with research organisations such as CSIRO in looking at ways to provide that sort of information about the sustainability or otherwise of native species. Aboriginal people and their organisations would be keen to be involved in this sort of research, in monitoring and in implementing sustainable wildlife harvesting activities on their land.

The Central Land Council sees the introduction of commercial wildlife utilisation as an opportunity to establish a regulated commercial environment in which Aboriginal landowners might successfully participate. Aboriginal landowners would also welcome the conservation benefits which the Parks and Wildlife Commission, in proposing commercial utilisation, has suggested will be significant.

However, there are a number of concerns which need to be raised in considering commercial utilisation. Commercial utilisation should not and must not threaten Aboriginal people's ability to enjoy their rights to land and to natural resources. Commercial utilisation on Aboriginal land must remain in the control of traditional owners of that land. Commercial utilisation should not be seen as a conservation measure. Conservation benefits are an expected result of any sustainable wildlife utilisation operation.

The benefits of hunting and bush tucker collection to Aboriginal communities in most cases far outweigh the projected financial returns from the commercial utilisation of the same resources. Wildlife utilisation is already the principal land use on Aboriginal lands. Commercialisation, we feel, has the potential to undermine the existing enterprise, which is vital to the cultural and physical wellbeing of traditional landowners in the Northern Territory.

There is a concern that commercial utilisation of native species may interfere with some of the cultural mechanisms that restrict subsistence wildlife utilisation such as taboos on hunting outside designated areas, reciprocal species use arrangements and restrictions on the methods of hunting. The primary concern of Aboriginal people is that they retain rights to control and manage their lands and resources. Any form of commercial use of wildlife should not negatively impact on subsistence land uses in any way.

Situations where the concerns we have raised might be more adequately addressed or minimised will include harvesting through a carefully controlled process which ensures that there is adequate monitoring and regulation to ensure sustainability. We feel that these sorts of outcomes will be more likely where harvesting is taking place for wild populations which are feral, artificially displaced, or occur in artificially high numbers. These present the best opportunities to avoid potential conflict with current Aboriginal land uses, and the existing relationship between Aboriginal people and the wildlife.

Senator FERRIS—I also found the submission fascinating reading. Like Senator Woodley, I have made marks through much of it. It seems to me that one of the difficulties in this issue is to achieve the balance between—as you have already said—the conservation of animals for environmental purposes and, in the case of the Central Land Council, the conservation of wildlife for Aboriginal native purposes, and how we get that balance right. Do you have any specific views on how we should approach that?

Mr Rose—The way the Land Council would approach that is to say that, if Aboriginal people are able to make decisions about what is happening on their land, they would be in a position to strike the balance that is right for them. I think it is fraught with difficulty to try and identify ways—perhaps there are scientific ways—we can find a balance. Unless those decisions are understood, and unless Aboriginal people are empowered we will never really know whether our solution is going to meet their needs. I think that through empowering Aboriginal people and giving them the information they need will they be able to make decisions about what is to happen on their land. It will then be their responsibility and it will be within their power to make decisions for themselves.

Senator FERRIS—Clearly, there are a lot of Northern Territory Aborigines who are part of the Northern Land Council's care group, if you like, who do not own land and who live on land that is not owned by them. How would you see them having access to the same opportunities?

Mr Rose—The Land Council also represents Aboriginal people who do not own their land: Aboriginal people whose traditional land is now pastoral lease or national park.

Senator FERRIS—Or even urban.

Mr Rose—That is right. Aboriginal people have rights of access to pastoral leases in the Northern Territory, to hunt and visit sites on those lands. So the information about sustainability, and about the impacts of those uses and other uses is still very relevant for them in decision making.

Mr Gambold—And needs to take them into account as resource users.

Senator FERRIS—I am thinking of Aboriginals who might live in urban Alice Springs or urban Darwin. How do you get the balance right for those people? Do they have to go and seek permission to gather food on Aboriginal owned property of another group or do they have to seek permission to hunt on pastoral leases? How do urbanised Northern Territory Aborigines have access, as you are saying, through self-empowerment, to the collection of bush tucker, if you like?

Mr Rose—I suppose there is quite a range of situations. They may not be able to visit some people's country. But a lot of people who are based in Alice Springs may have rights under Aboriginal law to visit some areas of their own people or other people's based on reciprocal responsibilities and rights.

It is a difficult question to answer speaking in such general terms. I suppose the important thing in managing those sorts of impacts has been the cultural strengths, the cultural traditions of Aboriginal people. I think it is important that those things are able to be continued and strengthened where possible.

Senator FERRIS—What percentage of Northern Territory Aboriginals would you think were still living on what we might call today 'bush tucker'?

Mr Gambold—It varies enormously depending on people's situations. It is more a percentage of how much of their actual diet consists of bush tucker. It is not so much a question of that, it is how important bush tucker is to them culturally. You might have Aboriginal people living within Alice Springs—they may be fairly urbanised people—who place an enormous amount of store in being able to go out and collect bush tucker because that is their only contact with the country.

Senator FERRIS—Even though they may not necessarily eat it?

Mr Gambold—Yes, they would eat it. They may not collect it on a day-to-day basis, it might be on a monthly basis or even a yearly basis but it would be vitally important to them. There might be resources that are being used for specific cultural

events too.

Senator FERRIS—The other area that I found really intriguing in your submission is on page 8 where it states:

Similarly, we recommend an investigation into the benefits of trophy hunting because it may provide high returns with little environmental and social impact.

Could you elaborate a little on that?

Mr Rose—I will just point out that the submission that you are looking at is the Northern Land Council one.

Senator FERRIS—Separate. Sorry about that. Do you have any comments on that?

Mr Rose—I suppose it applies more in the northern region to animals that could be seen as trophies, crocodiles, buffalo and other species which do not occur down here.

Mr Gambold—I could not hazard a position on that.

Mr Rose—I suppose in general they are talking about some sort of specialist access to the country, specialist tourism wildlife harvesting. I think in a situation where people were controlled—that is, there are fewer people accessing the country and doing so on a basis which is providing high returns to the community, and perhaps doing it in areas which the community sanctions—there is the potential there for a higher return and minimum or less impact.

Senator FERRIS—Do you think your people would be supportive in principle of something such as trophy hunting if it were to be available in your area?

Mr Gambold—If there were resource species of that kind, and I would imagine there would be. It really represents minor species use, in terms of the number of individual animals you are utilising, for high returns. I would imagine that the CLC would look at that and put it in the best case scenario basket rather than commercial wildlife utilisation where you are looking at harvesting large numbers of any particular population.

Mr Rose—Again, I think it would vary greatly depending on which animals you are talking about. In some areas people may have very strong concerns about outsiders hunting a particular animal if it was of significance or cultural importance. Some of the feral species in central Australia—for example, camels—while perhaps not such a great trophy on the wall might present some sort of a hunting experience or something that people might support.

In our research and in working with landowners, we have found that people in general support utilisation of species, particularly feral species, but they do not support culling. Perhaps this is a situation where utilisation—for example, hunting one animal for a trophy—might be condoned. Again, it would really be up to the community.

Senator FOREMAN—Paragraph 1 on page 5 of your submission, in respect to the intensive farming of wildlife, says that there is considerable debate over whether intensive commercial farming of wildlife is an economic venture, only without any tangible benefit to the conservation of the targeted species in the wild. You go on to say that some argue that there is no economic incentive to assist with the habitat preservation or species management in the wild and that, in fact, collection from the wild is cheap and easy. Would you like to comment on those points?

Mr Gambold—Inherent in the motivation for commercialisation of wildlife utilisation—because there need to be some fairly significant benefits for Aboriginal people and for conservation in general, before we get into taking on commercial wildlife utilisation—because of the inherent dangers, there do need to be serious benefits in those areas. I do not think commercial farming of wild species is going to provide any conservation benefits to those species and may in fact be deleterious, as in the case of Gouldian finches.

You have got lots of Gouldian finches in captive populations, but that has led to the transfer of pathogens to the wild populations and to the extinction of the birds of that particular species in the wild. In that case and in many other cases, there has been a very negative impact on wild populations from farming that particular species. But we would like to see attached to commercial wildlife utilisation very strong benefits for Aboriginal people and for the conservation of their regional species in general.

Senator FOREMAN—In your general comments in respect of wildlife utilisation, you say that in many cases commercial utilisation has resulted in dire consequences for the species concerned where targeted species are over-utilised before enough information is known about them to establish sustainable levels of harvest. Would you care to comment on that and maybe on some of the general comments that you make there?

Mr Gambold—Yes. That has been the case with virtually every species that has been commercially utilised—and non-commercial utilisation in many respects has also led to the decline of those species.

CHAIR—Does it depend on the kind of utilisation, though? I am very interested in your example of the Gouldian finch. Are there other species that have suffered that same fate? I can think of some. It depends how they are commercially utilised. Thinking of John Walmsley and his breeding of species, particularly for their conservation value but also commercially, he has certainly increased populations of some species. It is good to get the fate of the Gouldian finch on the record, because I have heard that assertion made

but without examples; but yours is a clear one.

Mr Gambold—That particular pathogen seems to be spreading to quite a number of species now, including to budgies and long-tailed finches and whatnot. For the CLC, the central question is this: you have got large numbers of Aboriginal people living on their land, which is basically 50 per cent of the Northern Territory. Those people are actively utilising wildlife every day, and it is very integral to their lifestyle, culture and wellbeing. To bring in commercialisation of that utilisation, over the top of what they are already doing, may in fact significantly impinge on their lifestyle, culture and wellbeing.

CHAIR—It changes their whole relationship, does it not?

Mr Gambold—It does; and you may get a situation which is analogous to some of the situations on Aboriginal land where some of the community are very keen to have established pastoral operations on that land and where the other half of the community are keen to just be accessing the country for traditional uses. That dichotomy can be a disastrous thing for many communities. I can see exactly the same situation arising with this commercialisation of wildlife coming in over the top of a quite significant economy that is going on at the moment out there—with its own checks and balances, I might add.

CHAIR—I would like to continue on that line. How far north does the Central Land Council jurisdiction extend?

Mr Rose—We have brought in a map of the Northern Territory, which has been produced by the Central Land Council with our geographic information system. There is a green line which follows the boundaries of parks and pastoral leases in Aboriginal land. That is the boundary between the Northern and Central Land Councils.

CHAIR—Do you go into South Australia?

Mr Rose—No; the land rights act only applies to the Northern Territory. There are a number of traditional owners for Aboriginal land in the Territory who reside outside the state.

CHAIR—The Pitjantjatjara do.

Mr Rose—Yes; or, for example, people live in Mt Isa who are traditional owners for this country. So the land council will discuss issues with those people, but we are primarily dealing with land which is within the land council region.

Yellow denotes Aboriginal land on this map. The brown areas are pastoral leases. The pale green parts are national parks held under Northern Territory Aboriginal freehold title. The orange areas are areas of land which are currently under claim under the NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act. The land council region covers an area of about 775,000

square kilometres within the Northern Territory—which occupies a total of 1,350,000 square kilometres—so that represents about 55 per cent of the land area.

CHAIR—It is useful to get that information because, when we are talking to the Northern Land Council, we need to have a rough idea of that in our heads. I have visited some of the Pitjantjatjara lands, but it was many years ago. There was a very big cattle industry at one stage. Does that still exist?

Mr Rose—In the Pitjantjatjara lands, I am not quite sure of the situation. I am sure that there would be at least one venture there, Fregon. Within our region there are a lot of different types of pastoral ventures occurring. There are fully commercial ventures on a pastoral lease such as Mistake Creek, which is under claim to be Aboriginal land, quite high up in the northern end of the land council region, with access to markets from Darwin. It is live-exporting beasts and has been quite a successful commercial venture.

At the other extreme, there are leases which are now Aboriginal land but which perhaps never should have had a cow on them, because of their marginal nature—sticking out into the Simpson Desert, or something similar—and which now carry very few, if any, animals. There is also Aboriginal land which has never previously been a pastoral lease, where Aboriginal people are introducing cattle on a small scale, either as a killer herd or as a small local economic enterprise venture.

CHAIR—The reason I am asking that is—and this inquiry is so jolly wide; it is as big as the country, this inquiry—that we were very interested to visit an Aboriginal community at Cherbourg, which is a different kind of community altogether to the more traditional communities here but it is an Aboriginal community, where they have captive breeding and farming of emus. So far it seems to be, economically, a reasonably successful venture, but it is not in any sense traditional gathering at all; it is quite intensive farming. Do you think there is any scope for the farming of, say, emus in this area or of any other species?

Mr Rose—There are a number of points that I would like to make. Pastoralism has become a large land use for Aboriginal people because of their involvement with the industry over the years. The people worked on pastoral leases. People's fathers and grandfathers worked and lived on pastoral leases for such a long time that it has become very much part of people's aspirations in a lot of areas. At the same time, a lot of other sorts of agricultural ventures have failed.

Community citrus farming, various sorts of market gardens and other sorts of animal domestication have often failed through lack of ownership, I think, from the community. It is being introduced from an outside interest because it is a good idea but it is not being sustained by the community themselves. Those two aspects have to be taken into account. People do not have a strong farming tradition. At the same time the impacts of native animals, like emus for example, being farmed in a semi-natural environment

might be far less than farming cows. So there may be quite a significant opportunity there for people to become involved in those things.

CHAIR—The Cherbourg experiment is really very interesting; quite fascinating. It is large scale. Cherbourg itself is also a little township and it is quite landlocked. They do not have any opportunity for traditional activities at all.

Mr Gambold—Generally people having the option to get into that sort of thing might be a good thing within central Australia. They would be very difficult ventures for most Aboriginal people in central Australia to come in on. In terms of farming Australian wildlife, there needs to be quite a bit of serious research done because it is an area that has been sadly lacking for many years. You need to put the horse before the cart and have some of that research—

CHAIR—That would be a change, wouldn't it?

Mr Gambold—Yes, it would. It would be nice to see Aboriginal people, with their great knowledge of the central Australian environment and the Australian environment in general, being part of that research. I think that would be a very good outcome.

CHAIR—Part of the purpose of this inquiry—obviously we cannot do research—is to at least gather across Australia these kinds of concerns so that we get them on the record. If we could encourage you: the federal environment department is very interested in our inquiry because they are aware that there is a whole lot of work they should be doing. It may be that we can prompt or give a spur to some of that.

I notice you are critical—and this might also illustrate some of the things you are saying—of the Desert Park enterprise as being a lost opportunity in terms of Aboriginal involvement. I am not wanting to get you into a fight with the Desert Park but, for the record, it would be useful if you would expand on that. You feel the opportunity was lost?

Mr Rose—The main point is that the Northern Territory government has refused to engage the land councils in discussions in regard to native title. That was the issue over the park; there is a native title claim there, and so negotiations over an outcome should have been able to take place. Traditional owners are keen to be involved in some measure. There were employment outcomes that could have come out of it which may not have eventuated. It comes back to the fact that the Northern Territory government was not prepared to accept that it should negotiate any of those issues to do with the park.

CHAIR—That seems a pity—I suppose I had better make it a question rather than a speech. My last visit to Ayers Rock was about nine years ago but it seemed to me, having visited Ayers Rock since about 1969 periodically, with the improvement in the environment around Ayers Rock and in the educational use of it, that the involvement of the traditional owners in all of that has been very successful. That was my perception nine

years ago. Is that still a fair statement to make today?

Mr Rose—In an international sense there is a lot of attention paid to the joint management which happens at Ayers Rock. There are a number of improvements one could always make and a criticism which traditional landowners from that region would make is that their level of involvement in joint management has been less than they could have hoped for. That is currently being addressed, we are hoping, through the new plan of management which will come into effect.

CHAIR—That is still in the Northern Territory, isn't it?

Mr Rose—Yes.

Mr Gambold—It is largely managed by a federal government body: ANCA, as it was, or Environment Australia, as it is now. So it is a fairly different situation to the situation elsewhere in the Northern Territory.

CHAIR—Somewhere in the submission you were talking about maybe there being some opportunity for feral animals—I imagine the harvesting or whatever of feral animals. Were you seeing that simply in terms of the environmental value of getting rid of some of them? Or were you thinking of something beyond that?

Mr Rose—Both. There is environmental value in lowering the numbers but there is also potential employment for Aboriginal people and potential commercial ventures there. There are large numbers of feral camels, horses and donkeys in different regions within the Central Land Council region that would support an ongoing industry of a sort—commercial utilisation. We think it would have benefits from both directions.

There have been ventures of various sorts based on feral animals, with varying degrees of success. The difficulty is the distance from the markets where they sell the meat. Camels present an opportunity both in terms of meat and as live animals for a range of uses. There are a couple of small ventures which are still utilising camels, where people may capture 10 or 15 camels over a period of a month or a couple of months. The Central Land Council manages a cooperatively owned truck to help assist those groups with transporting the camels into town or to abattoirs or wherever.

CHAIR—So that is in terms of camels, donkeys and horses. Goats?

Mr Rose—Not in the Northern Territory; a bit further south.

CHAIR—Are they mostly harvested for their meat? Is that the main product?

Mr Gambold—Camels are being sold for stud purposes and restocking. Better market.

CHAIR—They are utilising camels to ride for tourism.

Mr Rose—The central Australian camel industry has had a steering committee over a number of years and now has a committee which has looked at a whole range of possible uses for camel meat: export of meat into specialist markets in the Far East and different types of products. A whole range have been investigated. There are possibilities there, but for an ongoing small industry.

CHAIR—The other interesting thing, and it is something that is developing in some areas—I do not know that there are Aboriginal people involved—is that of bush tucker outlets through specialised restaurants. There is one in Adelaide and one in Cairns. Are Aboriginal people involved in that at all, in gathering. They gather that food for, as you say, cultural reasons but would it be a problem for them, culturally, to gather it for commercial reasons or is there no scope for that?

Mr Gambold—Central Land Council are at the moment looking into the commercial utilisation of vegetative bush tucker. I do not think there is a great cultural problem with it. People are actively working collecting seed and things for sale. One of the biggest problems at the moment for Aboriginal people collecting stuff on their land is that the returns for it are very small because it is being sold through a third party. Also, the Northern Territory government is charging a levy on what people collect, prior to them collecting it. So it is a big disincentive to people to go out and collect if they know they have to have \$50 in their pocket to buy a permit before they can go out and collect four kilos of a particular seed. It is not something that is going to happen.

CHAIR—It is a very European concept that one, is it not?

Mr Gambold—It is a very European concept and a very European approach. For fauna species, there are quite often taboos attached to particular species and there are responsibilities attached to particular species. Let us say someone goes out and hunts and kills a red kangaroo. They have an obligation to let the person who is responsible for red kangaroos know that that animal has been killed. There would then be some reciprocal arrangement. So there are these very complex checks and measures on species utilisation working in most cases. In some areas things have disappeared and in central Australia I think we are very much on the verge. It is a very fine line but in most cases those checks and measures work quite well.

CHAIR—I just do not know how this would work in central Australia but there are, I think—and we can ask the Northern Land Council how they are going on this—on some of the islands off Arnhem Land, tourism ventures which involve staying at an Aboriginal community, gathering bush tucker and taking people to experience that. I do not know how successful those ventures are but they certainly looked a real possibility to me when I saw them.

Mr Rose—It is certainly the case that people in central Australia are involved with tourists. They bring others to their country specifically to show them the country and the environment there and they are often keen to show people bush tucker. People are involved locally with various sorts of tourism enterprises which involve showing people how to catch witchetty grubs or other types of foods that can be collected. There is that element of involvement with the tourism industry but, as Nick was saying, there is quite a low level but widespread involvement in terms of collecting things like grass seed or acacia seed for resale. The potential is there for a range of other industries based on perhaps flowers or a whole lot of other resources out bush. We have a research project happening at the moment just looking at the opportunities that people are going to have—those that are likely to be the most successful, most sustainable opportunities for some sort of venture based on bush resource use.

CHAIR—It is interesting that you mention flowers. One of the things that has disturbed me, and probably the committee, is the fact that both our fauna and flora have been taken overseas. Overseas countries are now commercially growing emus and a lot of the flowers and actually selling them into markets that would have been great if they had been markets for, say, our Aboriginal people. I think it is a tragedy.

Senator FERRIS—Could you talk in a bit more detail about the sustainable use on, say, an Aboriginal pastoral property of the animals on the property. I was interested in your comments that if someone shoots a red kangaroo, or kills a red kangaroo in some other way, they have to let the person who is responsible for the red kangaroos know. On a pastoral property, how do you maintain the balance of the wildlife that is on that property? Is there an informal way of doing it or is it structured? Is the man or the woman responsible for the red kangaroo also responsible for documenting other animals? How do you sustain a viable food source on an Aboriginal pastoral property?

Mr Rose—I think Nick alluded to the traditional mechanisms whereby people maintained and expressed their rights to use resources, and that that had in-built checks and balances associated with it.

Senator FERRIS—That is what I would like to know about, the checks and balances.

Mr Rose—A lot of the balance has disappeared in the case of, say, a European pastoral lease that may have been located on that country. An example from the MacDonnell Ranges is that there are very important waterholes in the ranges, at Running Waters Yard, and other places in the West MacDonnell Ranges, which, because of their permanent water, were the first places that were looked at for supporting cattle when people came to the centre. They were very important places, where hunting taboos were in place so that people could not go into those areas to hunt, based on traditional and custom stories passed down.

But white fellows were able to go in there and use that for cattle. That was probably a very significant factor leading to the extinction of species because of the importance of that place as a refuge in very dry times. So when you put cattle over the country you are very likely changing the whole balance of the other species that are going to be there. You are probably not going to have as many kangaroos and other animals that people are hunting. Of course, rabbits have been, and continue to be, a big issue in changing the balance. With cattle, and with communities located in one area, rather than people living a fairly mobile existence and moving around their country, those balances have started to break down. Obviously a lot of species have disappeared in the past.

I think that, locally, resources are being heavily impacted around sedentary communities. So these traditional mechanisms may not be all that is required now to ensure the survival of these species; although, they are a very important way for people to start to deal with the issues. I think they need reinforcing but also with scientific and other information to help people work out how to do it.

Senator FERRIS—Would those comments apply on Aboriginal owned and managed land as well? In other words, do most of the Aboriginal pastoral properties currently run cattle?

Mr Rose—That is a complicated picture. Most of the Aboriginal owned pastoral properties would run cattle but generally at lower levels than previously. In some cases, they would run no cattle. Some properties are seen as very commercially oriented ventures. Others are much more of a balance between a venture that is clearly economically valuable and that of traditional use and other uses. So I think there is a big spectrum there. Yes, the same problems would apply on Aboriginal-owned properties as to Aboriginal people managing it or being involved with another pastoral lease. Cows are cows, and those sorts of impacts or the total grazing pressure are going to increase and the situation becomes much more complex.

Senator FERRIS—I am interested in trying to better understand how you ensure, in traditional food source areas, that the traditional food sources are not put under such great pressure as species disappear.

Mr Gambold—The section of the CLC that I work for, which is the Land Assessment and Planning Section, deals with that quite a lot, and actually looks at people's use of their country. If they have taken up an Aboriginal land trust and recently moved back onto their country, we look at how they are going to manage it in the future. We sit down with people and say, 'We can look at mapping out the best country—where to put your herd.' When we are mapping out where they are going to put their paddock and have their 100 head of cattle, we take into serious consideration people's existing land uses, which involves traditional bush tucker harvesting.

The upshot of it all is that there is a traditional Aboriginal conservation ethic out

there. But the CLC is open to proposals for commercial wildlife utilisation, with the caveat that you need to be very careful that they do not override or completely obliterate the existing traditional conservation ethic, because it is what we need to build on to keep things intact. Central Australia is a very fragile place. We have lost 50 per cent of our mammal species here.

CHAIR—I think your last words are the ones we really have to take away with us and spell out further with the Northern Land Council, too. I think the value of your submission is the warning about the fragility of the arid lands, and the whole issue of the cultural appropriateness of what you are doing. We were very interested in Brisbane to get some advice from biologists from the Queensland University who talked about the way in which land-holders in Africa had been able to add conservation value because they were given ownership of the animals on their property as well as simply ownership of the land. Your warning in the submission that you cannot necessarily make that jump to Australian conditions is a good one.

Mr Gambold—That is right; it is a very different situation here. Maybe these proposals, particularly within the Northern Territory, and coming through the proposal for commercial wildlife utilisation—as it will come through the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory—really need to be linked to a raft of commercial conservation type initiatives, which would include the indigenous protected areas proposal that Environment Australia has put up, and which, I guess, the Parks and Wildlife Commission are being a bit circumspect about applying to any land other than Aboriginal-owned land. I think that commercial utilisation of wildlife needs to be linked to other conservation measures like indigenous protected areas and stewardship.

CHAIR—You have added quite a few more dimensions to our inquiry. This is what we were hoping to get by coming here. We have got a long way to go. Thank you for your attendance.

Luncheon adjournment

[1.34 p.m.]

HARRIS, Alderman Geoffrey Donald, 6 McKay Street, Alice Springs, Northern Territory 0870

CHAIR—Welcome, Alderman Harris. We presume that you are an alderman in Alice Springs?

Alderman Harris—That is correct, and I am appearing here in my capacity as an individual alderman.

CHAIR—Thank you for your written submission. We do not need you to read it; we will be able to have some dialogue about that. But if you want to make an opening statement, feel free to do that and then we will put some questions.

Alderman Harris—There are probably three key points in the submission. The first one relates to the risk of commercial utilisation of wildlife. I guess I am asking this committee and the federal government to consider the risk in any policy or legislation that you are devising and weigh that up against the benefits. You will obviously be doing that but it is an important factor, given that some types of exploitation—for example, roo culling—are quite expensive to operate and the benefits do not necessarily outweigh the costs. Where that cost comes from is also important because often it is conservation money which is used to monitor things like commercial utilisation of wildlife and that may reduce resources for direct conservation.

The other issue in terms of risk is the example of the fishing industry, which probably represents the best developed exploitation of wildlife. Quite a bit of research has been done by economists and other people into that industry and the significant problems that happen with fishing of a wild resource. A similar sort of theoretical framework will apply to commercial exploitation of any species of wildlife. It is obviously quite difficult to control that exploitation to make sure that it does not have a major ecological impact. Those are the main points I would like to make.

CHAIR—I notice that you underline the whole issue of fishing as one of the problems of over-exploitation of a species. Are you talking about freshwater or saltwater fishing?

Alderman Harris—Saltwater mainly, because that is where the big machinery comes into play. I have not seen much on freshwater fishing in terms of an industry, but I presume that you would have similar problems, because you are talking about a small area which is quite easy to overfish.

CHAIR—I hear what you are saying, but I am not necessarily convinced that you can actually jump from what has happened to deepwater fishing stocks in the ocean and

farming of native species in Australia. Maybe, as we have further discussion, that will become a bit clearer. One of the issues in terms of ocean fishing is that there is some hope that farming of bluefin tuna in South Australia may restore some of those stocks, which would seem to be the other side of the argument you are putting.

Alderman Harris—That is a different situation from what I thought this committee was about. That is more a fish farming situation as opposed to exploitation in the wild. The big problem with any commercial utilisation of wildlife is that there is an incentive for people to over-exploit, because the people who are exploiting the resource do not bear the cost of generating it. With regard to fish that are swimming around in the ocean, the marginal cost of increasing the number of fish you catch is very small, so the incentive is there to keep fishing until it is much harder to find the fish. However, if you are talking about a farming situation, you actually bear the cost of growing the stock to a commercial size and then catching them and processing them. So it is that incentive that is the problem in the fishing industry.

CHAIR—So your concern is really more to do with harvesting from the wild than farming. I probably have some of the same concerns about straight-out harvesting. The committee is interested very much in all kinds of commercial utilisation, which certainly includes farming. We have had quite a bit of evidence from farming. I do not know whether you want to make a distinction yourself on that. In Queensland, emu farming and crocodile farming certainly have increased numbers, rather than decreased them, but there would still be questions about intensive farming.

Alderman Harris—I guess I should have said, when I started, that mostly what I thought about in writing my submission was the semi-arid and arid zone. That significantly restricts a lot of the potential in terms of farming. It is also an area where one of the key problems with land management and land damage is the problem of people trying to make a living off a piece of country which is not particularly productive; so if there are ways of farming native animals in a relatively sustainable way and getting income off a piece of land, then it is probably a good option to explore. But that is a different situation to straight exploiting wildlife, because you are talking about a different level of management. Anyone can come along and grab a bunch of plants off a property, but it is much more difficult for someone to actually grow those plants for commercial purposes.

CHAIR—It is helpful to get that clarified. I must say we all read things with a framework in our own minds, and if I read your submission in terms of simply harvesting wildlife in the wild then it makes more sense. I had a number of questions that were to do with farming of species.

I do not know whether you are familiar with the work of Dr John Walmsley. He is fairly controversial. I hope that we might be able to get him before the committee some time. The work that he has done has been quite significant in extending the numbers of

some of the endangered species, and in his case that is certainly commercialisation. He makes a buck out of it, but he certainly has a conservation value, I think, as his bottom line. He is pretty committed in that way.

Alderman Harris—Yes, although I would distinguish his operation and the broader context of conservation in the arid and semi-arid zone. He has got 10 hectares or whatever it is, he has been able to reintroduce species in that 10 hectares, and he is intensively managing it to keep out foxes and cats. In terms of translating that here, to the conservation of mala and bilby and things like that, we have a long way to go if we are going to fence the area.

Senator FERRIS—He has a property in the Flinders Ranges, and he has also got a semi-arid property on the Murray River Plains where he is doing similar things. He did start with the hills property.

CHAIR—It is an artificially created safe haven, in a sense.

Alderman Harris—Yes. If your goal is to have mala and bilbies and mulgara and whatever in the wild, it is quite an expensive option. To me it is a bit of a sad option, too, because you have to fence them in.

CHAIR—I had better give the committee a chance.

Senator FERRIS—I have got a couple of questions. Your submission says in the second paragraph that the key consideration should be the environmental impacts, and in the next paragraph you talk about the cost of administering and managing the kangaroo cull. To take up your point of environmental impact, how else would you see us dealing with the kangaroo cull if we do not spend money on managing it as we do?

Alderman Harris—I cannot give you an easy answer on that. The issue I am trying to point out is that in terms of trying to exploit wildlife, and doing it in such a way that you are confident that there are not going to be huge environmental impacts, you need to spend the money on doing the research. Then you are in a better position to do it.

Senator FERRIS—I think the research on kangaroos has shown that it has actually been the creation of waterholes that has resulted in the difference in the balance of kangaroo numbers. As someone who has followed the kangaroo cull quite closely over the years, I am intrigued by your comment about the cost of it. Clearly that has to be a priority in making sure that the environmental impact of kangaroos is correctly balanced and managed.

Alderman Harris—That is right, but there are other options around. For example, out around Cobar there was a bloke who invented an electric fence which you can put around a waterhole. It was just two wires, so sheep could walk over it whereas a kangaroo

would put its tail on the ground to have a drink and would get an electric shock from it. So if the problem on a piece of land is that there are too many waterholes that have been artificially created and that creates a kangaroo problem, then maybe there are other solutions to it.

Senator FERRIS—I am not sure that animal liberationists or animal welfare people would be pleased about that particular one, but I was interested in the principle of it. On page 2 of your submission you talk about urging caution, which you have done again today, and suggest that we give a serious weighting to the ecological risks involved in commercial utilisation of our native species. I wonder if you could explain that a little more. I think we all concede that the natural balance that might once have existed in this country has now gone, probably forever. How are we to ensure that the food chain is more effectively balanced if we do not intervene in some way ecologically to sustain those animals which are most at risk?

Alderman Harris—Again, I am talking about the arid and semi-arid zone, so you are looking at a piece of land—

Senator FERRIS—You talk about cockatoos. You mention them at the bottom of page 2. That is an issue that I am particularly concerned about, because South Australia also has the problem. If you do not intervene in some way, how can you be sure that the red-tailed black cockatoo is not going to fall prey to hawks and so on and disappear as a natural evolution over the effluxion of time?

Alderman Harris—That is a difficult question, given that there is not a lot known about the biology and the ecology of the red-tailed black cockatoo. If you approach the issue from an ecological basis, you have to say that if we do not know there is a problem, we should not fix it, and so an application to commercially utilise red-tailed black cockatoos should be seen as a risk.

Senator FERRIS—But surely it should also be seen as an opportunity to build up the database.

Alderman Harris—It would be, if the reason for building the database was to learn about red-tailed black cockatoos. If it is just to learn about them so that we can knock a few off, then to me it is not really a conservation issue. The priorities in the Northern Territory for conservation are probably not red-tailed black cockatoos, they are things like the small mammals or better land management in some areas. Making a buck out of cockatoos tends to skew conservation thinking to say, 'We are doing this research on red-tailed black cockatoos and it is good for their conservation'; but it is taking dollars away from something else which might be a higher priority. It is quite a complex issue.

Senator FERRIS—The dimension that I am trying to explore is how you can put a value on a particular species to best ensure its survival. I suppose that is always going to

be a balance between putting the commercial value on it and putting the sustainable value on it. What I was trying to get you to explain to me was how you see that balance working.

Alderman Harris—One of the most important things—and I suspect that CLC would have talked to you about this in their submission—is where the money goes. For example, with kangaroo harvesting, not much of the money, if any in some areas, goes to the landowner or the land manager. What is essentially happening is that on a piece of country whose greatest ecological risk is overgrazing you have a situation where there is a bunch of kangaroos that have done a bit of grazing, someone has come along and shot them and someone has made some money out of them, but the person who is managing the land with sheep and cattle is in a situation where often there is a problem with viability and the kangaroo culling has not helped that situation at all. So where the money goes is quite important.

Senator FERRIS—Indirectly it goes to the graziers, because they can presumably put more animals on the land or reap a greater grain harvest as a result of kangaroos not eating the crop. So, indirectly, they benefit from the removal of kangaroos from their properties.

Alderman Harris—That is possible. I think you can probably prove that in sheep country with wool yields, but it is more difficult to prove it out here in this sort of country. I do not know whether it is appropriate to bring up references for this committee—

Senator FERRIS—It is very helpful.

Alderman Harris—There is a bloke called Geoff Cunningham who did a report on the viability of the rangelands. It clearly showed that in a lot of areas there are significant viability problems for pastoralists and graziers. To me, that is one of the biggest pressures on land management and one of the biggest conservation issues in this area, because if you have to pay the bank X dollars by January, then you have to sell X cows to make the money to pay the bank. No amount of conservation training or education is going to make your bank manager happy. You have to run the cows. You have to make the money. This is where in issues like the kangaroo cull if there is a way to put that money back into that piece of land, then I would be more comfortable with that sort of exploitation.

With the red-tailed black cockatoos, again, you look at who is going to make the money out of it. It is going to be a bunch of people who probably live in towns and who do not own a large piece of land. So it is like an extra pressure on the land or on the environment. With Aboriginal people who might live at Yuendumu, there is no economic base in Yuendumu, so if this is a way of giving people an economic base then it is probably more acceptable. That, to me, is the important issue about the value. It is not necessarily the commercial value, per se; it is also the conservation benefit in the broader

picture.

Senator FERRIS—On the final page of your submission you talk about a full range of options for conservation. Are there any more options that you would have in your mind that you have not already covered in your last remarks?

Alderman Harris—Probably not in terms of really practical options. I have not had a lot of time to think about that. But I guess it is important not to just take on dogma unchallenged from other places. I know that what John Walmsley has done on his piece of land is really good, but it does not necessarily apply everywhere. Another example that is brought up frequently is Kenya with big game animals, where it is like a privatisation of big game so individual landowners have the incentive to preserve certain animals so that tourists can come along and shoot them or look at them. While that might be a good option for Kenya, it is difficult to see a justification along those lines here in the rangelands in South Australia. For example, most of our really important mammals are a bit too small to shoot, and we do not have the same economy operating or the same economic forces that are driving those animals off. That is probably the main thing that I would like to say.

Senator FOREMAN—You mention that commercial use of wildlife already occurs to a considerable extent in Australia and that you believe that the committee will have its hands full trying to make existing exploitation ecologically sustainable, let alone profitable to taxpayers. You are urging caution and say you trust that the committee takes a long-term approach. Would you like to comment on that?

Alderman Harris—Just thinking about what happens around here, people go out and cut firewood. Probably people with gardens go out and dig up plants and bring them back and plant them. There is a lot of seed collecting. I would imagine that in the wetter areas, say, in western Victoria, that sort of thing would happen a lot more often. While you may not quite define some of it as commercial utilisation of wildlife, if people could not do it then perhaps commercial operators would be doing that sort of thing anyway in terms of getting the firewood or getting plants for cultivation and those sorts of things. That is what I mean by saying that a lot of commercial exploitation goes on already. I know there is a commercial seed collector in town. There is lots of it that happens.

In terms of the long-term view, with issues such as the rangelands you need to look at the management structures and the pressures on the land and look at strategies that effectively deal with those. In that sense, commercial utilisation of wildlife is an opportunity, but at this stage I suppose I would see it more as a risk, given that there has not been a lot of research into specific proposals. You have proposals like the red-tailed black cockatoo harvesting which does not appear to have much research at all behind it. There are no guarantees that it is going to have any conservation benefit at all, yet it is being sold as a conservation enterprise.

Senator FOREMAN—You also mentioned that there was no evidence to suggest that commercial exploitation of wild species would be good for conservation in Australia. In fact, the experience of wild species exploitation is quite the reverse, and you mentioned the fishing industry. Is that the case?

Alderman Harris—Yes. I think there are other examples, like the western red cedar on the east coast and probably logging of native forests. I guess with grazing of animals it is not directly commercial exploitation of wildlife, but it certainly has impacts.

I guess with logging you could say that you can have, for example, only one tree per hectare, but the amount of damage that might happen getting that tree out, the disease risk and things like that are unquantified, really. So that is why I am urging caution.

CHAIR—Thank you. Just a couple of questions for clarification, Geoff. Roo culling is expensive. That was one of the statements you made a couple of times. I was just wanting to tease that out a bit. In Queensland, as far as I understand it, the roo culling is done by professional shooters, who then get some value from the skins and from the meat. The only cost, as I understand it, is the tags. I was just wondering who pays the costs in the Northern Territory and what they are.

Alderman Harris—I was talking more about the cost of estimating kangaroo numbers and allocating the quotas. The actual roo industry itself is probably quite efficient. Above the dog fence here, there is not a lot of roo culling that goes on in a big way here. It is more down where there are no dingoes that kangaroo numbers are higher.

CHAIR—Just stay with the monitoring. That is mostly done by aircraft, isn't it?

Alderman Harris—I think it is done by helicopter by the federal conservation department—I am not sure what it is called these days.

Senator FERRIS—Environment Australia.

CHAIR—You do not feel that that method of monitoring is very accurate?

Alderman Harris—They are trying to do national monitoring and kangaroo numbers can sort of go up and down and can do so quite quickly.

CHAIR—They go up and down when they are moving too.

Alderman Harris—That is right. An issue that pastoralists in particular areas have to deal with is that a district might be allocated a quota but there might be several properties in the area that are completely overrun by kangaroos and others that do not have very many on their property. So there are difficulties in allocating those numbers on the ground. I am not saying that that is ineffective, but I guess the major point is it is

expensive and where is the benefit to conservation. That is the main issue.

CHAIR—It is a very long debate. I would love to think we will have got to the end of it sometime. Others would claim that it is efficient and probably the only way you can count kangaroos. I guess we are not going to resolve that debate this afternoon.

Alderman Harris—I am not arguing on the methodology either. I am just using it as an example of where the monitoring is quite expensive—

CHAIR—And paid for by the taxpayer.

Alderman Harris—Yes. It is probably conservation money that goes to do it—although I am not sure of that, but that seemed to be the case.

CHAIR—I am not sure in Queensland whether the tags are sold or not.

Senator FERRIS—Yes, they are. You buy the tags.

CHAIR—So some of that goes back to conservation. Anyway, we would need to get all the figures on the table.

Alderman Harris—I would be interested to know what the net cost is to the government.

CHAIR—It is a good question anyway and worth raising. You said in one of your general concerns about commercial utilisation:

. . . it should be proven beyond reasonable doubt that such exploitation and likely expansion of same will be ecologically sustainable.

Do you mean ecologically sustainable in terms of the species or of the land which is being used, or both?

Alderman Harris—I would hope both. Obviously it is difficult to foresee all outcomes, and that is why I put in the ‘beyond reasonable doubt’. I would hope that the decision would always be made in context. It is quite easy to look after one species so that it will be quite happy, but there might be a whole range of other impacts in the environment which should be looked at.

CHAIR—In terms of the red-tailed black cockatoo, your statement is fairly controversial. We will be talking to the Northern Territory government about that tomorrow. It will be useful to have your submission in front of us because we might pursue some of those questions with them. You would probably be interested to see what answers we get.

Alderman Harris—Yes, it would be good.

CHAIR—I would like to tease out just a few of these things. You said that there is no secure habitat to be provided for the red-tailed black cockatoo. I am not sure and, again, we will have to ask the people in Darwin about that. I would have thought if they were going to farm them that that would mean they were going to breed them in captivity. You do not know?

Alderman Harris—As I understand it, the proposal has evolved. It started off as harvesting from the wild and then trying to breed from them. Now it is collecting eggs from the wild and trying to rear them from that.

CHAIR—We looked at a couple of places in Queensland where they are trying to breed red-tailed cockatoos. It is very difficult but they are having some success. They have actually been able to increase the numbers to a certain extent but, again, I guess the jury is out on that one as to knowing which way it is going to go. We can pursue some of your questions with the government when we see them tomorrow. A cost-benefit study of how much it is costing them to put this program in place would be very useful.

A distinction was made for us—and I would like your opinion on this—very clearly. You say in No. 5 that the cruelty aspect of caging wild birds such as red-tailed black cockatoos is unacceptable. The proposition has been put to us that with taking adult birds from the wild and caging them that is certainly true. But it was put to us that if you bred animals in captivity and had proper caging—not restrictive caging but reasonable caging—that would be quite a different proposition. Do you see a distinction there?

Alderman Harris—Yes, I certainly do. I understood the original proposal could have meant taking wild birds and trying to breed from them in captivity. In terms of breeding in captivity from the egg state, personally I do not like the idea. I do not know whether you have seen them in the wild here but they are quite amazing birds; they are quite big. They do not appear well suited to the confines of a cage. But it is certainly nowhere near as traumatic to cage birds bred from eggs.

CHAIR—How do you know? You cannot ask them; that is the problem of course. It is a point that we want to pursue as we move around on our committee and get the various opinions. Testing the opinions is our biggest problem.

Alderman Harris—I am not sure whether I actually raised it properly in these questions but one of the problems in breeding things like red-tailed black cockatoos is that, at a customs level, if for example there were a permit to export those birds, it would be quite difficult actually to tell, from the policing angle of it, the difference between a wild bird and a caged one.

CHAIR—That does raise another question. Again, this is an issue on which the

committee is getting very varied evidence. The proposition is put to us by a number of commercial operators that if you had properly regulated export of some of these species, that would really begin to cut out the illegal smuggling of these birds which, of course, is very cruel. We are getting different opinions on that. That would be the export of birds bred in captivity, and exported under proper conditions, which is a lot better than smuggling them out in suitcases. As I say, the evidence we are getting is quite wide. I do not know whether you have an opinion on that.

Alderman Harris—No, without proper information it is difficult to give an opinion, but it is a major concern. If, for example, the restrictions on trade were lifted—and it is difficult to tell the difference between a wild bird and a caged bird—you may find an increase in harvesting from the wild, because you do not have to go to the expense of breeding them.

CHAIR—In No. 6 you state:

6. It is noted that if the harvesting program looks detrimental to the species, this option of complete cessation of harvesting is not one of the options listed in the Commission report.

Is that the commission for parks and wildlife in the Northern Territory?

Alderman Harris—Yes, they were the Conservation Commission, I think, when that was written. It was their draft report.

CHAIR—Thank you, Geoff, for your submission and for appearing. I do not know how many of these inquiries you have been to. They are sometimes a bit awesome to face up to, but we try to have a dialogue rather than attack witnesses, although sometimes we get into a fairly strong debate. It is very helpful to have your opinion, too.

Alderman Harris—Thank you for the opportunity.

[2.13 p.m.]

HILLERY, Ms Melinda Jane, Convenor, Arid Lands Environment Centre, Gregory Terrace, Alice Springs, Northern Territory

CHAIR—Melinda, you are very welcome. We have your written submission. If you want to make an opening statement, we would be very happy to hear that. There is no need for you to read the written submission, because we have all read that; then we can ask some questions.

Ms Hillery—I do have a few things to say. The submission that you have got in front of you addresses all of the areas of the inquiry with the exception of commercial viability, which we had no wish to comment on.

In my opening statement I will be specifically focusing my comments on what the Arid Lands Environment Centre, known locally as ALEC, perceive to be two potential outcomes of this inquiry: firstly, a possible change to the export controls over Australian native wildlife; and, secondly, changes to the regulation of commercial wildlife utilisation within Australia.

The Arid Lands Environment Centre considers that, given the poor historical record of commercial utilisation of wildlife, it is imperative that any discussion of the potential development of commercial wildlife utilisation adopts the precautionary principle that such activities should only ever be considered in the limited cases where conservation and environmental benefits are proven and sound government regulation and management is available. That is our general position, as given at the top of the summary in our submission, at page 8.

To expand on this general statement a little, in many cases past commercial utilisation—for example, fisheries and forestry—has resulted in dire consequences for the species concerned where targeted species have been over-utilised long before enough information has been known about them to establish sustainable levels of harvest.

This leads us to our first principle, which argues that any proposal for commercial utilisation must take as its starting point a thorough investigation of the biology of the organism, its habitat, its interactions with other species and the potential effects of the proposed activity. It is not good enough to be doing this at the same time as beginning the trial venture.

The second tenet of our position puts forward that, in the limited cases where environmental benefits can be shown, sound government regulation and management should be available for the commercial venture. This is both for the obvious reason that the only body in a potential position to oversee and independently monitor such activities is a governmental one, and also for the reason that it is recognised in the literature on

commercial wildlife utilisation that where licensing and property rights over wildlife are poorly enforced, legal commercial wildlife ventures have a much greater chance of economic and ecological failure.

ALEC suggests that the cost to government of regulation has often been underestimated in proposals for wildlife utilisation, with the result that monitoring and regulatory controls are inadequate. For example, I would draw the inquiry's attention to the Northern Territory government's proposal to harvest red-tailed black cockatoos from the wild, where it has been proposed that the licence fees will cover monitoring and supervision costs. Clearly, this will create an incentive to increase the number of permits rather than being able independently to ensure adequate monitoring and regulation of the industry.

In addition, the potential creation of an illegal market where it may not have previously existed and the increased difficulty of sourcing legal or illegal supply is a cost of commercial utilisation which has not been specifically identified or accounted for in this or any other proposal for wildlife utilisation which we have seen.

With regard to the potential outcomes of this inquiry, it is ALEC's position that there should be no relaxation of the control of export of Australian native wildlife but that there is a clear need to improve the legislative framework regulating the utilisation of wildlife within Australia. The export controls simply provide a substantial safeguard against over-utilisation of our native species and in particular those endangered species as listed under CITES.

The need for a better legislative framework nationally, however, is evidenced by the reality that many forms of both commercial and non-commercial utilisation of wildlife are taking place already, yet there is no legislation to cover these activities that we are aware of unless they involve endangered or threatened species. In order to ensure both sound biological understanding and monitoring and effective regulation of such ventures, a better legislative framework is clearly imperative in our opinion.

The final point that I would like to address is the issue of off-reserve conservation, which is the issue that forms a large part of the context of this debate, being often stated by the proponents of wildlife utilisation as a benefit of their commercial ventures. It has been argued that if wildlife is given a marketable value, landowners, having enforceable property rights over land which is a habitat to such species, will have an incentive to nurture and value these resources.

It is ALEC's position that it is a retrograde step to reduce wildlife to a simple economic commodity after years of education work to convince land managers and the wider community that wildlife has important intrinsic values which are educational, spiritual and important for maintaining a healthy environment. Further, in most situations and for most species, the commodification of wildlife will not produce a conservation

benefit.

A commodity approach offers nothing for species with little or no economic value and is a potentially serious threat for those species for which a single harvest to extinction may be more profitable than a sustained harvest, for species under threat due to more profitable land use and where management of an area for a single profitable species undermines and degrades that area for the rest of the biological community.

In Australia, we are lucky enough to have a number of other more effective conservation tools, so that we should not have even to consider commercial utilisation as a conservation mechanism. Commercial utilisation of wildlife should stand as an economic venture which must prove its lack of negative environmental impact in the same way as any other economic venture, rather than setting out with an economic benefit as an unproven assumption.

Tools which we would see as far more effective and appropriate for improving off-reserve conservation include improvement of lease regulations and the possibility of stewardship payments to landowners in return for forgone production. Our submission details our position on the more specific types of ventures as set out in your inquiry guidelines, so at this point I will leave it to you to ask me for any further clarification.

The only further comment that I would make is to point out that ALEC is concerned about the difficulty of setting up definitions to separate harvesting from farming and from all the other possible combinations in between. We feel that it is important that any legislative framework recognise that those two activities rarely take place independently of each other. Finally, thank you for your invitation to appear before this inquiry.

Senator FOREMAN—In respect of intensive farming of wildlife, you say that there is considerable debate over whether intensive commercial farming of wildlife is an economic venture, only without any tangible benefit to the conservation of the targeted species in the wild. Some argue that there is no economic incentive to assist with habitat preservation or species management in the wild. In fact, if collection from the wild is cheap and easy, a wild population may actually be perceived as unwelcome competition to a commercial farm. Would you like to comment on that?

Ms Hillery—I specifically meant that, where a farm is operating sustainably—in other words, it is no longer taking from the wild, which is theoretically the position that you would want to be in, I suppose—if it is still easy to take things from the wild, then you will have an illegal trade set up. We are arguing that the only slight conservation benefit that we can see is that there will be some pressure to keep up good enforcement on illegal collection. Aside from that, we cannot see that there is any specific benefit: unless you have an actual research fund coming out of the industry, or something like that, going into research on the particular species, there is no direct conservation benefit from a

farm.

Senator FOREMAN—Somewhere here you have made mention of a legislated framework federally and that you prefer this to the state-by-state situation that exists now?

Ms Hillery—I do not know that I commented exactly on how it should be gone about. I am certainly no expert in that particular area. I do not think we have a position on exactly how it should be done. Our position is that there is definitely room for further regulation of activities in this area.

Senator FERRIS—I am interested in the statement that you make in your opening paragraph, repeated here today, about the ‘poor historical record of commercial utilisation of wildlife’. What particular species did you base that view on?

Ms Hillery—The most obvious species under this category are in fisheries and forestry—which I am aware are not covered by this particular inquiry, but I think the principle obviously still covers that. There are numerous examples in both those: orange roughie is one example, amongst the fisheries. There are numerous examples of timbers that have obviously disappeared from our forests for that same reason.

Senator FERRIS—What about terrestrial wildlife, though?

Ms Hillery—With a lot of terrestrial mammals that have disappeared, the causes of extinction are obviously a number of different things. Land clearance, which we mentioned in the submission later on, is another sideline issue with land management that has affected a lot of terrestrial species: small mammals here in Central Australia are an example of that—although that is not commercial utilisation of them, directly. I cannot think of a terrestrial mammal that has directly disappeared because of commercial utilisation, but that is because I do not think there have ever been substantial industries based on them, perhaps with the exception of kangaroos.

Senator FERRIS—Could you elaborate on the statement on page 1 one of the submission where you say that there are ‘a number of situations under which the commodification of wildlife will fail to produce a conservation benefit’?

Ms Hillery—For a start, there is a large number of species which simply do not have an economic value, and so commodification of wildlife will not do anything for them. There are also a number of biological attributes to species that would make it actually more profitable to harvest a species to extinction. Examples of that are long-lived species where the short-term gain in terms of harvesting now is actually a lot more profitable than waiting for the population to turn over and build up. An example of that is whales, of course. That is one group of species. Another group of species is endangered already through competing land uses which are more profitable than any potential economic benefits from the particular species themselves.

The third situation is where you have a profitable species itself, but where a whole area becomes managed for that particular species alone, to the detriment of the other species in that environment. This is basically merely replacing the problems of having foreign and exotic animals here with the same problems in a native wildlife utilisation context.

Senator FERRIS—Again, on page 1, you say that your organisation's 'guiding philosophy with respect to wildlife use is that wildlife has an intrinsic value and a right to exist.' Given that you reject the commercialisation of wildlife as a means of protecting it, what specific approach would you or your organisation advocate as a way of achieving a conservation balance?

Ms Hillery—That comes back to what I was saying before in terms of conservation reserve options. Obviously, we support conservation within reserves. That is a very important tenet of conservation. But we recognise that it is really quite important to do conservation off the conservation reserve, as well. There are two tools that we would suggest in that context: firstly, something which I think is happening in South Australia to do with the actual lease conditions of properties having biodiversity as a specific management goal; and, secondly, potentially looking at landowners as stewards having stewardship of an area, and perhaps having some kind of stewardship payment to compensate for forgone production.

CHAIR—I am wanting to pick up from where Senator Ferris finished. I hope it is not an unfair question, but I am very interested in guiding philosophies. I have some of my own. Is it possible for you to spell out ALEC's guiding philosophy? That is a very worthy goal that you have set, but I am wondering how you arrive at that. Is it possible to do that?

Ms Hillery—Do you mean as an organisation, or individually?

CHAIR—Either; in terms of wildlife, given that 'it has an intrinsic value and a right to exist.' I agree with that. I come at it from a theological perspective, but other people have other perspectives.

Ms Hillery—Yes. One thing I would add before I answer the actual question is that we were referring there more to the species having a right to exist rather than to individuals.

CHAIR—That is a useful clarification.

Ms Hillery—Obviously, we use particular individual products all the time. Certainly, that is my personal understanding of it. I wrote the submission, so I guess it reflects my personal view.

CHAIR—I do not knock personal philosophies, because I believe all of us eventually arrive at where we are, if we have any substance to us, on the basis of our starting points. I was just wondering—

Ms Hillery—Wondering where it came from? That is a very interesting question. I guess it is something that has come about as part of my experience—and I am sure this would be true of other ALEC members too; that is why people join ALEC—in terms of personal morality and experience of the world. I am a biologist, so I do respect—

CHAIR—That is important.

Ms Hillery—Yes.

CHAIR—I did not mean to make it a difficult question, but it does interest me. You say in the submission:

. . . after years of education work to convince land managers and the wider community that wildlife has important values which are intrinsic, educational, spiritual, economic and important for maintaining healthy environments.

I imagine ALEC does education work. I would be interested to have some examples of some of the work you have done.

Ms Hillery—We do a lot. The way we are set up at the moment we have three main focuses, one of which is rangelands and rangelands issues, so this is an issue that would come under rangelands. Another one of our main issues is sustainable living, which I suppose would come under this as well.

We have a paid coordinator who does a lot of public speaking. She is usually the person who would come and address an inquiry like this. She is involved in a lot of different committees around town in the regional planning process, which is where something like this may well come up. That involves a lot of working with representatives from different land managers' associations, government departments, planning authorities—that sort of thing. We are trying to work on improving our relationships with the various people who manage land and make decisions about land management in this area.

CHAIR—Would that include talking to pastoralists and Aboriginal people?

Ms Hillery—Yes, we do. As well as being on those sorts of committees we are trying to educate ourselves about the issues here by visiting properties and communicating with the different players in all of those decision making processes.

CHAIR—It is very important work. Is there any landcare work here?

Ms Hillery—Yes, there is a landcare facilitator here in Alice Springs.

CHAIR—Do you liaise with them?

Ms Hillery—One of the committees—and I actually did sit on this one recently—was the National Heritage Trust funding regional assessment panel. That was run by landcare. Our coordinator, Georgia, also does a lot of work with the landcare officer here, working on particular projects.

CHAIR—This committee is also doing an inquiry into the effectiveness of landcare—it is one that we have been doing for quite a long time—so these two things are a bit parallel for us as well. In your submission, you have a paragraph on the whole problem of degraded land from farming sheep and cattle—and this, again, is one of these issues on which the committee keeps getting evidence that is often at different ends of the spectrum—then there is the question of whether or not you farm kangaroos, for example. I do not know how you farm kangaroos, but ‘harvest’ them anyway. There are some fairly substantial studies at the University of Queensland on this issue. Are you aware of those studies or would you like to comment on that?

Ms Hillery—Not specifically. I am certainly aware that kangaroos are a very severe additional grazing pressure for a lot of farmers—that is certainly the way that they see it—and, in a sense, they can cause quite significant degradation themselves. I am not quite sure exactly what you want me to comment on.

CHAIR—It was not a very good question.

Ms Hillery—One comment that I would make about that is, again, that definitional point. I do not know if you noticed this in our submission, but I think kangaroo harvesting or farming, whichever you like to call it, is one of those borderline ones, depending on exactly how it is done. If it is done in a situation where it is an area of land that is being managed for kangaroos, which I do not think happens terribly often, and the landscape has actually been modified specifically for that, then I think our position would be that that would be farming.

To some extent I think what goes on now is a sort of farming because increased water points often lead to increased kangaroos, so there is some modification of the landscape going on. It is that whole definitional problem, because in another sense it is a harvesting as the people who are coming in and doing it are often quite separate to the land managers themselves.

CHAIR—There is certainly a problem of definition with kangaroos. With other animals, such as emus, it is a bit clearer.

Ms Hillery—Although, again, our position is separating out exactly how eggs, for

example, are collected and whether or not they are being produced on the farm or there is actually some harvesting still going on.

CHAIR—In Queensland they are certainly—

Ms Hillery—I think they all have to be on farm.

CHAIR—Yes, they are all on farm. It is the same with crocodiles. In fact, that is one of the issues in terms of regulation between the Northern Territory and Queensland where they have a different approach. As someone said to us, the crocodiles do not know that there is a border. But that is another issue.

Senator FERRIS—Melinda, I was interested in the statement you made on page 7 where you were talking about tourism and you said that ‘tourism has also had a history of resource overuse and poor management’. Could you tell me where you got the research from to make that statement? Generally speaking, people believe now that tourism enables the sustainable management of either places or species.

Ms Hillery—I am not necessarily commenting on what is going on now. It is a comment on what has gone on in the past. There are numerous examples of places which just simply have grown up as tourist areas and have become degraded. Quite often they have been rehabilitated. One of the places I am thinking of is Uluru. The changes to the environment from tourism are obvious in places like the Blue Mountains, for example.

There is no doubt that there is a changed mood in the tourism industry. For a start, it is economically imperative for them to do so. It is a bit of a life cycle thing—once an area is degraded so much you will not get people coming to see it anymore.

Senator FERRIS—Yes; and I guess if it is valued as a tourist resort, it gives the opportunity for the revenue to be put back into the loop, as it were. The other question I wanted to raise with you, in relation to the bottom of page 6, is the issue of bush tucker and, in particular, the indigenous community’s access to that. We had some evidence this morning from the Central Land Council. I was interested to explore with them the question that I will ask you also, and that is: if you agree with the proposition that indigenous people have unfettered right to the resources on their lands, either pastoral lands or indigenous lands, how do you operate a monitoring system which makes sure that the diversity of the species is maintained? Should it be done externally or should it be done by the community themselves? As a biologist, do you have any views on how that could operate, perhaps in terms of plant species, because I was thinking this morning about animal species?

Ms Hillery—I am actually an entomologist.

Senator FERRIS—Perhaps I should include insects then.

CHAIR—We have looked at insects too.

Ms Hillery—Good. That is a very difficult question and I have to say that I do not think I can answer it. I do not think my understanding of the way things operate within communities is good enough to really give a good answer to that.

Senator FERRIS—The difficulty in principle is to ensure that you are not interrupting the food chain by taking out specific animals—well, I had in mind animals.

CHAIR—There is a debate in, say, Queensland which is not quite the same debate as in the Northern Territory because you do not have the same pressures. In Queensland there would be a lot of conservationists who would now argue against the right of Aboriginal people to take native animals. But you would still want to maintain that traditional right.

Ms Hillery—Yes. I guess that is where you come down to the difficulty of deciding what exactly is traditional use and so on. I could say, personally at least, that when it comes to commercial utilisation the Aboriginal organisations should be under the same regulation as anyone else. Traditional use may be different.

CHAIR—It is not such a serious question in the Northern Territory yet because you do not have the population pressures, but it is a very serious question in many of our national parks, et cetera in Queensland. That shows where I come from.

I notice you are a little bit cynical about the committee. That is all right; we do not mind. You say:

It is almost ludicrous to be evaluating how well existing federal government regulations ensure the maintenance of biodiversity when we still cannot measure it in its entirety nor do we have much understanding on its contribution to ecosystem processes or sustainability.

I do not know whether I can encourage you a little bit. I am certainly not going to predict what recommendations this committee might make at the end of all the hearings but I have a feeling that one might be that we recommend to the federal environment department that there is a lot more research work that needs to be done in establishing some of the baselines in a lot of this. I do not know whether that might encourage you.

Ms Hillery—I guess that is in the context, particularly in central Australia, of there really being a lot that is just not known. That is particularly true of quite a few of the things that have been proposed for commercial utilisation here.

CHAIR—Do you want to comment a bit more about illegal markets, because this is another controversial issue? We are getting evidence again from both ends of the spectrum but there would be those who would argue that a properly regulated export

market for captive breeding stock would do a lot to stop the rather cruel practice of smuggling birds, animals and reptiles out of this country. I do not know whether ALEC has an opinion on that.

Ms Hillery—I am not sure that we are aware of exactly what is going on illegally; obviously it is very difficult to know. We are concerned that illegal markets could actually be created where there are none at the moment simply because once you have a legal market operating it becomes a lot harder to trace where things are coming from.

In terms of the argument of whether illegal trade already exists, I have heard people debate this point and how big illegal trade is here. I am not sure whether or not it is a significant cost if you compare it with a whole lot of other threats to wildlife. I do not know that it is a significant one. That would be our position. There are numerous other issues that we would regard as being far more important.

CHAIR—It depends whom you talk to. Some people would say it is very significant and others would not.

Ms Hillery—For example, in comparison with the land clearing I am sure it is not even on the same scale.

CHAIR—I would agree with you in terms of land clearing. It has a very serious impact.

You say as one of your conclusions:

ALEC could support the commercial harvesting of wildlife if it could be shown that this was essential to the net conservation of the species (unlikely in the Australian context) or if by doing so removing a threat which is causing imbalance in an ecosystem.

I think that is a good position to take; it is a fairly safe position to take. We might have to be a bit more risky than that. If you confine it to harvesting of wildlife I think that is problematical. If you go beyond that and begin to talk about farming or perhaps the kind of John Walmsley illustration I used before where he is breeding some of our threatened species in a kind of artificial but safe environment, that is also a commercial utilisation because he makes money out of that by displaying them. Would you feel that was a reasonable commercial utilisation of wildlife?

Ms Hillery—So he is actually breeding threatened species?

CHAIR—Yes, he is.

Ms Hillery—I do not know much about that particular example.

CHAIR—Particularly small marsupials.

Ms Hillery—Is that in South Australia?

CHAIR—He has a number of places now. He started in South Australia. If you are not aware of it, it is an unfair question.

Ms Hillery—I think I do know of the particular case but I have not actually thought about that. One thing I was going to ask—because I went back and had a look at the submission before I came here today—is whether or not, looking at the private collection which is basically this issue again, you would be considering the issue of native pets under this?

CHAIR—It is marginal because if you had a commercial market in native pets then it would obviously be a commercial market.

Ms Hillery—It is something that would come under it.

CHAIR—Birds particularly.

Ms Hillery—We can see that there may be some potential conservation benefits of that if it actually ended up leading to a trend of replacing other domestic pets that cause trouble, cats and dogs for example. There are also problems with it as well.

Senator FERRIS—We are going to be hearing some evidence tomorrow from the Northern Land Council. Their submission says, and I will read it to you to see if you have any comment on it:

We recommend an investigation into the benefits of trophy hunting because it may provide high returns with little environmental and social impact.

I accept that there may not be a particular species that might qualify but, in principle, would your organisation favour a situation where there would be an opportunity for trophy hunting if the money that was paid for the opportunity to take the trophy was put back into the area where the animal had come from?

Ms Hillery—I suspect that is another one of those grey areas. We have not specifically considered that as an issue.

CHAIR—Don't worry about it; you are not forced to answer questions.

Ms Hillery—I would rather not come out with a statement on that particular issue.

CHAIR—We can ask the Northern Land Council about that. It occurred in one of

our hearings in another place and they were mainly talking about feral animals such as pigs and goats and buffalo.

Ms Hillery—Yes, that is what I was just thinking. The other part of that is that there is bound to be some environmental effect simply by the action of having people going all over the countryside hunting. I still feel it comes under our general position of knowing; of having adequate biological information and having considered or having done some kind of study on the potential impacts of the whole thing, looking at proper regulation and so on. As a general statement, that is our position.

CHAIR—Thank you. It is sometimes a bit of a daunting experience but we do try to have reasonable dialogue about these things because we really are seeking information rather than determining positions at the moment.

Ms Hillery—Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak.

Committee adjourned at 2.50 p.m.