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# CHAMPIONING SCIENCE INFORMATION

## MARSHALLING EXPERT OPINION FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT: PERSONALISED ENGAGEMENT COMPLEMENTS GROUP EFFORTS

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Governments rely on expert opinion to inform policy development, but the manner in which experts are engaged is shifting. As well as contributing to committees and panels, participating in working groups and co-authoring strategic reports, experts are increasingly making it personal—by writing opinion pieces for newspapers, giving interviews to the mainstream media and sharing their reflections on complex issues in real time via social media. Here, I explore how experts engaged with the issue of feral horses, contrasting traditional collective efforts with personal perspectives, and suggest the combination of both is critical for meaningful policy development.

For years, ecologists, conservation scientists and land managers have proactively engaged with the issue of feral horses, especially concerning their impacts in alpine areas. In addition to conducting and communicating empirical research, timely summaries of available information were compiled, informing media releases and summarising a consistent set of talking points. Rather than waiting for an invitation, scientific societies were proactive in communicating the consensus on the issue, explaining uncertainties and contextualising known impacts. By integrating local information on wildlife disease, animal welfare and water quality with international work on the effects of feral horses on wildlife, soil degradation and weed invasion, emotive support of ‘brumbies’ in the High Country was comprehensively challenged, reframing the debate and demonstrating that feral horses are incompatible with protected area management.

As news of the ‘brumby bill’ broke, groups of scientists mobilised and responded rapidly—fact-checking statements by politicians and feral horse advocates, countering arguments conflating cultural values with management targets. By sharing information and working cooperatively, the issue remained live and engaged the wider community in the broader issues of protected area management, invasive species impacts and the disproportionate effects of human-induced climate change on alpine biota.

Individual efforts complemented these collaborative contributions, many people sharing their considered views on the Bill, the issue of feral horse impacts and wider concerns about the role of national parks and erosion of trust in the development of public policy. Several individuals dedicated significant efforts to public discourse on the issue, presenting a personal face to the issue and

confronting misinformation directly. They pointed out how the Technical Reference Group to the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), OEH professionals and the Threatened Species Scientific Committee were all systematically ignored prior to tabling the Bill. Although some view scientific advocacy as an oxymoron, these scientists demonstrated otherwise, illustrating the impact of articulate and informed experts in this age of 24-hour news cycles.

Despite the 2018 Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Bill passing both Houses of the NSW Parliament, there is a continued need for scientific engagement on this issue. Although necessarily slow and variably accessible, peer-reviewed literature on all aspects of feral horse impacts represents the bedrock upon which arguments against the ‘brumby bill’ and its advocates must be based. Ongoing work by committees and societies integrating this information ensures the currency and relevance of the scientific establishment, providing the impartial knowledge crucial for informed public discourse and policy development.

Finally, it is important to recognise and support those individuals that are the public face of this issue, championing evidence-based policy and transparent governance. Rather than favouring one approach over the other, I suggest this three-way consortium between researchers, scientific organisations and science communicators is our most effective means to boost scientific literacy and promote critical thinking in the era of fake news.



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