Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
SUBMISSION: IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT OF FERAL HORSES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS
Email: secretary@mcav.com.au Ph: 03 5775 1127
www.mcav.com.au

MCAV SUBMISSION TO THE IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT OF FERAL HORSES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS

This submission relates specifically in the terms of reference to:

a) identifying best practice approaches to reduce the populations of feral horses in the Australian Alps and their impact on:

ii. the ecological health of the Australian Alps national parks and reserves,

BACKGROUND:

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria (MCAV) was formed in the late 1950s and represents families who engage, both past and present, in transhumant grazing in the Victorian High Country.

Alpine grazing is recorded as going back to 1834, when William Wyse followed in the footsteps of Hume and Hovell and found a rich grazing area between the Kiewa, Mitta Mitta and Murray Rivers. The cattle run started there, 'Mungabareena Run' is where Albury is now situated.[1]

At roughly the same time, James McFarlane set out from Monaro and travelled south to the Omeo plains. MacFarlane was later joined by other early cattlemen who established the Cobungra and Tawonga runs – and so began the practice of what is now referred to as Alpine Grazing: where families would take their cattle to the High Country to rest their home pastures during the hot summer months, returning to 'low' runs over the cold winters.
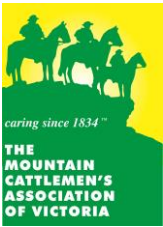
Like most pioneer groups, Mountain Cattlemen relied on the knowledge of those around them – Australia's First People. From the Indigenous they learned to tend to the land using fire and, later, horses; prior to the advent of motorised transportation there were few jobs that could be achieved without a horse.

Although there are records of horses being released into the Alpine environment – both intentionally and unintentionally – from the beginning of white settlement, the numbers increased significantly as horses were made redundant with the increase in mechanisation coinciding with the cattlemen being excluded from their traditional activities, which have given rise to unmanaged herds[2]

In the *Victorian Government Feral Horse Strategic Action Plan 2018 – 2021*, it was acknowledged: "the 'brumby' is part of Australian folklore. For some members of the public and community groups, horses provide a living link to Victorian pioneer and grazing history in the Barmah region and the Alps, and form part of Australian folklore as depicted in 'Banjo' Paterson's poem 'The Man from Snowy River'."
The image of a Mountain Cattlemen on his horse, chasing brumbies with Akubra and oilskin flapping in the wind is internationally recognisable, so much so that it was the iconic image used to open the Sydney Olympic Games.
The Mountain Cattlemen's Association recognises that their geographical knowledge is predominantly related to areas of the Eastern Alps located in Victoria but maintains that this submission should be considered relevant given parts of the New South Wales Alpine environment, combined with Victorian regions, make up the Eastern Alps.

Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
SUBMISSION: IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT OF FERAL HORSES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS
Email: secretary@mcav.com.au Ph: 03 5775 1127
www.mcav.com.au

WHERE BRUMBIES ROAM:

The large majority of Australia's wild horse population resides in Northern Australia where an estimated 400,000 roam. A small number can be found in the Barmah Forest and the Australian Alps, though there has been widely varying accounts on exactly how many graze in the latter environment.

In a paper prepared for the Australian Alps Liaison Committee in 2005 - considered to be the first of its kind - *The Population Ecology of Feral Horses in the Australian Alps Management Summary* author Michelle Dawson surmised that an estimated 5200 horses were in the identified Alps study area.
Population estimates used the line transect method and found an equated 1.86 horses per km2. (Coefficient of variation = 31%)[3]. It was found that horse populations increase three-fold every decade.

There are an estimated 14,000 wild horses living in the New South Wales Eastern Alps.[4]

THE PROBLEM:

Many scientists have expressed concern about the increasing numbers of wild horses and the threat they pose to the environmental values of the Alps. It has been identified that track formation, soil compaction, change in vegetation structure and streambank disturbance were impacted as a result of wild horses on sub-alpine and montane environments.

Mountain cattlemen have witnessed the damage and effects of overgrazing and managed horse populations prior to the formation of the National Park and exclusion of their management.

This submission relates in the terms of reference to: identifying best practice approaches to reduce the populations of feral horses in the Australian Alps and their impact on: ii. the ecological health of the Australian Alps national parks and reserves.
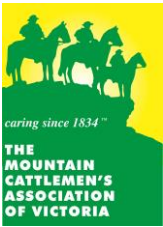
Specifically, the problems created by an explosion in wild horse numbers in the Australian Alps, and the best way forward to minimise the latter.

Recognising the problems caused by wild horses, the *Victorian Alps Wild Horse Management Plan* was released in 2013. This was followed by *the Feral Horse Strategic Action Plan 2018 – 2021*, and later the *Protection of the Alpine National Park: Feral Horse Action Plan 2021*.

In November 2021, the NSW Government finalised a new Kosciuszko horse management plan, *Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse and Heritage Management Plan.*

"Management of horses in national parks and public lands must balance three elements: the right level of protection for our natural environment and pre-European cultural heritage; the humane treatment of feral horses; and social expectations for either a continued heritage connection to the 'brumby' or their management;" *Feral Horse Strategic Action Plan 2018 – 2021.*

Both State Governments agree that the number of wild horses in the Australian Alps cannot remain unchecked and we agree. The challenge is to find an appropriate balance that incorporates population control with humane methods, heritage value, environmental damage and emotional benefit in a package that is digestible to a public made up of individuals with vastly different ideologies.

Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
SUBMISSION: IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT OF FERAL HORSES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS
Email: secretary@mcav.com.au Ph: 03 5775 1127
www.mcav.com.au

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria agrees with the principal elements of the NSW plan the *Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse and Heritage Management Plan,* and we strongly believe any plan for Victoria must operate in conjunction with and in co-operation with the NSW plan.

Interestingly, in June 2018 the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act became law[5]. It was the first law to prioritise the protection of an introduced animal, the domestic horse, above the native wildlife of the national park – indicative of the need to maintain a wild horse population so that they can continue to remain in the Alpine landscape as well as in the heart of Australian's.

PAST CONTROL METHODS:

According to Michelle Dawson's report; "from the mid-1800s to as late as the 1960s graziers controlled the distribution of wild horses in the Australian Alps. Different graziers had different approaches to wild horses". Some eradicated locally and others took a much broader approach as they sought to supplement grazing income with horse sales.

In its submission to the *Victorian Alps Wild Horse Management Plan 2013*, the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria outlined its belief in a "practical management" system of wild horse populations.

Parks Victoria acknowledged the on-going conservation efforts of Mountain Cattlemen in their paper *The Ecology of Wild Horses and their Environmental Impact in the Victorian Alps May 2013*. "Graziers managed the distribution (and numbers) of wild horses to varying degrees from the mid-1800s up until cattle grazing ceased early this century".

"Brumby-running" began soon after the arrival of horses in the Australian Alps and is closely tied to the culture of wild horses. Mountain Cattlemen traditionally carried out brumby running as part of their annual trips to the High Country.[6] Anecdotal evidence suggests it was a matter of pride to bring home new horses – caught from the wild population – when Cattlemen returned home from the summer.
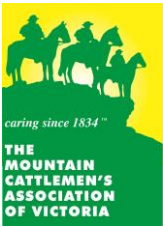
There are also multiple accounts of Cattlemen shooting stallions while in the Alpine environment to protect their own horses and manage breeding stock. As an example, McNamara's Hut on the Bogong High Plains has the words "21/11/1962 shot 14 horses" written on one of the timber roof beams.[7]

Combined, these methods served as a free service to the local environment: wild horse numbers were not able to increase un-checked.

In 2005 grazing was banned in the Alpine National Park – at the same time Mountain Cattlemen ceased to maintain wild horse numbers in the Alpine environment as it was no longer part of their enclave.

In more modern times, local stockmen would head away for a weekend to go brumby running. Over many years brumby running clubs emerged - based at Tubbut through to Benambra, Mitta Mitta and south to Buchan. Many of these clubs had members scattered far and wide, drawing from as far away as Melbourne.[8]

Demographic data on wild horses caught and removed from the Alpine National Park was supplied by the Alpine Brumby Management Association (ABMA) and Parks Victoria from 1998 to 2002. Brumby-runners recorded the general location, number and type (stallion, colt, mare, filly) of all horses caught each financial year. [9]

Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
SUBMISSION: IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT OF FERAL HORSES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS
Email: secretary@mcav.com.au Ph: 03 5775 1127
www.mcav.com.au

About 200 horses were caught annually between 1998 and 2002. The majority of horses caught were young colts and fillies, with a predicted long-term reduction in population numbers the result from eradication of young breeding animals.

"Modelling shows that although brumby-running is a form of recreational harvesting, it can suppress populations below carrying capacity and can be used as a management tool. Its effectiveness as a management tool will depend on the management objectives in each circumstance. I recommend that it is used as a management tool in the future," Michelle Dawson, *The Population Ecology of Feral Horses in the Australian Alps Management Summary.*

Most brumby running organisations have now folded after the practice was banned in the Alpine National Park.

CURRENT CONTROL METHODS:

Management of wild horses is predominately carried out by aerial culling in Victoria, notwithstanding the public antipathy to this form of control, and the results are widely varied.

There are reports of bushwalkers threatened from the air[10].

The National Party blamed aerial culling for an explosion in wild dog and pig numbers due to carcasse feeding.[11]

An aerial cull in 2000, conducted in Guy Fawkes National Park NSW, resulted in a public backlash after it was found that only 63 per cent of horses were killed instantly[12]

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria does not support aerial culling due to the potential for shooter inaccuracies, prolonged suffering of animals, inability to differentiate between animals not suitable for culling, and cost.

Aerial culling in NSW was later banned via legislation. This again raises the question on how to effectively manage population numbers.

The Victorian Government will continue to rely predominantly on shooting, both aerial and on-the-ground, despite the public abhorrence.
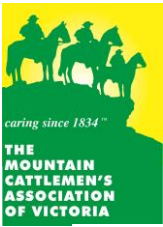
It is proposed that some horses will be re-homed. Parks Victoria received over 300 enquiries to re-home wild horses (between both Alpine and Barmah national parks)[13], indicative of the public's willingness to be involved.

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria would like to officially record they have asked to be included in roundtable discussions and to take an active role in wild horse population control advisory boards; this has not been enlivened by either government.

PROPOSED CONTROL METHODS:

The *Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan 2021* currently lists the following as control methods for consideration:

See table

Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
SUBMISSION: IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT OF FERAL HORSES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS
Email: secretary@mcav.com.au Ph: 03 5775 1127
www.mcav.com.au

Capture methods

Method	Example application
Passive trapping	Areas that are safely accessible by vehicle with trailer and/or truck.
	Areas where transport duration permits daily checking of traps.
Aerial and/or ground mustering into yards	Areas that are safely accessible by vehicle with trailer and/or truck.
	Areas with suitable terrain for safe mustering.

Control methods

Method	Example application
Removal from the park for domestication (rehoming)	Where there is pre-identified demand from suitable and approved individuals or organisations for removed horses for rehoming.
	Areas that are safely accessible by vehicle with trailer and/or truck and where transport of live horses does not cause unacceptable welfare impacts.
Removal from the park for transport to abattoir or knackery that meets specific animal welfare criteria	For wild horses that were removed for rehoming, but rehoming did not eventuate.
	Areas that are safely accessible by vehicle with trailer and/or truck and where transport of live horses meets animal welfare requirements.
Shooting in trap yards	Areas that are safely accessible by vehicle.
Tranquilising in trap yards followed by euthanasia via a captive bolt or lethal injection	Areas that are safely accessible by vehicle.
Ground shooting	For use in areas of the park which have been closed to ensure safe implementation of ground shooting.
Reproductive control	In retention management areas after the population is at target level, if scientific evidence suggests it will be effective.

The following will **not be considered** for use in the management or control of wild horses in the park:
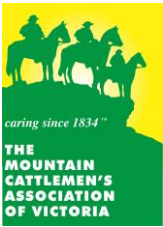
1. translocation to other parts of the park or other national parks or reserves
2. brumby running and roping.

Passive trapping is considered by most stakeholders and community interest groups as the most humane control method.[14]

Running/roping and mustering followed by re-homing are two additional capture techniques endorsed by the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria.

It is pleasing to note the NSW Government will not re-visiting aerial shooting as a control method.

In the *Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan 2021,* a total eradication program is recommended in certain areas of the Eastern Alps while a reduction in numbers to 3000 is listed as best practice to balance environmental degradation concerns with heritage value and public opinion. Using figures found in the plan, this represents an approximate culling of up to 11,000 wild horses.

Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
SUBMISSION: IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT OF FERAL HORSES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS
Email: secretary@mcav.com.au Ph: 03 5775 1127
www.mcav.com.au

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria believes a single management plan that covers the Alpine region, rather than a management division between State bodies, should be developed using the *Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan 2021* as a base document.

The following recommendations are made on a landscape-wide basis, with no differential between the Victorian and New South Wales Alpine areas.

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria recommends an initial target of 1200 horses be captured over three years – a figure established by the Victorian Government as providing considerable impact.[15]

A target of 200 animals per annum would keep the current Victorian population stable, including births and natural deaths.[16] Based on this information the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria recommends an annual target of 400 animals per year until numbers in the Eastern Alps reach those outlined in the Kosciusko Plan – a stable genetic herd of 3000.

How:

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria recommends experienced local Cattlemen be engaged to:

1. Set up an advisory panel to oversee population control.
2. 6 teams be established for the capture/removal of wild horses from the Eastern Alps

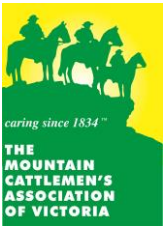Primary form of wild horse control should be capture and re-home. Best practice is as follows:

1. Passive trapping with inducements such as feed or salt
2. Mustering
3. Brumby running/roping

These methods are inter-connected and should be used in parallel. Once captured, the MCAV recommends the identification of horses into three categories: those suitable for re-homing, those that should be euthanised for commercial purpose and those to be returned to sustain genetically diverse herds.

1. Re-Homing: Identification of horses suitable for re-homing: a large proportion of horses captured would fall into this category with the following exception: stallions over 3 years of age, all horses over 5 years of age and those deemed to have unmanageable traits.
2. Euthanasia: The reality of euthanasia is not lost on the Mountain Cattlemen's Association, nor the attraction of commercial compensation for those involved in the capture. It is proposed that horses deemed too old, of ill-health, with unmanageable traits or in poor genetic condition should be transported humanely to be euthanised.
3. Return: Those horses in prime physical condition that represent good genetic breeding be returned to the Alpine environment. Limited to 10% of all captured.

CONCLUSION:

Wild horses belong in the Alpine National Park.

Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
SUBMISSION: IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT OF FERAL HORSES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS
Email: secretary@mcav.com.au Ph: 03 5775 1127
www.mcav.com.au

Preserving their cultural and historic value will have better outcomes than attempting to hunt them to extinction.

Protecting these values must be balanced with controlling the exploding population.
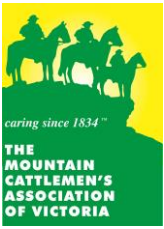
The MCAV agrees wild horse numbers must be reduced and then maintained at a genetically sustainable level.

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria believe their knowledge and expertise should be utilised to help manage a sustainable population of brumbies, including the herd minimisation phase.

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria would like to acknowledge the common-sense approach laid out in the *Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan 2021*, in particular the treatment of different areas within the Park paying proper regard to the differing characteristics and horse involvement rather than a simplistic, broad-brush approach. We believe the plan goes a long way to identifying ways to manage the wild horse population while respecting their heritage value.

Bibliography:

1. Alburyhistory.com.au pg 1
2. Jane Holth, Tales of the Cattlemen of the High Plains, www.portphilippioneersgroup.org.au
3. A.B Costin, Study of the Ecosystems of the Monaro Region of New South Wales.
4. *Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse and Heritage Management Plan 2021*
5. https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/bills/Pages/bill-details.aspx?pk=3518
6. Leah Tindell , North East Living Magazine, Huts in Safe Hands, 2016
7. Victorian Government released the Feral Horse Strategic Action Plan 2018 – 2021, and later the *Protection of the Alpine National Park: Feral Horse Action Plan 2021*.
8. Michelle Dawson, The Population Ecology of Feral Horses in the Australian Alps Management Summary, 2005
9. https://www.2gb.com/freeze-on-snowy-mountain-culls-after-hikers-brush-with-death/
10. https://vic.nationals.org.au/media-releases/backing-our-brumbies-in-the-ovens-valley/
11. Don A. Driscoll, Graeme L. Worboys, Hugh Allan, Sam C. Banks, Nicholas J. Beeton, Rebecca C. Cherubin, Tim S. Doherty, C. Max Finlayson, Ken Green, Renée Hartley, Geoffrey Hope, Chris N. Johnson, Mark Lintermans, Brendan Mackey, David J. Paull, Jamie Pittock, Luciana L. Porfirio, Euan G. Ritchie, Chloe F. Sato, Ben C. Scheele, Deirdre A. Slattery, Susanna Venn, David Watson, Maggie Watson, Richard M. Williams, Impacts of feral horses in the Australian Alps and evidence-based solutions, 2019
12. Victorian Government Feral Horse Strategic Action Plan 2018 – 2021
13. Dr Mark Lonsdale, Monash University and Charles Darwin University (Chair), Dr Bidda Jones, RSPCA Australia (Deputy Chair), Dr Sara Beavis, Australian National University, Professor Elissa Cameron, University of Tasmania, Professor Emeritus Geoffrey Hope, Australian National University, Professor Emeritus Reuben Rose, University of Sydney Glen Saunders, NSW Department of Primary Industries, Professor Alan Welsh, Australian National University, **Final report of the Independent Technical Reference Group, Supplementary to the Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Management Plan,** 2016
14. Victorian Government Feral Horse Strategic Action Plan 2018 – 2021

Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria
SUBMISSION: IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT OF FERAL HORSES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS
Email: secretary@mcav.com.au Ph: 03 5775 1127
www.mcav.com.au