



ABORIGINAL LANDS PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE

ABORIGINAL HERITAGE

Watarru Room, Old Parliament House

Friday, 2 December 2022 at 10:20am

[PROOF COPY]

**(OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT)
PARLIAMENT OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

WITNESSES

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MEMBERS:

Hon. T.T. Ngo MLC (Presiding Member)
Hon. S.G. Wade MLC
Mr E.J. Hughes MP (via videoconferencing)
Ms O.M. Savvas MP
Mr J.B. Teague MP

WITNESSES:

WALSHE, KERYN, Independent Researcher and Field Archaeologist

BUSWELL, CLARE, Chair, Cave and Karst Conservation Commission, Australian Speleological Federation

324 The PRESIDING MEMBER: Good morning and thank you for appearing before the Aboriginal Lands Parliamentary Standing Committee. A transcript of your evidence today will be forwarded to you for your examination for any clerical corrections. Should you wish at any time to present confidential evidence to the committee, please indicate and the committee will consider the request.

Parliamentary privilege is accorded to all evidence presented to the committee and therefore protects the witness from any legal action arising in regard to the evidence; however, witnesses should be aware that privilege does not extend to statements made or documents circulated outside of this meeting. The committee will consider any documents presented to it and will determine whether the documents will be received and form part of the evidence. All persons, including members of the media, are reminded that the same rules apply as in the reporting of parliament.

The committee acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners of this country throughout Australia and their connection to land and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures and to elders both past and present. Today we acknowledge that we are meeting on Kurna land and would like to specifically pay our respects to the Kurna people as custodians of this land.

May I introduce you to the members of the committee. My name is Tung Ngo. I am the Presiding Member. On my right-hand side, I have Ms Olivia Savvas, the member for Newland. On my left-hand side, I have Mr Josh Teague, the member for Heysen; another one of my colleagues in the upper house, the Hon. Stephen Wade MLC; and online we have Mr Eddie Hughes, the member for Giles. I have Ms Lisa Baxter here. She is our executive officer and it is her 21st birthday today as well. I have Hansard taking the minutes. Could I get you to introduce yourself and your title before we start.

Dr BUSWELL: My name is Clare Buswell. I'm a political scientist from Flinders University. I hold an adjunct position at Flinders. I am here in my capacity as the chair of the cave and karst Conservation Commission, which is a commission that is associated with the national peak Australian Speleological Federation, which is an organisation that represents cavers and people who have an interest in cave research in the country. The organisation has been in existence for 60 years, and its members have extensive knowledge because of their exploration activities of the caves and karst across the country.

Dr WALSHE: I am Dr Keryn Walshe. I'm an archaeologist and I have been working in archaeology for many years, about 35 years. I have been appointed with the Flinders University archaeology department and also the South Australian Museum as the principal archaeologist there. I now work as an independent researcher within the field of archaeology. My entire focus is on Aboriginal heritage and, as I say, I have been doing that for many decades. Thank you.

325 The PRESIDING MEMBER: Thank you. Do you have an opening statement for the committee? We have about 45 minutes, so if you can talk for 20 minutes to half an hour, we will have questions after that.

Dr WALSH: Yes, sure. I think obviously you have seen the submission, so just as a summary from that I think Koonalda Cave, which was the focus of my submission, is a wonderful example of the processes around Aboriginal heritage, and that is in trying to undertake meaningful research that can be used as a conservation tool in the preservation and protection of highly significant sites.

Koonalda Cave is situated on the Nullarbor Plain. It is in a wilderness protection area, so it is under the management of the Department for Environment and Water. It is also a cave of significant interest to the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation, and particularly the Mirning people who are part of that corporation. They are the native title holders, and that determination was made in 2013. Koonalda Cave was registered as a national heritage site in 2014 because of its renowned high heritage values. It is a very rare and unique site not just in South Australia but in Australia and also globally. In fact, in the known universe, it is rare and unique.

I think regardless of all of that, regardless of the native title determination, regardless of its recognition for its high cultural values, it suffers from lack of protection. This is not a comment about the Department for Environment and Water, who do work within the resources available to them and do care about the site as much as any of us. It is really about, I think, I feel, in my opinion, a process that has failed to be able to bring about a coordinated and consistent level of protection adequate to the values of that site.

So that really is the basis of my submission, and that directly relates to the way that the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988 is applied. It precedes the Native Title Act 1993, as I'm sure you are aware, and that in itself is an enormous problem. It is a problem for the native title holders in order to not only carry out management that is not just directly related to sites in their country but allow them the authority over the management and instigation of management tools. They cannot simply go out and start working on a site to do remediation or, in the case of Koonalda Cave, to prevent further vandalism.

The vandalism in that cave, in the form of graffiti, has been going on since the 1930s and we know that from photographs and also dated graffiti, where people have very kindly or unkindly put a date against their name. This has destroyed a form of artwork which makes Koonalda Cave unique in the world. It's a form of art which dates back quite likely to 30,000 to 40,000 years and it is defaced and that has been going on for almost 90 years.

The inability of native title holders to take direct action around that is, I think, I believe, because the Aboriginal Heritage Act has yet to recognise the Native Title Act. Therefore, authority for the native title corporation board has not been granted to them to carry out immediate responses to any forms of vandalism and other damage to the site.

I was in Ceduna yesterday to report to the board on the most recent fieldwork that we undertook out at the cave. That fieldwork was highly successful. We had senior traditional owners with us, Mirning custodians for the site and we also had rangers who are engaged through the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation, and all of them were very excited about the level of collaboration between researchers and speleologists and the cultural custodians themselves.

Our aim is to digitally record the site, which can then be used as a conservation tool. But we are not supported in any way by the department of Aboriginal Affairs in this exercise. In fact, we feel, on a sort of subliminal level, I suppose I could put it, that we were under threat most of the time because it would be argued by Aboriginal Affairs, I believe, that we need to consult more widely and we shouldn't be out there with only the native title holders. I find this rather surprising. It is not in the best interest of the site.

The site is also under the management of a group that was instigated under the national parks act, the co-management group. The co-management group is an entity formed by national parks staff and also senior Mirning custodians. They also do not have the authority to simply begin works towards conservation and protection of the site because of the current situation in the way that the Aboriginal Heritage Act is applied or perhaps the way that it is interpreted when it comes to recognising who speaks for a site.

Those complications have been ongoing for more than 10 years and this is 10 years that we have lost in terms of research, in gaining greater knowledge of the site, which would benefit the Far West people enormously in understanding and appreciating their own cultural connections and also for the greater Australian public who really deserve, I think, to have a better understanding of the significance and the enormity of time that Aboriginal people have been connected to their country. We are losing these opportunities, as I say, because of the way that the Aboriginal Heritage Act is interpreted. Perhaps I could leave it there and hand over to Clare, or answer questions.

326 The Hon. S.G. WADE: Dr Walshe, you said that yesterday you reported to the board. Could you clarify what board that was?

Dr WALSHE: That's the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation Native Title Board.

Dr BUSWELL: I would like to address the issues that relate to the management of Koonalda, as a term of reference of this meeting. In my submission back in July, I discussed the devastating and irreparable damage that has been done to the finger flutings that are in the remote section of Koonalda, and I presented in that submission a photograph, which I requested is not sent out to the wider public, just so you have an idea of what we were talking about.

327 Mr TEAGUE: Dr Buswell, in relation to that photograph, there is an indication there of 18 June 2022. Is that the date the photograph is taken or is it an indication of approximately when the damage occurred?

Dr BUSWELL: It's the date the photograph was taken. No, the photograph was taken in May.

Dr WALSHE: If I could just add to that, the damage was most certainly done within the last 12 months. The photograph was taken in June. On that trip I was present and also Clem Lawrie, senior Mirning custodian for the site, and we saw that particular vandalism. It was definitely new. It had only occurred since our previous visit, which was roughly 12 months prior.

328 Mr TEAGUE: So, by reference to your submission, Dr Walshe, you describe it as recent?

Dr WALSHE: Yes.

329 Mr TEAGUE: It is in that 12-month window?

Dr BUSWELL: Yes.

330 Mr TEAGUE: Thank you. I apologise for interrupting.

Dr BUSWELL: I understand that, that's fine. I want to discuss that, for researchers or independent speleologists like myself to actually access Koonalda, to actually go and visit Koonalda, there is a long process you have to go through. That process involves lots of consultation, which is to be expected. As speleologists, we consult with every landowner on whose land we visit, and without their permission, we don't visit. The landowners and land managers set the rules, and we abide by those rules; there is no question about that.

To access Koonalda, you first of all have to apply for a permit from DEW, which is a scientific permit. It is the only type of permit that is given to Koonalda. Across the country, there are different types of access permits for speleology. As well as that, you must go and talk with the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation, which is the representative body of Aboriginal people, which we would do naturally anyway. We must also go and talk with the Nullarbor Parks Advisory Committee, which, as Dr Walshe just pointed out, is the co-management board that has been set up by DEW.

By the virtual fact that you have to have a scientific permit to access Koonalda, it then brings you into the orbit of the department of Aboriginal affairs and reconciliation. There are rules that they have that restrict or allow you to do things. In particular, one thing you have to do is apply to search their archive. Their archive is highly restricted, and you have to pay a lot of money to get a search done.

If you are a volunteer organisation, those costs add up. You have to go to Ceduna, as you would normally expect us to do, to go and talk to the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation to present to a meeting of the Nullarbor Parks Advisory Committee. On top of that, you also have the

costings of dealing with the archive, if the archive will ever get back to you. So for a volunteer organisation, you're looking at up to \$2,000 just to do that.

The damage that was done in Koonalda over the last 12 months has not been remediated. There has been no change at all to the access conditions in terms of the physical access conditions that you need to do to get into Koonalda. I am going to present to the committee a photograph of the actual physical gate of Koonalda. I will pass it around so you can all see. It's quite a big gate. It's the size of this room and it's quite tall. On the left-hand side, you will see there's a hole and a few rocks around it. That hole, I can fit through.

I have been there three times since 2014. Each time I have been there, we have filled in that hole with rocks, and each time I have been there, those rocks have been excavated. So people access the actual doline, which is the hole down into the cave, into the entrance. They dig out the rocks and they go through. So there is straight vandalism going on through the problems around the gate. Where that person is standing, the gate is behind them, and that's where the lock of the gate is.

In late September/early October, myself and Dr Walshe attended a high-level meeting called by the Department for Environment and Water, which had at it traditional owners from the Mirning people, high-level and senior staff from within DEW here in Adelaide, national parks senior staff and representatives from the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation to talk about the issues of management and Aboriginal heritage funding to try to fix some of these problems.

From that meeting it was stated that they couldn't do simple, fairly minimal invasive management processes. Taking another look at that photo, you can see where the hole is on the left I was talking about. They are unable to actually put down a simple couple of pieces of piping into the ground because that would be a disturbance of an Aboriginal site which, according to the act, will put you in jail.

331 Mr TEAGUE: Dr Buswell would you be content to provide that photograph to the committee for the purposes of your evidence?

Dr BUSWELL: Yes, I will. That's fine. The only way that they can actually do any of that work—

332 The PRESIDING MEMBER: I am sorry, is that public too?

Dr BUSWELL: That is for public, that's fine. The only way they can actually do any of that remedial work is to go to the minister, so that takes time. In the meanwhile, this sort of stuff goes on. People access the doline, they can dig out the rocks and they can still get in, so there is a real problem with the act and the way in which the act is administered. People are forced to go through a process, including government departments, to do any simple remediation work or any work that would increase the ability of management to carry out its objectives and protect the site.

You can simply put in just past the gates some 24/7 photo monitoring cameras that are used across national parks to monitor cats and pigs and stuff on Kangaroo Island. They are there, but they are not in Koonalda, so you have no idea how often the gate is breached. You have no idea who is breaching it—locals, tourists—so there are those physical problems within the process of management.

The second thing I would like to talk about is an issue of transparency and that gets back to what Dr Walshe was saying. To get permissions to actually do the research that we have to do and like to do, so that we can inform management of the value of this site and we can inform the wider world of the importance of this site to everybody's heritage, we have to go through all these processes—the Department for Environment and Water, the national parks advisory committee, the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation Board—and there is no feedback from those meetings back to the permit holder.

We have no idea whether we have been successful at national parks advisory committee meeting level or within the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation Board. There is no feedback and that caused humongous problems back in September when all those organisations knew that we were turning up to do fieldwork in the middle of September. They knew that way back in April of this year, yet we got into Ceduna and were held for two days waiting for permission.

They held five academics; it cost \$40,000 to get those academics and get those permissions done. That's an awful lot of research money, that's an awful lot of resources that we fight for through universities, through whatever research organisations. We find the lack of transparency to be a real issue and I would really like this committee to try and address those issues of transparency within a process which can work but is currently not working for researchers. I would like them also to address the issues of facilitating quick management actions which involve the traditional owners who want control over their site. That is all I have to say.

333 Ms SAVVAS: Thank you both for coming as well. I think I speak for everyone when I say that it is quite a privilege to have this sort of information from you both from the perspective of people who are actually spending that time there which is so important. I just wanted to clarify a few points on the access. Firstly, how often, or how many hours a day or whatever it is, is the guard stationed or a person stationed at the gate there? Is that someone who is stationed at the gate there?

Dr WALSHE: There is no-one ever at the gate.

334 Ms SAVVAS: There is no-one ever at the gate? Okay. In terms of the visits, whether it be yourselves or otherwise, do you know roughly how many visits take place, whether it be from traditional groups and/or science visits or whatever on a certain basis? You are not sure?

Dr WALSHE: No.

Dr BUSWELL: No, and no-one keeps that information.

Dr WALSHE: There's just one key for the gate and it's held at the national parks depot in Ceduna, so they would be the only group who would keep some sort of tally of visitation.

335 Ms SAVVAS: Do traditional owners have to go through the same process for access?

Dr WALSHE: Yes, they don't have their own key. They also have to ask for the key.

336 Ms SAVVAS: But it's the same process of application to enter, as far as you know?

Dr WALSHE: Yes.

Dr BUSWELL: Yes, they do.

Dr WALSHE: Because the Mirning custodians are on the co-management group committee, as Clare mentioned, but in order to access the cave they still have to request permission through the Department for Environment, who themselves need to operate under the Aboriginal Heritage Act. Where it all kind of falls apart is that if you ask Aboriginal Affairs they will immediately put the brakes on everything until you have consulted widely, beyond the native title holders. That is really the sticking point.

Regardless of the fact of native title determination in 2013 for the Far West Coast people, Aboriginal Affairs is still operating as if it is 1988 and they will not recognise native title. To meet their requirements, it is necessary to talk to any Aboriginal person who has an interest in that site. That could be an Aboriginal person who is currently living and working in New York, but they might have an interest in Koonalda Cave. You need to seek their opinion.

This is the level of it, and this is why if we involve Aboriginal Affairs—although I have to say Aboriginal Affairs do not voluntarily involve themselves in any of this process. Whenever we seek permission to access Koonalda Cave, we do not go directly to Aboriginal Affairs, we go directly, as Clare says, under a scientific permit application with the Department for Environment and we just hope that it will be sufficient. It should be sufficient to say that we have the Mirning traditional owners with us, the senior custodians for this site.

We have also the agreement of the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation and so can we access the site for scientific purposes, which in the end benefit the conservation efforts to protect this site? Generally, the Department for Environment does award that permit to go in, but Aboriginal Affairs at no point has any active position within that process, and we hope they don't, to be absolutely honest, because they will impede and obstruct and become no more than a gatekeeper.

337 Ms SAVVAS: In terms of access, again, you have mentioned—I believe it's in one of the submissions; I don't have it in front of me—that it's relatively easily accessible by four-wheel drive, in theory. Once you were to park, say, how long would it take you from that point, or what are the conditions to get from the place where you park to the entrance?

Dr BUSWELL: Put it this way, in 2017 I think, I had a permit to visit Koonalda. I parked. You then have to tie a ladder and a rope to get down into the doline and that is approximately 15 metres. It's unnerving, so you need to have your wits about you, and safety-wise we have people on ropes and we belay them up and down. You then have to walk another 70 or 80 metres to actually access the gate. If you are belayed and go down a ladder, that will probably take you 10 to 15 minutes.

I have been at that gate on my way out and have met people totally unrelated to us who have used our gear and said, 'We want to go in the cave.' We have just said no. I have had stand-up arguments with people who have come down and used our gear. So there are access problems from that point of view. It is remote, but it is not remote. You are 15 kilometres from the highway.

Dr WALSH: Yes, it's quite close, really.

Dr BUSWELL: So the answer to your question is that if you think of a great big sinkhole, 12-metre drop, you have to have an ability to put a rope down it so you can climb down.

338 Ms SAVVAS: But you could? Someone could, obviously.

Dr BUSWELL: Oh, yes, and they do.

Dr WALSH: I have seen people take seatbelts out of old cars that are lying around Koonalda Station, tie them together and use that to climb down. Some people are very gung-ho about this. They wouldn't hesitate to take risks and be down at the gated entrance within, say, five minutes. They would do it, and they have done it. That's how they're getting in.

339 The Hon. S.G. WADE: I was wanting to go back to what I call the screen and a gate. It's quite a large screen. You raised the issue about, shall we say, fixing the gate as a potential risk for damage under section 23 of the Aboriginal Heritage Act. Are you aware of any permissions given for the erection of the fence and the gate in the first place?

Dr BUSWELL: No, I'm not.

340 The Hon. S.G. WADE: So that, in itself, would have been a potential damage to the site.

Dr BUSWELL: Yes.

341 The Hon. S.G. WADE: I'm also mindful of section 25 of the Aboriginal Heritage Act, which gives the minister the authority to appoint an inspector. If satisfied that urgent action is necessary for the protection or preservation of an Aboriginal site or object, the inspector may give directions.

The act itself does envisage urgent action, so if this fence was not put in as a disturbance to the site under section 23, it might be better conceived as a protection of the site consistent with section 25. I suppose I'm just posing the question: if the fence could be erected originally, why can't it be fixed?

Dr BUSWELL: I agree.

Dr WALSH: Yes, I agree.

Dr BUSWELL: Exactly, and why can't it have been fixed six months ago?

342 The Hon. S.G. WADE: Yes. We as a committee might actually inquire. I don't even know whether any inspector is appointed under the Aboriginal Heritage Act, but the act does envisage urgent action. Certainly, disturbance of a site requires all the consultation that the act envisages, but it also does envisage urgent action. Sorry, that's more of a comment than a question, but there's nothing inconsistent with your understanding from what I've just said?

Dr BUSWELL: It's a very valid statement, absolutely.

343 Mr HUGHES: I do have a question. When it comes to the consultation, that process to consult widely, which are the other Aboriginal groups that might have some overlapping interest in that area?

Dr WALSHE: I think the principal group is, as far as I understand it, the senior Mirning Council of Elders. They are a group who sought to apply for a separate native title determination at around about the time that the Far West Coast Aboriginal group were lodging their application. As far as I understand it, the separate application has failed three times to be registered for native title process, whereas the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation (as it is now known) were successful in 2013, having received native title determination.

The other group—which is a major group, really—are quite influential and certainly would be considered an entity required to be consulted. If we were to ask Aboriginal Affairs, they would certainly anticipate that we would consult with that group. I guess we find that a little confusing, considering the three-times failure to register as a native title group. We're not sure what their authority is, under those circumstances, but they are given equal weight to the native title holders when it comes to consultative processes.

344 Mr HUGHES: Between those two groups, are there differing views in relation to the caves? I would have thought that both groups would want to ensure that the caves were protected.

Dr WALSHE: Yes, I agree. I think everyone certainly has the best interest for the site at heart. I believe that they do. But it doesn't mean that different interest groups work together harmoniously. I think we see that in the broader human world, so I don't think we should be surprised by it. It's how it operates.

I think also, when resources are very scant in remote regions, there is perhaps a greater level of competition over who speaks and who has authority. I think this underpins a lot of the machinations that take place in those areas, and that in itself can be quite damaging for sites in their protection but also in trying to gain more knowledge about those sites and ensuring that Aboriginal people get back onto country. It is undermining those good efforts.

Dr BUSWELL: Absolutely.

345 Ms SAVVAS: I want to ask a question about easy access to the site. Dr Buswell, in your submission you mentioned about it being easily found on any map or web search. I did a Google Maps search myself and saw that it literally has the name, and says 'art and Aboriginal site' or something like that.

Do you believe that is truly a limitation in the protection itself as well, that people are aware that it's there? Is there signage, or anything indicating otherwise, actually at the site or near the site? I'm just curious if something like the ability to be able to Google it actually limits the protection in itself, because there is an awareness of where to go and how to find it.

Dr BUSWELL: This gets back to a number of issues. It gets back to the way in which Australia manages its overall caves and karsts—and by karsts I mean a limestone landscape with holes in it, simply. If you go and visit the Lascaux Caves in Europe you will not actually visit the cave itself; you will visit a purpose-built, facsimile copy next door.

There is no reason we cannot do a similar thing, and involve traditional owners and put people back on country by doing exactly the same—near Koonalda, Border Village, at the Koonalda Homestead site, which itself needs protection and money, or Ceduna. There is a big opportunity here to show the world what should be World Heritage listing, the same as Naracoorte Caves, as a tourism opportunity, and protect the actual site itself. We just have to think outside the box here.

So, yes; you are right. It does currently limit the protection of the site because it is on Google Earth. There is no signage saying what is in the cave anymore. They have actually redone some roadworks around it, but there is no signage. There used to be—and there still is—a stile that helps you over the falling-down fence that prevents people from supposedly accessing the doline. If you just think of an ordinary wire fence that you see on farms around the place, and someone has put a stile with three steps over it. That's there for people to just walk over. It is inviting: it is not protecting, it is inviting. Remoteness is not a protection anymore.

Once again, I would request that this committee really understands the value of this site, understands the value of the research that is going on, adds to the management of it and, hopefully, you can bring on board or modernise (1) the act, and (2) do something with the department of Aboriginal affairs and reconciliation to be more supportive of Aboriginal heritage and its protection and the stories it has to tell, because that in itself is an enriching process.

346 Mr HUGHES: Given the value of the site, has there ever been a consideration given to going for World Heritage listing or some other level of listing that might well enhance the protection? I know it is a very involved process, it is not a simple process.

Dr BUSWELL: Yes.

Dr WALSHE: I understand that there is a move at the moment, which is being promoted by the Australian Conservation Foundation, I understand, to seek world heritage status for the Nullarbor region, including Koonalda Cave. It would be an important part of that nomination were it to go ahead, but this is where the factional interests will become very divided and are already showing up as a division over that aspiration.

It could be quite problematic unless there is more of a cohesive effort made towards any nomination or a suggestion of a nomination. I think what really needs to happen first is that authority is granted to one entity and one entity alone. That is not to say that they would not include members outside of their organisation, corporation, body—they probably would—but they need to be given authority in their own right in order to manage these issues far more effectively and also with immediacy, rather than having long time lengths involved.

I do think that this is an issue not just for Koonalda Cave. It is rampant across South Australia. Every Aboriginal site encounters the same issue of who is in authority here, and can that authority be challenged.

Dr BUSWELL: Just to add to that, in 1992 the Australian Speleological Federation and researchers and scientists did actually put together a heritage listing for National Heritage listing, with a view to taking it to World Heritage listing, for the entire Nullarbor. That is what is on the Western Australian side and the South Australian side. The South Australian government was on board. The Western Australia government was not, so it failed at national level.

Once again, the Australian Speleological Federation is pursuing a National Heritage listing because of the humungous threat to the Western Australian side of the Nullarbor from a massive hydrogen, wind, solar plant, which will run from Eucla to Madura. It is about 200 kilometres and from the road to the highway up to the railway line. All over the Nullarbor Plain, there is massive evidence of Aboriginal occupation, use, trade routes. It is all there, and the speleologists and researchers have been working on this for years.

To answer your question, to get support for a National Heritage listing in the first place requires the South Australian government in the case of Koonalda, and if the South Australian government was brought on board, that would really help Koonalda and other caves on the South Australian side that also have Aboriginal heritage within them. Koonalda is one site. It is the most significant site, but there are also others.

If members of this committee were to support that and were to lobby for the support of it, that would help improve protection, but immediate protection has to come back to the actions around the small and minimal impact on management processes and fixing the problems within Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation, because that is where our hindrance lies.

347 The PRESIDING MEMBER: If the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation was appointed a RARB, how could this affect your research work?

Dr WALSHE: It would be extraordinarily positive. We would see that as a very positive step. From what I understand, the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation native title representative body made an application for RARB status three years ago—three years plus probably—and have not received an outcome. They do not know what has happened to their application. They don't know what stage it is at. There is no information on that. They themselves are extraordinarily disappointed.

As far as I know, there has only been one RARB registered since 2017, which is Kokatha, which occurred last year. When we have native title determinations that have been made across South Australia, why is there only one registration to date in the last five years? It is quite clear on the information given that native title holders would be the appropriate recognised Aboriginal representative body to be appointed. That's an obvious one, so why hasn't it happened?

This would be so beneficial to us when we go to the length of taking ourselves out to Ceduna just for—not just, as it's important and it's very significant, but it is a long way to go. It's a lot of resources to put in to attend a meeting in order to keep the research going to keep up those collaborative relationships that we have worked so hard to build. It would be so helpful because we wouldn't be leaving that meeting thinking, 'Well, it could be tipped upside down any moment still because this group has not been given the authority to be the single group to speak for that site and that country.'

348 Mr TEAGUE: I have an overall observation. In raising both issues as to the present inadequacy of the security of the site on the one hand and the concern about what sounds to be dysfunctional arrangements in terms of being able to conduct a process of application and then research, is it conceded that, in terms of a course of action, including the RARB process, these things aren't necessarily going to augur in towards greater access for scientific research in all circumstances? I suppose that is part of the territory that you navigate.

Dr Walshe I wonder whether—both of you—there are examples of known areas of scientific interest where preservation is being done more effectively but, on the other hand, it's not possible for there to be the sort of scientific research that you would like to undertake for different reasons—cultural sensitivity and so on.

Dr BUSWELL: I can't think, off the top of my head, as to an example internationally that I could give you where that collaboration has been easy or could be used as a template because we have to work within the Australian context and we have to work within the Australian law. Maybe it's a question we can take on notice and get back to the committee.

Dr WALSHE: I think that certainly there are examples in Queensland and the Northern Territory rock art sites that are being effectively managed because it is, let's say, a more straightforward process in terms of the Aboriginal organisation that will accompany and collaborate within that research effort.

It always comes back to this one thing: if the pathway is more straightforward from the beginning, we all know that, okay, this is going to be the collaborative group, you can keep going forward. There is continuity and there is also legacy when people come and go, but the path continues on the predictable journey. It's when it is interrupted by factional interests, a surprise person who comes in from who knows where, that it gets tipped upside down and we all go back to square one to start again the next year. But I do think there are examples, certainly for rock art sites in Queensland and Northern Territory, where this is happening effectively.

349 The PRESIDING MEMBER: Is there anything else you would like to say before we wind up?

Dr BUSWELL: Only to thank you for your interest. I hope that we are able to continue this discussion with members of the committee because I think it's important for the cave itself and it's important for our research.

Dr WALSHE: Yes, certainly. Just to add to the question of interpretive signage at Koonalda Cave, yes, there were signs, as Clare mentioned, and they were removed because there has been some redevelopment at the top of the site, mainly to direct traffic flow away from the edges of the site, but there will be signage put back in the near future, I understand. The Department for Environment are very keen to do that, and they are working with the co-management group in the Far West Coast on the wordage around that signage, so it's coming.

350 Ms SAVVAS: As a final thing on that, I might just ask, if possible, is that a good thing or a bad thing, to have the signage? I would think that perhaps drawing attention again may be a negative for the implications of protecting the site.

Dr WALSH: I personally think it's a good thing because, as you say, it's very easy to find the site on Google Maps. I think what happens, when tourists go out there, they're very disappointed that they can't actually go inside the cave and see for themselves why this place is so important. The signage is really to say, 'Yes, it is a very important place and this is why,' but then also to say, 'And that's why we need to protect it, so we cannot grant you access. It is authorised access only.'

I think for most visitors that works; they're happy with that. They're actually happy to see that a place that is so important is being protected. There are just some who read that and say, 'That's it, I'm going to do my best to bust in there,' but I think that's the minority of people, fortunately. So, signage is actually very important.

Dr BUSWELL: You can combine that with active citizen science, for example. You can say, 'Here I've got a gizmo—let's say it's a gizmo—'and I need you to make sure the red light or the green light is flashing so that I know that it's working.' That gizmo could just be simply monitoring how many owls fly out of the doline—so people feel involved with the research, they feel involved with their environment. People are actually interested in their environment. They want to participate in its preservation and its conservation. You could actually put in those sorts of simple instruments, readily available and reasonably cheap, and you could simply ask people, 'Can you email me to say that the red light or the green light is functioning, because that will tell me whether the battery is working on the device.'

Those sorts of interactive-type actions around management are really important. The other thing that is really important is to try to get a ranger to be on site because that's what is really going to protect it—if you've got someone on site who can talk about it, who can run a verbal tour at the top of the site. That's a simple management tool.

351 The PRESIDING MEMBER: Thank you, Dr Buswell and Dr Walshe. Thank you for giving your evidence to the committee today. The committee will send you a copy of today's transcript of your evidence. Please review it as an accurate record of your evidence today.

Dr WALSH: Thank you very much.

Dr BUSWELL: Thank you, and thank you very much for your time.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW