Leisa Caldwell
10 March 2024

Dear Animal Welfare Committee

I would like to provide additional information regarding my responses to questions posed at the hearing on February 5, 2024. The complexities of these answers were not fully explained nor addressed due to time constraints at the hearing. I will also address the supplementary questions requested on Feb 20th by email as well as put forward further relevant information.

> ***Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you for your evidence so far. Can I confirm that neither of you have qualifications in ecology or earth system sciences at all?***

As said, I do not hold formal academic qualifications in ecology nor earth system sciences. However, it's essential to recognize that academic qualifications aren't the sole measure of expertise in these fields. While formal education certainly provides a strong foundation, extensive field experience and first-hand observation also offer invaluable insights and possibly more practical knowledge. It is this kind of experience that is often called upon by scientists for assistance.

In this case, the local mountain community that I represent includes landholders and managers who live adjoining the park and close to localities of brumby areas in the national park. They have a deep understanding of mountain ecosystems because they live with them. The local hands-on experience and practical knowledge of park areas, accumulated over generations, offer unique perspectives that has actually assisted academic research in the past.

The knowledge of these individuals that I represent, spans individually 40 to 70 years of firsthand observations and extensive experiences. They have acquired a unique experience derived from decades of ongoing attention to and interaction in the mountains. These regular 'on the ground' and 'hands on experiences' in their own back yard well surpasses any others, including most current NPWS staff.

Additionally, the insights of the local mountain community are founded on empirical data gathered over lifetimes, in contrast to sporadic visits by academics, lobbyists and activists who are relatively new to the mountains. This collective knowledge deserves greater respect and inclusion alongside formal academic research in decision-making processes.

This vast experience sets them apart, emphasizing substance over titles. It distinguishes them from individuals who rely on superficial credentials and those who also make questionable claims of mountain upbringing. Such individuals may assert they have deep connections to the mountains, but in reality, their visits are pecuniary, infrequent and from afar.

> ***Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In terms of the methods, do you acknowledge that most experts and statisticians who have expertise in those matters—particularly in relation to animal counts—say that distance sampling is the best methodology that we have for the circumstances in Kosci and the alpine region?***
> *LEISA CALDWELL: Dr Cairns did explain to us that the methodology was developed by St Andrews University for the Serengeti, so it's a very different landscape. A lot of it is based on*

assumption, and he said he can only base his information on the data he is given and that that data is given by people who are assuming that there are horses living in certain areas where we know they are not.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And you know they are not because you say that you've seen it at all times, to say that they're not there?

LEISA CALDWELL: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: With all of those thousands of hectares, you know that they're not there.

LEISA CALDWELL: We cover—yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Because you were there the whole time.

LEISA CALDWELL: Yes, because we don't just travel there the whole time, but we can track where horses have been and we can see where horses live.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I wouldn't remotely question your horse skills; I'm sure you're absolutely fantastic.

LEISA CALDWELL: It's not about horse skills, it's bush craft and bush skills and knowing the landscape of the land.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: …Which are very different to ecological expertise and science.

LEISA CALDWELL: Maybe, but we can tell where horses are or have been in the last week, six weeks, six months or 12 months.

Let me reiterate; given Ms. Higginson's doubts and scepticism about our own expertise, I extend yet another gracious invitation for the committee to join us and witness firsthand to get an understanding of the breadth of our proficiency.

This local knowledge has been not only recognized but also actively sought after by NPWS in the past specifically in horse management. This underscores its importance and certainly warrants more value and respect again! This expertise is akin in significance to the traditional knowledge held by some Indigenous peoples, who manage their lands with an unparalleled understanding also rooted in generations of experience—no formal academic qualifications are needed by them nor are their qualifications ever dared questioned, and rightfully so!

The practice of tracking, monitoring and locating animals, especially horses, is not just limited to indigenous skills. We possess a keen understanding of the habitats where these horses reside and where they do not. Frankly, it is offensive that this knowledge is even challenged.

This unique skill set has also been put to the test over the years, called upon by authorities like NSW Police Rescue and SES for assistance in search and rescue missions. The local horsemen possess an intimate knowledge of the terrain and can cover vast areas with remarkable speed without modern technology of GPS or compass etc. Exploring expansive regions on horseback is second nature to us, as is logical field observations of the natural environment.

Regarding the survey methodology part of the question, we believe it is highly flawed and is utilized for the purpose of manipulating data to artificially inflate numbers in order to justify shooting or removal.

The majority of the surveyed forested areas (80%) compared to the open plains (20%) in the northern part of Kosciuszko do not inhabit horses. The majority of the horses are on the plains or in close proximity of the fringes to the plains.

1. Recommendations from both of the KNP Independent Scientific Committees emphasized that removal decisions should be grounded by unwanted impacts to the local environments, rather than based on total population numbers. However, this crucial advice by NPWS own advisors is consistently and blatantly ignored by the NPWS hierarchy.

2. The peer reviews conducted by both CSIRO and St Andrews University critiqued the (2019) survey, highlighting that the reported increase percentages exceeded what is biologically possible for the species. For instance, the purported rate of increase in the northern end was documented as 37%, surpassing the internationally accepted maximum rate of 22% per annum for wild horses under ideal conditions. It's noteworthy that the 2019 survey was conducted after and amid one of the worst droughts in our history. This preceded the devastating black summer fires, which is hardly conducive to ideal population growth. Interestingly, St Andrews University has since also been excluded from subsequent reviews.

3. Regrettably, St Andrews University did not evaluate the 2022 survey, they would have had a field day with this one! The report observed an increase in the southern end of the park, which is geographically isolated from other areas, escalated from 1433 horses in 2020 to 5335 in 2022—an astonishing annual growth rate of 92.6%! Such anomalies underscore the scrutiny surrounding the methodology employed. Yet the northern end with 85% of the total population only increased by 263 horses! Is this a joke?

4. While it is plausible that brumbies will be unseen during park explorations & surveys, whether conducted on horseback, foot, car or by air, the notion that up to 20,000 horses could remain undetected (by anyone!) is not only highly improbable but laughable.

Distance Sampling methodology involves making guesses about certain factors that may affect how horses can be detected in the survey. These guesses, or assumptions, are based on an understanding of the environment & landscapes and the behaviour of the horses being surveyed. Given that St Andrews and the CSIRO (whom have never been to the park but merely assess the report by desktop), have both questioned the extreme increases at times, therefore there is clearly something suspicious between the actual counts and the end reports.

Horse Distribution & Visibility: It must be assumed that the horses are distributed throughout the block area in a certain way. For example, they assume that they are spread out evenly or clustered in certain areas. Cairns states clearly that the highest densities of horses are found in the open plains area and its fringes but then assumes that 80% of the horses in total are unseen! On the open plains horses can be seen from the ground over a kilometre away and by air even further. They can be seen!

IF HORSES CAN BE SEEN WELL ENOUGH IN FORESTED AREAS TO BE SHOT HUMANELY HOW CAN THEY NOT BE SEEN AT ALL FOR A COUNT?

Dr. Cairns indicated that he can only analyze the data provided to him, and that NPWS controls this data entirely along with the assumptions and guesses made. The assumed distribution of horses provided to Dr. Cairns is overly widespread and dense, leading to the assumption of horse presence in areas where they are not actually found.

Consequently, this results in a major overestimation of population density. There are concerns that this may be intentional, rendering the methodology not only flawed but potentially fraudulent. Who makes these assumptions? What knowledge of wild horses do they have? What knowledge of the area and where the horses inhabit do they have?

Brumbies tend to occupy certain landscapes with distinct grazing habits. They have a designated home range where they graze in a rotational manner over sometimes several days or even weeks, occasionally overlapping with other herds. However, there are significant areas where horses do not and have never resided. This can be attributed to factors such as steepness, dense and rugged bush & scrub, poor forage quality or choice, wet, boggy or unstable ground, rocky ground, presence of predators, or the presence of deceased animals.

Now we are seeing significant movement away from Snowy 2.0 development & construction sites which ironically equals three new whole suburbs of destruction to the environment in the park.

NPWS Senior Area Manager of KNP Steve Cathcart, stated on a field trip with the Community & Scientific Panels that NPWS had only ever counted up to around 3000 horses +/- annually in the northern areas and agreed that the horses tend to stick to the open areas or on the fringes.

The assumption made by the official survey that it fails to detect up to 20,000 horses is nothing but absurd and certainly lacks any credibility by those with knowledge of the park. This is a notion that only those unfamiliar with the area could ever consider.

Drone & thermal expert, NSW Chief Scientist Hugh Durrant-Whyte, when a member of the Community Panel strongly made recommendations of using drone and thermal imaging for an accurate and precise census. He said that it would cost around 10% of the Cairns Distance Sampling method and would be an accurate & precise census. Again an imminent scientist is ignored.

Both advisory committees recommended that other survey methods should be used parallel to compare. NPWS senior management promised this would be implemented. We are still waiting.

> ***Ms SUE HIGGINSON: The other question I would have for both of you is, what is your experience and your anecdotal knowledge of other national parks in New South Wales?***

Kosciuszko National Park welcomes over two million visitors each year, and for us, this special place is right at our doorstep - it's where our families have deep roots and connections. Like indigenous peoples, we have a profound bond with the land of our ancestors. As a result, we spend most of our time exploring Kosciuszko National Park but individually we also all enjoy exploring Australia.

> New questions received:
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> *1. How much would you roughly estimate that it costs the NSW Government to remove a brumby from the Kosciuszko National Park and send them to a rehomer or sanctuary?*
>
> *2. Do you have any estimated cost on how much it would cost the NSW Government to shoot the horse via aerial shooting?*

I am not privy to the specific costings associated with current wild horse management strategies, including trapping, rehoming, ground shooting, or aerial shooting. The comparison of costs between removing wild horses alive and shooting them would vary based on several factors. These factors include the methods employed, the entities responsible for implementation, the scale of the operation, and the associated expenses.

While shooting may entail fewer logistical challenges and upfront costs, it still necessitates resources such as personnel, firearms, ammunition, and potentially specialized training. Additionally, there may

be expenses related to compliance with regulations, environmental assessments, and public relations endeavours.

Although shooting may appear more economically viable in the short term due to lower immediate expenditures, it is imperative to consider the long-term ramifications. These include ongoing public opposition, potential legal disputes, and the necessity for comprehensive management strategies to address ecological concerns over time.

It is crucial for the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and governmental bodies to prioritize all issues related to park impacts and their management, including the management of introduced plants and control of feral animals as well as the very expensive trail maintenance and resort management. The allocation of resources for horse management should be weighed against other pressing concerns, especially given that effective management practices have been lacking across the board for decades.

The costs associated with repairing damage caused by tourists and walking or bike tracks is extremely substantial and in the several millions. This damage is also in the most fragile and unique alpine areas where horses do not exist. It is imperative for governments to maintain a long-term perspective and address all factors contributing to environmental issues, including the impacts of bushfires, noxious weeds and feral animals, which without doubt outweigh those attributed to wild horses.

If you look at the historical financial data, horses have never even been on the list until the last decade or so when NPWS decided to manage the horses themselves rather that the previous FREE management that had been undertaken by the local community for well over a century.

Efficient and cost-effective horse management strategies could be implemented by the government through active engagement with local stakeholders. Independent scientific groups and government departments have consistently emphasized the necessity of socially acceptable wild horse management programs since 2000. It is widely recognized that aerial shooting is not and will not ever be acceptable to the public but local community involvement again would be welcomed by most.

By fostering open dialogue with local experts who possess extensive knowledge and experience in wild horse management, mutually beneficial solutions can be identified. These experts have a demonstrated track record in the field and offer valuable insights that can complement bureaucratic perspectives and activist voices.

Proposed solutions for a real management plan

1. Engage an expert working committee: i.e. Not a futile CAP with irrelevant members as we have currently. A working committee to include 3 or 4 local horsemen (volunteers) with expertise handling wild horses in the wild as well as in captivity, a wild horse ecologist, a wild horse vet, an environmental ecologist/consultant, Brumby advocate for rehoming & public relations (volunteer), Ngarigo representative and NPWS operations staff.

2. Triage localities for horses that need to be removed or thinned out for environmental impact reasons (not because of overall total numbers as recommended by both scientific panels!) Exclusion zones to always be the first priority.

3. A solid census of horse distribution in the targeted areas using at least 3 different methods (Distance Sample once) Investigate what other countries do – St James NZ for example (include independent observers including working committee)

4. Allow the working committee to work out a plan for the specific localities and engage in a type of removal by the means they feel appropriate with good welfare outcomes.

5. Volunteers guided by committee experts can monitor trap yards independently (as was demonstrated in 2000-2003 by locals with very good outcomes)

6. IF any shooting is deemed warranted by the committee, the committee should oversee it for transparency (if not do it themselves).

7. Trapping & removals by mustering to be carried out by the committee and include other volunteers where appropriate. This alone will reduce costs to NPWS.

8. Continuous on-going monitoring for adverse AND beneficial impacts to the environment.

Another proposal for the horses trapped is the STOCKWHIP program. This would be a very useful project when trapped surplus brumbies are available.

Called "The Legends" rehabilitation centre, originally initiated by former Kosciuszko National Park Manager and later Snowy River Shire Council. This program is used in USA for wild horses (mustangs) to be utilized at a centre for the rehabilitation of prisoner inmates based on the Colarado prison system.

An even more innovative idea is for the rehabilitation and therapy for returned veterans and clients from Beyond Blue or Black Dog institute as example. Today horses are working in this kind of service for mental health therapy all over the world and it is only getting more popular as we learn more about this powerful equine therapy ability. An ideal and suitable facility for this is currently already available in the Snowy Mountains if only the powers that be would open their minds & their hearts.

Additionally, it was stated by Assistant General Secretary of the PSA that '*It's either a Kosciuszko National Park, or brumbies. We cannot have both'* and yet we have had both for nearly 200 years! The horses are not all of a sudden new, they have inhabited the mountains since at least the 1840s in often immense numbers. It is essential that this committee recognises that the horse issue has only evolved in the last 2 decades since NPWS took over their management from the local people. Clearly it is a mis-management issue but our cultural heritage and the horses are the losers.

It should also be noted here that there are also many NPWS staff who feel they cannot speak out publicly for fear of losing their jobs that have also agreed in private that the numbers of horses stated is absurdly inflated and that the horses were better managed 30 years ago by the local people.

In conclusion, I would like to mention how very disappointing that no members of the government had even one question to put to myself as a local mountain community representative. Its very sad that politics gets in the way of truth.

The invitation to come see for yourselves from our perspective remains.