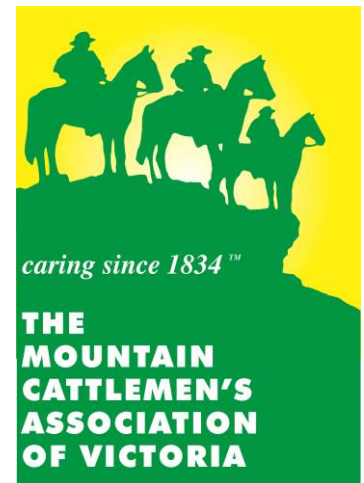


# ENQUIRY INTO THE CONTROL OF INVASIVE ANIMALS ON CROWN LAND

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

*That, under s 33 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, an inquiry be referred to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee for consideration and report no later than 30 March 2017 into the benefits of Parks Victoria and other agencies such as the Game Management Authority's use of community hunting organisations and individuals in the control of invasive animals on Crown land including but not limited to the following:*

- 1. assessment of the biodiversity outcomes, community safety and limitations of the trial conducted by Parks Victoria on control of deer populations in a national park;*
- 2. consideration of the application of these types of programs for other invasive animal species in partnership with Crown land managers;*
- 3. assessment of the relative costs and benefits, financial or otherwise, of other forms of pest control in national parks.*



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## SUBMISSION FROM THE MOUNTAIN CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA (MCAV)

The Members of the MCAV live and work alongside the boundaries of the Alpine National Park and adjoining State Forests. The comments in this submission refer to the Alpine National Park but also apply to State Forests in the High Country.

The Cattlemen offer sound practical advice to this enquiry and our Executive would like the opportunity to appear before the Committee. The MCAV office is based at Mansfield.

## DEER

### Background

Our members have been alerting Government authorities for many years about the obvious danger to the environment of the escalating deer population. Twenty years ago, sphagnum bogs in the Park on Bogong and the Bennison Plains were being used as deer wallows and vegetation was being damaged by stags rubbing.

The MCAV has repeatedly attempted to alert Government authorities and environmental bodies such as the VNPA about the potential disaster. Unfortunately, the politics of Alpine grazing around that time clouded the message as environmental groups didn't wish to join the MCAV on this. Environmental groups were blind to the deer problem while Alpine grazing was being debated publically.

Since alpine grazing has been legislated out, the VNPA began talking about the damage caused by deer as though they have been leading the campaign for years. That opportunist modus operandi in our opinion is a disgrace and demonstrates how vicious and self-serving environmental politics has become.

Samba deer are not mob animals, preferring to live alone, now on public land in Eastern Victoria their numbers are out of control and recent reports indicate the Samba are now mobbing up into groups.

Fallow deer is another species emerging as a major threat, herding up in large numbers around places like Bindi and Benambra. Fallow deer have now spread into the Buchan Headwaters Wilderness area.

Fallow deer mobs are coming out of the bush and doing a great deal of damage. Consequently, they are being shot on farms in increasing numbers with little obvious effect on the deer population.

One member of the MCAV sent us the following comment for this submission.

*“Our farming operation is definitely suffering from the explosion in sambar deer in past 15 years. Considerable expense is being incurred due to damage to fences, crops and revegetation areas. They just run straight through our 8 wire electric fences that have box posts with steel posts every 3 metres between. We cannot keep them out of our new pastures and any areas that were sown down in the autumn look like they have been grazed by sheep. We are shooting them but they just keep coming. Trying to revegetate areas is also an issue. I would estimate that an area planted with young trees along the creek has lost 75% of the new plantings to deer”.*

## FUTURE SOLUTIONS

The environment within the Alpine National Park is in a period of rapid change because of the impact of deer and will never revert to pre deer condition.

The numbers of deer are increasing exponentially and the most that can ever be achieved is a holding of the population. The numbers of deer in the Alpine National Park are out of control. The only predator of deer in Australia is man and the only solution to holding the population at any significant level is to encourage man to hunt the deer.

Spagnum bogs, water points, biodiversity and general vegetation will all continue to suffer and change as a direct result of deer action. The end result will be dramatic and will pale into insignificance the claims made by ‘environmentalists’ about the alleged damage by Alpine Grazing which did not change the environment since European settlement and in fact assisted biodiversity.

As for the “concerned scientists” that ran a collegiate media campaign against grazing, where is their public and prolonged campaigning now for a real issue threatening the environment?

Campaigns to encourage hunting to hold numbers will not even be achieved unless the management and rules and regulations in National Parks are changed. This would mean the Park rules and regulations that are known today would not exist as regards hunting of deer. If Parks Victoria and the Government do not grasp and act on what needs to be done nothing will save the Park from irreversible damage and it will change forever.

The same dire situation exists in State Forests and whatever management controls are implemented following this enquiry need to be the same over all classes of Public land. (Tenure blind policies and management)

It has been reported by our members that some DELWP and Parks Victoria staff are running the line that they think deer numbers have reached their peak due to the vegetation spurt after the mega fires and numbers will gradually plateau and even reduce. The MCAV believes this is wishful thinking by authorities perhaps designed to procrastinate on decisions. Their theory is totally incorrect.

## **Key points to encourage Hunters to reduce the numbers of deer.**

Hunting and the shooting of deer is the only known method of controlling numbers.

1. Future policies and management control of the deer numbers would have to be ‘tenure blind” and apply equally over all public land in the High Country.
2. Government would have to explain to and obtain an understanding from the public regarding the importance of hunting in Parks in order to even partly save the environment.
3. A culture of hunting and an understanding of hunting would have to be fostered with accreditation of hunters being very important. Heavy penalties could apply to rogue hunters.
4. Hunting dogs would have to be allowed and be radio controlled for recovery.
5. Financial incentives to hunt and remove the carcasses is the key to attracting enough hunters. At present there is simply not enough incentive to attract more of the class and standard of hunter that is required (responsible and accountable). These incentives could include allowing the meat to be sold for pet food and /or human consumption using a similar system to Kangaroo culling in NSW. Removing carcasses is very important (but that is not always possible) to avoid the build-up of numbers of wild dogs. Remoteness is a factor in any stipulation to hunters that required total removal of carcasses.
6. To assist the removal of a significant number of carcasses, closed seasonal tracks and some management only tracks would have to be opened to accredited hunters and key tracks gravelled and upgraded to avoid damage during the Winter. This would greatly assist the practical removal of some of the carcasses.
7. There is potential for hunting tourism to be developed in Parks, and rules for this could easily be developed thus fostering a new industry.
8. We again mention the importance of Hunter accreditation in another context. Our members are experiencing difficulty from some irresponsible hunting groups on their State Forest leases. They have experienced aggression and a don't care attitude by Hunters of issues surrounding cattle and hunting. There are reports of members of the general public have as well been intimidated by rogue hunting groups. This highlights the need to change both the culture of Hunters and the public as mentioned elsewhere in this submission. The oversight, control and management of Hunters can be assisted by heavy penalties for breeches, strict accreditation, and incentives to attract more responsible people to take up deer hunting.

*Regarding safety of the general population.*

In countries where hunting is a way of life, all users of public forests are aware of the situation and adopt procedures to mostly avoid incidents and accidents. Australia does not have that culture, but given the new situation, part of the new order of Parks management and Government will have to allow and foster coexistence of Hunters and the population.

Closing an area to the public for a quick raid on the deer is not a viable or potential option. What is required is a constant campaign against deer numbers all year around. Therefore, the public and hunters will have to co-exist for the greater good of the environment, or any program will fail. This happens overseas and can happen in Victoria.

## **WILD HORSES (BRUMBIES)**

*Edited submission from the MCAV to the Victorian Alps Wild Horse Management Plan 2013.*

The Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria has a long history involved in the management of the Victorian High Country. The MCAV has always believed in the practical management of our alpine regions with grazing and fuel reduction slow burns. Wild horses are part of our tradition, culture, heritage and history. They are a part our life and are a genuine part of the landscape.

### **Wild Horses and the Mountain Cattlemen.**

Wild horses or brumbies as we call them are important to our traditional heritage. Our traditions involve catching brumbies, taming and using them. No horses are as sure footed as a brumby in the alpine regions. Our culture is mirrored in the *Man from Snowy River* films in which the brumby is the hero. As our President Charlie Lovick says “We see brumbies as an extension of our own horses. A Mountain Cattleman is nothing if he hasn’t got a partnership with a good horse. They are part of our whole existence.”

### **Over population of Wild horses**

The MCAV understands there are now in excess of 10,000 wild horses in the Alpine National Park. This number has increased exponentially since our licences were taken away in 2005. Before this, the MCAV and cattlemen’s families played an integral part in the management of the wild horse numbers. Since 2005 the lack of traditional management practises which date back to European settlement have allowed Brumby numbers to increase, to a point where they have become a threat to the environment and their own welfare. We support the official Parks Victoria position that over many years the Mountain Cattlemen contributed to the management of the wild horses in the alpine national park. This is recorded in the Parks Victoria 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 (Walter 2002; Foster 2004).”<sup>1</sup> Our organisation strongly defends and supports the historical fact that traditional management methods kept the numbers of Brumbies under control and did so for more 100 years. We submit that this proven form of control and management should be reintroduced.

### **Wild horse numbers and the Victorian Alps**

Wild horses conclusively belong in the Alpine National Park. The traditional, cultural and heritage aspects of the brumby are very important. However, numbers have exploded due to the removal of traditional control measures. The MCAV agrees the numbers must be reduced and then maintained at a sustainable level. We submit that the Cattlemen’s knowledge and expertise will be essential in managing a sustainable population of brumbies into the future. It is clear that Victorians overwhelmingly support the retention of the iconic brumby in its rightful place in Victoria’s High Country. If the Mountain Cattlemen and the traditional pursuit of Brumby running weren’t removed by the authorities, the wild horse numbers and the landscape would vastly different now.

### **Control Methods**

The MCAV supports 3 types of wild horse control:

- Trap yards – just: ‘trapping’ with inducements such as feed or salt and then relocating
- 1. ‘Brumby running’ with ropes by horseriders with experience in this activity
- 2. Mustering in suitable conditions into yards with a suitable number of experienced riders

These methods are inter-connected and should be able to be used in conjunction with one another. They are proven methods, have been used for generations, and have proved their known effectiveness. The MCAV families have proved over 100 years these techniques kept the numbers at sustainable levels. The removal of the families from the Alpine National Park means this local effective control in the Park no longer exists and wild horse numbers have dramatically increased. Those two factors are connected.

### **Control Methods not supported:**

The MCAV is against inhumane methods. The MCAV is against helicopter culling. While helicopter mustering may be used, the alpine environment does not allow any accuracy for shooting from helicopters and suffering occurs.

## **Solutions**

Certainly the knowledge of the mountain cattleman should be actively sought to understand the history of the horse and their behaviours. Cattlemen and experienced bushmen and women in their own right have the greatest historic knowledge of the problem. Some members would be willing to cooperate and offer advice.

We need to change the regulations relating to the catching brumbies in Victoria's National Parks and State Forests in order to manage wild horse numbers.

When removing captured horses, the MCAV supports

- Transport captured Brumbies out to local farms
- Transport of captured Brumbies for sale
- Euthanasia if the carcass is utilised

The MCAV does not support

- Horses being put down on site when they are suited to be re-homed.

## **Conclusion**

Wild horses (brumbies) are an iconic part of our High Country heritage and if maintained in sustainable numbers can be beneficial to the environment. Grazing by both horses and cattle reduce fuel loads in the High Country and Brumbies assist in that important process. However, we say again it is important that wild horse numbers are managed.

## **WILD DOGS**

### **Background**

Dingoes/ Wild Dogs have existed in the Alpine environment for several centuries and are now considered by some, to be a native species and a top order predator. Since European settlement and the introduction on domestic livestock, the relationship with the Dingo underwent a major transformation. Dingoes now had an abundant food source comprising of defenceless livestock, resulting in a population expansion of this predator.

Mountain graziers had to be resourceful and adapt quickly to protect their livestock, income and their family survival. They developed a close understanding of these adversaries and often a deep respect for some individual animals. Over time the graziers developed methods of Dingo (and their hybrid cross derivatives) management which enabled them to continue the pursuit of raising livestock and helping build a nation.

### **Management Changes**

Since the early 1970's some of the techniques of Dingo /Wild Dog management have been deemed inappropriate or have simply fallen by the wayside. For example, in the 1950's and 60's aerial baiting was a major tool in the program and when it ceased the population increased dramatically. Combined with the increased restrictions on alpine graziers, the impact of wild dogs on livestock, and native fauna, rapidly increased. Over the past decade sheep, calves and other livestock have been mauled and killed on the outskirts of towns, beside busy highways and out in open farm land, the predator has never been so prolific and so brazen.

The management of this menace to livestock and native fauna has had to undergo a dramatic revamp, the effective traditional skills of the older bushmen combined with new innovative technologies have resulted in a modest reduction of Dingo/ Wild dog impacts.

As part of this revamp there have been some regulatory changes that allow and encourage the Mountain Cattlemen to once again actively pursue these predators. They do this willingly by laying poison 1080 baits, opportunistic shooting, stalking and trapping with rubber jaw traps on their State forest grazing leases.

### **Current Situation**

Government agencies now rely heavily on local knowledge and support to maintain a balance between predator and prey for a greater environmental and economic outcome. The management program of this predator in the Victorian High Country has recently had some minor success and MCAV reiterates the need to keep a firm hand on the Dingo/Wild dog population, to prevent further social, economic and environmental losses.

MCAV understands the complexities associated with wild dog control and fully supports the current program across public and private land tenures, using baiting, both ground and aerial, trapping and shooting. MCAV also supports the ongoing research to find new methods and technology that can be incorporated into the current program.

MCAV has had significant input to the Victorian Farmers Federation policy surrounding wild dog control and endorses the VFF's direction which has been crafted from the broader agricultural community, including north west Victoria.

### **Future Solutions**

In the state of Victoria, we have a tenuous hold on wild dog management, however with intensifying numbers of deer carcasses combined with the instinctive ability of adaptation, wild dog numbers are always going to be a major issue.

- There needs to be a broader community understanding of the issues associated with wild dogs.
- Incentive for Deer hunters and the broader hunting community to be more active in wild dog management.
- Removal of the 3km wild dog buffer zone.
- Facility to store and maintain traditional knowledge.
- Investment in the use of new technologies.
- Adoption of nil land tenure management approach.
- Formation of community management Group.

### **Opportunity for discussion.**

Given that State Government, Parks Victoria and DELWP have no option but to change the existing basic policies of management to meet the deer challenge, some opportunities present themselves to control other feral animals on Public land.

Cats, Foxes and Wild Dogs do enormous damage to native wildlife. These three species also breed rapidly because of the luxurious food source presented by deer carcasses. Judicial poisoning of strategic carcasses by accredited hunters and / or Wild dog officers from the department would reduce the numbers of three significant pests. Hunter's dogs may have to have some type of restraining muzzles but that can be worked through

## Conclusion

Feral animals on public land in Victoria are posing threats never experienced before. The environment is under siege especially from deer and authorities have to totally change basic policies and management direction to even hold the line.

To combat this environmental threat, Governments have to be brave and go where authorities have not gone before in changing the regulations and in that process be able to explain to the community why that is necessary.

The MCAV would like to present to the Committee and go into this issue in more detail.



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