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Comments on Wild Horse Management in the Victorian Alps

The Australian Alps are facing a crisis from unchecked feral horse numbers. The Invasive Species Council is pleased that the Victorian Government has begun a process that may lead to addressing the problem of the large numbers of feral horses in the Victorian Alps.

It will take courage for the Victorian Government to properly address this issue. While public consensus may not be achieved, we believe that opposition from one part of the community should not be permitted to stymie effective control.

If no action is taken, then the government is in effect agreeing that numbers should be allowed to increase. This is no way to manage an internationally significant national park and is inconsistent with legal obligations to protect conservation values. The default decision should be to reduce numbers as much as possible as quickly as possible. To further delay action will undermine the feasibility of control, increase the cost of future options, exacerbate damage to the natural environment and create more suffering for horses and native species.

The Problem of Escalating Numbers

The Invasive Species Council is seriously concerned that the Victorian Government has failed to meaningfully deal with the rising feral horse numbers in the Alpine National Park. They are causing severe damage to the natural values of the national park.

During the time of the legend of the Man from Snowy River, it is believed there were only ever 200 wild horses in the Alps. Retaining feral horses in the Alps because of their cultural association with the area does not require allowing a population of thousands. It is not consistent with allowing them to breed up to inhabit all suitable areas. This would presumably lead to a population of more than 100,000 horses covering the ranges of NSW, ACT and Victoria. Few would argue for this.

Feral horses in NSW and Victoria now number about 13,000 or more, with 8,200 to 10,900 estimated to be in the Victorian Alps (Parks Victoria background information). They have been increasing about 20% each year, even with an active NSW trapping program. This means that without new action, the population could double about every four years. Over time, horse numbers, density, range and damage will escalate and future control will become more difficult and expensive.

The likely environmental and other consequences of the exponential growth in feral horse numbers without effective control are not well understood by the community and need to be better publicised.

The Invasive Species Council campaigns for better laws and policies to protect the Australian environment from weeds, feral animals and exotic pathogens.

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Impacts

Feral horses trample and eat large amounts of alpine and sub-alpine plants, foul wetlands, erode streams, spread weeds, create a vast network of tracks and threaten the safety of motorists. Because of the short summer growing season, damaged and depleted alpine plants recover very slowly. Feral horses also compete for feed with native animals.

The impacts of feral horses are listed as a key threatening process under the *Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* because they impact on the future survival of a number of threatened plant and animal species.

The Solution

There is only one practical and humane solution. A large-scale horse removal program in the Australian Alps using aerial shooting conducted according to RSPCA guidelines, supplemented by ground shooting, is essential to prevent continued exponential population growth and to save sensitive alpine and sub-alpine habitats.

The current NSW feral horse trapping program (operating in Kosciuszko National Park since 2003) is extremely costly, inhumane (most horses are trucked long distances to slaughterhouses) and ineffective. It has been unable to even stabilise the population, let alone reduce it. Despite the trapping program, numbers still grow at rates close to 20% each year. It will become less successful as feral horse numbers continue to exponentially grow. In contrast, the ACT Government has an effective ground-shooting control program.

Animal welfare concerns should be central to the program. We advocate the RSPCA policy on the humane aerial shooting of feral horses. We believe that overall an effective aerial shooting program will provide the best animal welfare outcomes. There will be more suffering in the future if much larger numbers of feral horses have to be killed and when they starve because of over-population. We must be equally concerned about the welfare of the many more native animals adversely affected by feral horses.

The long-running feral horse control program run by Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service in Carnarvon National Park utilises aerial shooting and is supervised by the RSPCA. This effective and humane model should be applied to the Australian Alps to achieve effective control.

To minimise the numbers killed over time, initial efforts should aim for a large reduction of numbers over a short period of time.

Objectives and Measures for a Control Program

We believe a feral horse control program for the Alpine National Park should have the following objectives:

- Rapidly reduce horse numbers (over the next one to two years) by at least half the current population.
- Subsequently eradicate all feral horses from the national park. This will avoid the need to continue culling and will be in the public interest of protecting the national park's highly significant conservation values and in the interests of animal welfare.
- If a herd of horses needs to be maintained for cultural reasons, do this on private land in a secure location where the horses cannot repopulate the national park.

- High priority should be given to removing horses from those areas where they have recently spread and those in small isolated populations such as at Bogong High Plains.

The main performance measure would be the number of remaining feral horse numbers and their range compared with present population levels and ranges.

Methods

The Invasive Species Council believes that the only humane, effective and efficient control method is aerial shooting by highly skilled professional shooters. No other method can achieve even stabilisation of feral horse numbers, and methods such as ground mustering and removal are highly stressful for horses. Reproductive control is not proven to be effective. It may be useful in some sites to supplement aerial shooting with ground shooting.

We understand that the RSPCA wrote to Parks Victoria in July 2013 stating that the RSPCA supports aerial shooting, under strict protocols, to manage the current situation in the eastern Alps.

Similar to the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service program in Carnarvon National Park, two helicopters could be used for aerial shooting, the second one following the first to verify the death of shot horses. That program began with an audit program using a vet to assess the accuracy and humaneness of the cull to ensure that animal welfare objectives were being met. The NSW FFAST (feral animal aerial shooting team) program¹ is a good model for the standards and training for aerial shooting and has been developed in conjunction with the RSPCA.

The RSPCA stated in a national workshop on feral horse management (2006):²

The most humane approach that will achieve the aims of the control program must be used.

The humaneness of a specific technique is influenced by a range of factors, including the skill of the operators, terrain, season, and the numbers of horses involved, so the methods used must be appropriate for the given situation. In the case of horses, non-lethal control methods such as mustering and trapping can cause significant distress and injury. Even fencing can be inhumane if it is difficult for horses to see or prevents them from accessing known watering points. In such cases lethal control methods may be preferable. Where horses are to be killed, it is likely to be less stressful to humanely shoot them in the field than to muster and transport them to an abattoir.

Horse carcasses

The Invasive Species Council accepts that the short term outcome of any shooting program will be horse carcasses in the environment. It is impractical and costly to remove them, and they will decompose relatively quickly. Provided horse numbers are reduced quickly, they will not be an ongoing source of food for problem feral animals such as foxes, cats, pigs or wild dogs. There will be greater ongoing benefits by quickly reducing horse numbers, even if the dead horses are not removed.

1 FFAST Procedures Guide April 2012. Web: http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/430575/FAAST-Procedures-Guide.pdf Published by the NSW Government. Accessed 22 July 2013.

2 B. Jones and S. Coleman. 2006. Animal Welfare – RSPCA Perspective in Proceedings of the National Feral Horse Management Workshop, eds M. Dawson, C. Lane and G. Saunders. Invasive Animals CRC, Canberra.

We would oppose any condition that requires the removal or burying of horse carcasses. Many areas are inaccessible to helicopters, most would be inaccessible to vehicles, and it would not be a good use of public funds. To place this condition on any control program will make the chance of success less likely. It will divert limited resources away from the key job to reduce total numbers of horses.

Additional References

I have attached additional references:

- Is Shooting the Answer Down Under: The Wildlife Society 2010