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VICTORIAN ALPS IMPACTS

EVIDENCE, PROCESS AND PROGRESS FOR FERAL HORSE CONTROL IN THE VICTORIAN ALPS

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Representing just 0.3% of the Australian mainland, Australia's alpine ecosystems are both rare and unique. Today, they endure a wide range of human-derived pressures, from diverse invasive species, to impacts of recreational activities, infrastructure development and the many manifestations of climate change.

Over the past two years, Parks Victoria and the Victorian State Government have been developing the *Protection of the Alpine National Park – Feral Horse Action Plan 2018–2021* (adopted June 2018). This presentation will review some of the history of Victorian feral horse research and management, and the evidence underpinning this plan. It will also discuss the social and political context and issues, the process by which the plan was developed, the proposed approach and the ongoing challenges.

Feral horses are present in two separate Victorian alpine regions: the eastern Alps adjacent to Kosciuszko National Park (about 2,500 horses based on 2014 aerial survey); and the more isolated Bogong High Plains (estimated 106 horses, 2018 aerial survey).

Victoria has a long history of alpine ecological research and active management of feral horses. Australia's second longest-running ecological monitoring site was established in 1944 by botanist Maisie Carr at Pretty Valley in the Bogong High Plains (Carr and Turner 1959a, 1959b). Exclosure plots and impact assessments of domestic stock at this and nearby sites led to the total removal of sheep and horses from the Bogong High Plains in 1946. Feral horses have since returned to the Bogong High Plains, with a recent census finding that horse damage has increased from just 4% of 70 monitoring sites to 33% in 11 years. In 1999, similar exclosure plots were established at Native Cat Flat and Cowombat Flat in the eastern Victorian alps, which provided critical evidence of vegetation, habitat and waterway recovery on exclusion of feral horses. These sites, particularly Cowombat Flat, not only provided empirical evidence, but also supplied dramatic visual representation of vegetation and waterway damage—imagery critical in garnering public and political support for action.

Parks Victoria's current program for removal of feral horses from the Victorian Alps dates back to at least 1999, using a combination of passive baited trap yards and roping ('brumby running'). Since 2004, around 1,900 horses have been captured and removed at an average of around 150 a year, with approximately two-thirds having been captured using roping.

The impetus to expand Victoria's feral horse control program arose from increasing public and on-ground staff concerns of deteriorating alpine habitats, and the failure of the current program to reduce horse impacts. Rising awareness of climate change threats to the Australian Alps also drove the call for increased management of both feral horses and other invasive species.

As in NSW and the ACT, feral horse management in national parks has been a prolonged and complicated issue due to the highly polarised views and values associated with the presence of horses in the 'High Country'. The spectrum of interested parties includes conservation and green groups, traditional owners, land managers, licensed tour operators, alpine ecologists, mountain cattlemen, animal welfare organisations and pro-brumby associations and community groups. All groups were drawn by Parks Victoria into a detailed consultation and engagement process over a period of 18 months, commencing in late 2016. The connections, perspectives and values of all participants were respected and duly considered in the development of the new plan.

While all consulted groups accepted that there are areas of over-abundant feral horses where control may be necessary, there was considerable disagreement on whether there should be an ongoing presence of feral horses in the Victorian Alps as a representation of post-settlement pioneer and agricultural heritage versus the need to totally remove a non-native species from alpine ecosystems. For the eastern Victorian Alps, this issue is likely to be a moot point, as the wide extent of horse distribution and presence in remote areas makes it highly unlikely that total eradication is possible. By contrast, the smaller and isolated population on the Bogong High Plains is a candidate for total removal.

Informed by direct consultations and the roundtable process, the draft plan was completed in late 2017 and had two primary aims: to protect Victoria's natural alpine environments and to set the highest animal welfare standards for feral horse control. The plan proposes passive yard trapping as the primary capture technique and the maximising of viable rehoming options for as many captured horses as possible. For those horses for which rehoming options cannot be found, or for those that are ill, injured or aged, the plan proposes culling of horses by shooting in trap yards under strict protocols. A total target of up to 1,200 horses to be removed over three years was proposed, along with the total removal of the Bogong High Plains population. The target in Victoria's eastern Alps was chosen on the basis of halving the estimated total horse population over the three-year duration of the plan, with the aim of increasing monitoring of horse numbers and environmental conditions to inform the subsequent iterations of feral horse management in the Alpine National Park.

The draft plan was publicly released for comment for eight weeks on the *Engage Victoria* website in early 2018. Over 1,000 submissions were received, with 81% support for feral horse control as outlined in the plan. On the basis of this consultation, animal welfare considerations in the plan were further strengthened.

As the plan moves into an operational phase, a number of challenges remain, including building appropriate rehoming partnerships and outcomes; potential need to develop temporary holding facilities (lairages); protocols and decision triggers for culling; building trust with community; and strengthening communications and proactively managing media.

References

- Carr, S. G. M. and Turner, J. S. (1959a) The ecology of the Bogong High Plains. I The environmental factors and the grassland communities. *Australian Journal of Botany* 7(1): 12–33.
- Carr, S. G. M. and Turner, J. S. (1959b) The ecology of the Bogong High Plains. II Fencing experiments in grassland C. *Australian Journal of Botany* 7(1): 34–63.



Feral horse enclosure plot, Cowombat Flat, Alpine National Park, Victoria.

The enclosure plot was established in 1999 just a few hundred metres from the NSW–Victorian border and Kosciuszko National Park. In this 2013 image, the plot shows 14 years of growth without horses.

Source: Graeme L. Worboys.



Cowombat Flat enclosure plot at a distance and showing surrounding grazing pressures from feral horses.

Source: Mark Norman.