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SETTING THE SCENE

SCIENCE AND COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE AND OPINION

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Science is the best tool we have for informing land use policy and practice, but it is not enough. The practices of contesting information as 'alternative facts' and rejecting 'so-called science' have been successful in winning the feral horse issue against what might seem to scientists like a very obvious case. Why do the ideas of small minority groups dominate such issues? Because things that are obvious to scientists may not be obvious to the general public.

When ordinary visitors look at Tantangara Plain, they do not readily 'see' trampled, degraded waterways and wetlands, weeds and large mobs of horses. And they certainly don't see the more abstract concerns of scientists: loss of catchment capacity; threats to habitat of tiny plants and animals; and impairment of the idea that nature conservation is of, and for, Australian species (Axford and Brown 2013).

Many do see an exciting sight, an 'iconic' animal in its element (Gibson 2015). To the uninformed visitor or citizen who knows little of such things, over-blown cultural claims and their use in the politics of the feral horse issue speak louder than the science.

There has not been an effective alternative argument, education or vision aimed at the middle ground of public interest and knowledge. As Nimmo concludes:

> … increasing the public's knowledge of the environmental impact of horses, will increase the level of perceived harm, and hence alter the perception of wild horses from a species that belongs in the Australian environment to one which does not (Nimmo and Miller 2007).

Two examples are used to illustrate the point that community attitudes to scientific knowledge in the alpine area can be influenced and do make a difference.

The first is the story of the changing cultural attitude to feral horses, or brumbies. From the 1860s to the present, the goalposts have been moved to romanticise what *was* a practical approach to pest animal control for most of the 19th century. The perception of the value of the horses has undergone a massive shift.

Evidence from newspapers and journals throughout the 19th century shows that 'traditional attitudes' to brumbies were that they were a pest to be eliminated, shot or have their throats slit for their hides, taken live to abattoirs or left to rot in the bush. 'Traditional management' methods were brutish and cruel. But the economics of a colonial society underpinned such attitudes. The brumbies were a threat to grazing land, and to the quality of domesticated stock horses. Today, the brumbies don't wreck

Feral horse pugging damage to wetland, Ingeegoodbee River, Pilot Wilderness, Kosciuszko National Park, 2013.
Source: Graeme L. Worboys.

good grazing land; they just wreck national parks, which is not the landowners' problem, nor that of the brumby advocates. Traditionally, the brumby has been a problem when it impacts economically, not environmentally.

The second example relates to the broader issue of catchment health and the understanding of its importance by the wider community. In the 1960s, the Australian Academy of Science informed and led public opinion in a successful campaign to protect the Kosciuszko summit area and the Geehi Wall from Snowy Mountains Scheme engineering works. The Primitive Area dispute of 1958–65 is a seminal episode in the development of a nature conservation philosophy in Australia (Slattery 2010). The scientists were successful in the conflict because, over a long period, they had thoroughly informed relevant community groups about their research findings and their significance. In doing so, they not only established ecology as a scientific basis for conservation thinking, their arguments also foreshadowed the current idea that management of healthy country involves recognition of the links between aesthetic *and* scientific thinking. In this respect, science had the capacity to offer alternative visions to the community about the relationship between natural resource management and land health.

References

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