

Submission  
No 81

**INQUIRY INTO PROPOSED AERIAL SHOOTING OF  
BRUMBIES IN KOSCIUSZKO NATIONAL PARK**

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

## **Inquiry into the proposed aerial shooting of brumbies in Kosciuszko National Park**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. The management of feral horses should be considered in tandem with the issue of the fate of native animals whose existence is jeopardised by the presence of feral animals including horses. The focus must be on preserving the natural environment and its rightful species. Focusing only on the outcomes for feral horses will be at the expense of the native species that really belong in the area.

### Mismanagement

The mismanagement of horses in Kosciuszko National Park (KNP) is because of political interference especially under the previous government that ignored the science and allowed the horse population to grow to tragic numbers. Allowing the social and shock-jock media so much influence over serious environmental policy has proven disastrous for the environment, and also for native species. It has done nothing to improve the welfare of feral horses in the wild.

### Horses in the wild can be a danger to humans

Many low-impact park users are increasingly endangered by the growing number of feral horses in national parks, particularly KNP. Vehicle collisions are one such threat, but horses also damage stream banks and pollute and muddy the water so that campers and bushwalkers in particular, have increasing difficulty in accessing drinking water. Physical threats from horses are also a reality, with Blue Waterholes camp area closed a few years ago while nearly 100 horses had to be removed after people were injured by horses wandering through the campsites. Imagine the trauma to the innocent child on holiday who was trampled by a horse in the campground.

The '*waddabout the pigs, deer etc*' and '*waddabout the ski-fields, climate change etc*' ploys are tired attempts to deflect attention from the issue of the damage feral horses do, and the constraints that have been put on one very efficient control option with a high relative welfare outcome in NSW, namely aerial shooting.

Being shot either from the ground or from the air by properly skilled, authorised shooters is far more humane than end-of-life situations involving the natural hazards of living in the wild. The reality is:

- Many painful lingering deaths of horses in KNP are primarily through being left in the wild without human care. Photogenic as some are, it is totally unfair to leave them abandoned.
- Increasing numbers of roaming horses are killed painfully in vehicle accidents that could easily kill humans, and where the horses themselves may have to wait hours for someone in authority to put them down.
- Lingering deaths of horses in KNP are also through the very real risk of starvation.
- Feral horses are not treated for worms or given any dental care when in the wild.
- Feral horses are not put down when they suffer the traumas of injury or old age as occurs with horses that are owned and cared for.

### Unrealistic options for controlling feral horse numbers

Non-lethal methods to manage feral horses, as proposed by some people have been tried for years and have proven totally inadequate, and too often, quite stressful on the horses.

### *Rehoming*

Only a tiny fraction of the annual increase in horse numbers in KNP are taken for rehoming and some of those taken aren't have trouble getting permanent new homes.. Trapping and transporting is relatively traumatic.

Pleas for government to fund people rehoming horses are ludicrous. Even if there was capacity to rehome 18 000 horses from KNP alone, to say nothing of the feral horses in other national and state parks, forests and reserves throughout the rest of NSW and across Australia, paying to rehome horses at a time when so many people can't afford decent housing is utterly irresponsible.

### *Fertility Control*

Those proposing fertility control as a feasible control method should be challenged to administer contraception to just 100 horses in the wild, tag them and follow their progress over the next five years. Should some form of fertility control become available that is cost effective and efficient to administer, managers will embrace it. Till then, it's just another distraction.

### How many feral horses are there in KNP

As far as a realistic estimate of the number of feral horses in KNP is concerned, you have a choice of taking notice of a number of vested interests in arriving at 'counts' of the horses in KNP, or a professional, arms-length, peer-reviewed survey.

Recent examples of the unofficial counts in northern KNP include:

- 1000: Peter Cochran, particularly when speaking to Ray Hadley on 2GB, in the latter days of John Barilaro's political career, claiming in late 2022 and again a few months ago, that there were less than 1000 horses in northern KNP.
- 992: The flyover count organised by a private brumby lobby group that included Rod Roberts, NSW MP, who on 11 May 2022, in the NSW parliament stated that they counted just 992 horses<sup>1</sup>.
- 653: 70 horses-riders counted horses in northern KNP over a two-day period in June 2023 and reported 653 horses as the total.

IN COMPARISON, the last official survey in 2022 estimated (in very rounded figures) between 14000 and 23000 horses, with the most likely number around 18000<sup>2</sup>.

These unofficial 'counts' are an attempt to stall culling of horses, with claims that the 3000 target required by June 2027 under the Management Plan for the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018 (the Act) has already been reached. Similarly, some brumby advocates continue to promote calculations by a non-statistician who uses the survey results of a 2005 survey of a limited area of KNP to 'prove' that the 2022 official surveys are incorrect. False information is not given credence in official circles and should not be supported at the political level.

Especially since the release of the draft Kosciuszko Wild Horse Plan of Management in 2016, there is a history of obfuscation and delay tactics to stall any action to manage the known increase in the horse population by around 16% per year. When you have large populations of anything

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Hansard/Pages/HansardResult.aspx#/docid/HANSARD-1820781676-89007/link/2255>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/research-and-publications/publications-search/a-survey-of-the-wild-horse-population-in-kosciuszko-national-park>

spread over a large area, surveys count a sample of the population to get an estimate. It's a complex task.

### Recent removal of horses from KNP

Since the implementation of the plan commenced in February 2022, up to 18 August 2023, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) removed **2,201** horses from Kosciuszko National Park.

<sup>3</sup> If the unofficial counts had any validity, then KNP would be virtually horse-free. It isn't.

These 2201 horses were removed without helicopter shooting, which is more efficient and humane than current methods used for horses in KNP.

NSW Government figures for the last three financial years reveal that 88% of the nearly 272,000 feral animals removed in NSW by NPWS and the Local Land Service (LLS) were removed using aerial or helicopter shooting. Without the use of helicopter shooting, Australia has no hope of controlling feral animals, including horses. **Only the NPWS in NSW is excluded from using aerial shooting of horses.** Our native species suffer as a result.

### What about the natives

There is no need to keep repeating the facts on threats to native species in KNP. These have been well publicised.<sup>4</sup> Our native animals can't defend their habitats against feral animals. We must do the defending for them.

### Welfare concerns

With regard to animal welfare concerns, shooting any large animal from a helicopter can have a far higher welfare outcome than other end-of-life scenarios. RSPCA and Pest Smart both approve aerial shooting by skilled professionals with correct safeguards.<sup>5 6</sup>

Of the culling methods, aerial/helicopter shooting is overall the most sensible method. That is why even throughout NSW, nearly 90% of large animal removal is by helicopter shooting. Not using it for horses in NSW was a political decision, not based on welfare, but because the people who have influenced politicians knew it was the most cost efficient, humane and effective management tool in most cases.

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<sup>3</sup> Mr Atticus Flemming, Acting Coordinator-General, Environment and Heritage Group, Department of Planning and Environment, New South Wales. Evidence given to the Senate Inquiry into the Impacts and Management of feral horses in the Australian Alps

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Animals-and-plants/Scientific-Committee/Determinations/2018/habitat-degradation-loss-feral-horses-equus-caballus-final-determination.pdf?la=en&hash=8A5823ECF07BA2DA637B698DC21BE68E6DFD2D6C>

<sup>5</sup> <https://pestsmart.org.au/toolkit-resource/aerial-shooting-of-feral-ho>

<sup>6</sup> <https://kb.rspca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2023-04-27-Impacts-and-management-of-feral-horses-Austr-Alps-RSPCA-SUBMISSION.pdf>

## LIFE OF A HORSE IN KNP

**DROUGHT:** Horse owners are obliged to do their utmost to ensure the horses do not starve as they surely will in parts of KNP when faced with the next drought. With a much higher density of horses in KNP than even a decade ago the pressure will be far far greater on what feed is available. The native animals are the first to be displaced by the horses, so the rightful occupants of KNP will suffer the most. and/or starvation. Where is the animal justice in that?



**VEHICLE ACCIDENTS** that are a danger to humans as well as horses.



Killed in road accident about 3 months previously, now well decomposed.



This mare was killed in vehicle collision the previous night. The stallion kept pacing around the carcass.

**FIRE:** In the 2003 fires surveys before and after estimated over 1000 died. This would have been outright incineration, or from the aftermath of smoke inhalation and/or burns and/or starvation.



There was no official estimate of the number of horses killed or maimed in the most recent fires in KNP, but many disappeared in the 2003 fires.



This horse died of ‘natural’ causes in a creek bed near Currango, in KNP. The creek has suffered severe damage from horses.



## HUMANENESS OF WILD HORSE MANAGEMENT METHODS

(1 = MOST HUMAN, 8 = LEAST HUMANE)

- > Aerial shooting (instant insensibility) **4**
- > Aerial shooting (seconds to minutes) **5**
- > Loading and transport (short journey) **5**
- > Ground shooting (head shot) **5**
- > Ground shooting (chest shot) **5**
- > Mustering (small groups) **5**
- > Mustering (large groups) **6**
- > PZP and GnRH vaccine **6**
- > Roping (brumby running) **6**
- > Loading and transport (long journey) **7**



*Source: Modified from Table 1 in 'A report on the outcomes of a humaneness assessment panel assembled on behalf of the Independent Technical Reference Group (ITRG)' prepared for the 2016 draft Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Management Plan.*

Whilst the Guy Fawkes **River** National Park resulted in a knee-jerk reaction by the then NSW Environment Minister, media claims of mayhem were wildly exaggerated. The official inquiry found that only one horse had not died quickly<sup>7,8</sup>. Lessons have been learned from that episode, and whilst some people will never accept that aerial shooting is the most appropriate method of controlling the number of feral animals, experts should have the final say.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/pestsweeds/englishreport.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/pestsweeds/englishReportFinal.pdf>