

**Submission
No 159**

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

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A Call for Compassion

Submission to the Inquiry into the proposed aerial shooting of brumbies in Kosciuszko National Park

by
Billie Dean

To Whom It May Concern

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to the *Inquiry into the proposed aerial shooting of brumbies in Kosciuszko National Park*. I am deeply opposed to this proposal on a number of grounds, including:

- Aerial culling is ruthlessly psychopathic.
- The population counts of the horses in the KNP are significantly flawed and cannot be relied upon.
- Poor management by NSW Parks and Wildlife.
- The positive contributions of the horses to the KNP environment has been overlooked.
- Violence Begets Violence

- The Negative Effects of Culling In Actual Practice
- The horses have been demonised by propaganda, and this is having a flow-on effect to humans. It does not reflect the kind of peace-loving society we want to build.
- This proposed form of sanctioned violence is bad for our society, and a terrible example for children.
- Concerns about the Minister for the Environment
- A call for Compassion and Empathy.

The Cruelty of Aerial Culling

Labor rightfully banned aerial culling in 2000 in the aftermath of the Guy Fawkes brumby massacre. The Australian people were horrified by the brutality, and our country breathed a sigh of relief when this prohibition was put in place. To put aerial culling back on the table is a seriously retrograde step.

The animal welfare considerations of aerial culling are many, but most significantly, it is extremely difficult for clean, one-shot kills. With horses running and helicopters flying, the targeting for single shot kills is almost impossible, even by trained marksmen. This means that wounded animals are left suffering for the entire time it takes to locate them so they can be shot again. That's if the shooters can be bothered to go find them. Wounded animals are often left to suffer until they die, which can take days.

This is completely unacceptable.

It's not like shooters bring vets or animal welfare representatives along with them to make sure there's accountability and no suffering.

And there is plenty of suffering.

People calling for culling, whether aerial or otherwise, seem to think it is a neat and tidy way to resolve numbers of animals. A few bullets. No big deal.

The reality is much more grim. Aerial culling is a an extremely violent bloodbath. It's just like in a war, with helicopters shooting at civilians. Shooting at horses causes them hysteria, terror, and pain. It usually takes multiple shots to bring down an animal. There are wounds, blood trails, aborted foals, and orphaned foals.

Even using the term "culling" is a choice, used to make it cold, clinical and disconnected from the reality of flesh and blood, loving beings being killed just for existing.

Only those who are either ignorant or disconnected from their emotions and hearts, with no empathy or compassion, could call for a massacre of defenceless animals, introduced or not.

Horses are flesh and blood beings who love deeply and form very strong social bonds. They have a highly developed sense of family and society. They're also ancient, having lived with this planet for over 30 million years, with an extraordinary and unique adaptability which allows them to live in the various environments they find themselves in.

They are not imposing themselves on the environment. They are adapting to it in a way that will allow them to continue to exist. They certainly don't destroy the places they live,

because, unlike humans, they worked out instinctively that you need to care for the environment you depend on. That's how they've survived for millions of years.

Faulty Population Count

The number of horses in the KNP is wildly exaggerated. In March, the reported number was 14,000, and that was extremely faulty, when only around 1,000 could be found. by actual human counting. More recently, the reported number has been between 18,000 and 23,000. Impossible. These estimates are simply bogus. Horses don't breed that fast. That kind of population growth is biologically impossible. Horses have an eleven month gestation period. They don't give birth to "litters" as has been suggested by an ANU professor.

The lies around wild horses are breathtaking.

For a rigorous debunking of the methodology used to get the above estimates, see "Independent biostatistical report on the Brumby population in the Kosciuszko National Park" by Claire Galea at <https://meetourhorsemeat.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Independent-Biostatistical-report-into-the-counting-of-wild-horses-Claire-Galea.pdf>

This study has been presented to the Minister, but has not been given consideration.

More recent counting (Winter 2023) has put the number of horses actually spotted in the hundreds, not the thousands. The Minister also appears to be unwilling to accept eyewitness population estimates that contradict the governments position.

Why is the Minister believing such inflated numbers and calling for the slaughter of the remaining few hundred horses? Especially when, by Legislation, 3,000 are allowed to exist in the Park.

Are large numbers being touted to inflame the public so they will say yes to aerial culling? Why is the Minister so keen to bring back such a ruthless and heartless method of control?

Especially after Labor rightfully banned it.

The Conservation Ideology is Outdated

On her Facebook page, Ms Sharpe has spoken proudly about one of the parks under her care being a "pest-free haven", thanks to the efforts of NSW Parks and Wildlife.

The savagery with which all non-native animals are despatched by this organisation through aerial shooting, ground shooting and poisoning, is out of step with the modern day and age.

The conservation movement is in the middle of a swing to a more compassionate and holistic approach to animals and nature, and old-fashioned thinking is being seen as brutal and brutish, The invasive species ideology needs a makeover — because what has not been studied are the positive effects on the environment of introduced species of animals. But this is now emerging, with the growth of re-wilding and regenerative philosophies using animals' natural propensities.

I commend to you this article: *Wildlife Ethics and Practise: Why We Need to Change the Way We Talk About "Invasive Species"*. Published March 2020.
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10806-020-09825-0>

See also the group Rewilding Europe, with a link to one example of a country using horses to regenerate the land and increase biodiversity.

<https://rewildingeuropa.com/blog/a-horseman-returns-home-the-story-of-pablo-and-the-przewalskis/?fbclid=IwAR26cwi9qSgh9BeLi0Ah0qTz81ASMuXC53gohynAHzcUePn-koFb53JgHDw>

While the situation in Europe is different to the Australian Alps, Australian land managers could learn a lot from studying these techniques, and in fact they are already being adopted and adapted by some progressive Australian land holders.

Poor Management by NSW Parks and Wildlife

I have lost confidence in the management of forests and wilderness by NSW Parks and Wildlife, and this opinion has been shared by many in my community, and across the state. People in our district don't respect them because of their actions in November 2019 which led to our Black Summer.

On November 26, 2019, a fire started in the Tallaganda from a lightning strike. Members of our local bushfire brigade reported that Parks and Wildlife told them to stay away because they had it "under control" and they "needed more funding." (Those are the exact words that were used.)

NSW Parks did not act to stop the blaze.

The fire ripped through tinder-dry, drought-parched bushland and was an out of control inferno by the time it reached private land. Fire crews were helpless to stop it. The fire was so intense that it was making its own weather, and it savagely burned through the district, staying alight for over two months, taking ,homes, habitat, and millions of wildlife with it.

Aren't they supposed to be protecting wildlife?

Wouldn't you jump in to stop a fire taking habitat and life during a drought? Wouldn't you do anything to stop it?

Obviously someone in the organisation doesn't understand how to manage "Parks and Wildlife."

Witnessing burnt bodies of beloved kangaroos and wombats, and other local animals who died in the flame, smelling burning flesh in the thick smoke for over eight long weeks, and never knowing when the wind would bring the fire back to you, traumatised every single member of our community.

This loss of confidence in the organisation people around the state call "Sparks and Wildfires" remains to this day. Locals talk wistfully about the good old days when real bush folk who understood how to manage forests and slow burns in the winter before a rain, were in charge. The decision to get city people with university degrees but no bush sense

is deemed detrimental to how humans interact with the wilderness. And protect and manage it.

But this is the organisation that we're supposed to trust to appropriately manage the horses in the KNP?

We have already seen on the ABC documentary "Feral", how quick they were to ditch the horse in favour of the Broad Toothed Rat. How can someone with no love or understanding of equines be in charge of managing them?

The organisation's behaviour in the recent horse killing spree has already caused great distress across communities, and with tourists, further undermining any confidence. I have seen videos of dead horses left in waterways, contaminating them.

And I have seen pictures of horses left to rot where they were shot, in contravention of laws concerning the disposal of dead animal bodies (see: https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1299603/animal-carcass-disposal.pdf)

So how is there one rule for all land holders in NSW to dispose of their dead, but not Parks and Wildlife. And why does Atticus Fleming, A/g Environment and Heritage Coordinator General, NSW Department of Environment and Heritage, say on television that it is okay to leave the carcasses rotting. That it is good for the environment?

But the government's own body says it is not.

I have also seen heart-wrenching images of a lone foal forlornly standing by its dead mother's body, wondering when she will wake up, not knowing what to do or where to go. Left alone to starve or be taken by predators.

This is also in contravention of best practices that prevent mares from being shot if they have foals at foot or are pregnant. What is the inevitable fate of a foal in that situation? Starvation or predation, unless someone kind is somehow able to rescue them. And you know that will be a citizen, not a ranger.

We are currently in foaling season, and yet, the shooting continues.

This is not just inhumane, it is cold and callous, completely unacceptable and against Standard Operating Procedures. It is also unethical.

Finally, I have to wonder who it is advising the Minister that the KNP is overrun with thousands of horses, when any visitor can clearly see it is not,

What is the hate or agenda behind this ruthless eradication of gentle wild equines?

Role of Horses as the Large Herbivore in the Ecosystem

What much of the discussion of brumbies fails to account for is their positive contribution to the KNP environment.

There has been a longstanding debate over the impact of introduced species on the native flora and fauna of an ecosystem. While some argue that introduced species have a

negative impact, others believe that these species can actually have positive ecological effects. The brumby falls into this category, as described by wildlife ecologist Craig Downer in his article, *Brumbies can fill a useful role in Australian ecosystems* at <https://www.horsetalk.co.nz/2018/06/04/brumbies-useful-australian-ecosystem/>

He describes how the wild horse fills the ecological niche of the large herbivore, a role that has been empty since the demise of the Australian megafauna. The large herbivore is a keystone species in the ecology, and the Australian environment has adapted to having the wild horse be part of it over the past 200 years.

Downer says equids possess a caecal, or post-gastric, digestive system. This enables them to take advantage of coarser, drier vegetation and, through symbiotic microbial activity, to break down cellulose cell walls to derive sufficient nutrients from the inner cell without overtaxing their metabolism. In drier regions, this can give equids a distinct advantage.

Consumption by equids of coarser, drier vegetation can greatly benefit sympatric, pre-gastric (ruminant) herbivores, and energise and enrich the ecosystem as a whole. By recycling chiefly the coarse, dry grasses as well as other dry, withered herbs, forbs and bush foliage, the horses and burros expose the seedlings of many diverse species to more sun, water and air, thus permitting them to flourish. T

In Downer's article *Spotlight on the overlooked role of horses as carbon sequesters* (<https://www.horsetalk.co.nz/2021/07/17/horses-carbon-sequesters/>), he speaks of how horses, especially "wild, naturally living ones, play a major role in combatting global warming and do this in a variety of ways. One of these concerns their superior ability to sequester, or 'lock away', carbon. They remove carbon from the atmosphere, where, in the form of carbon dioxide, methane and other heat-trapping gases, this element accelerates a dangerous, oven-like increase in temperatures on the entire planet Earth."

In addition, the horse's digestive system does not thoroughly degrade the vegetation it eats. As a result, it tends to "replant" its own forage with the diverse seeds that pass through its system undegraded. This unique digestive system greatly aids in the building up of the absorptive, nutrient-rich humus component of soils. This, in turn, helps the soil absorb and retain water upon which many diverse plants and animals depend. In this way, the wild horse is also of great value in reducing dry inflammable vegetation in fire-prone areas.

The article *Wild Horses and the Ecosystem* (<https://americanwildhorsecampaign.org/wild-horses-and-ecosystem>) talks about horses helping to prevent fire.

The fact that horses wander much farther from water sources than many ruminant grazers adds to their efficacy as fire preventers. This tendency to range widely throughout both steep, hilly terrain and lower, more level areas, while cattle concentrate on lower elevations, also explains why horses have a lesser impact on their environment than livestock: when one looks at a boundary fence where horses range on one side and cattle range on the other, the horses' side typically reveals about 30% more native grasses. Their nomadic grazing habits cause horses to nibble and then move to the next bunch of grass. This is why horse range is seldom denuded unless the horses' natural grazing patterns are disrupted by human interference, mostly in the form of fencing.

Ecologist Derek Gow has been vocal about the benefits of wild horses in land regeneration efforts (source: Why the wild horse is essential to the ecosystem. The Guardian. From <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/24/why-the-wild-horse-is-essential-to-the-ecosystem>)

"Wild horses are an essential part of our ecosystem, particularly in their ability to regenerate land. They are incredibly effective at managing vegetation and creating biodiversity hotspots. Their grazing habits encourage the growth of a variety of plants, which in turn attract insects, birds and other wildlife. They are also an important cultural and historical symbol, representing a link to our past and a reminder of the natural world that existed before human intervention."

Needless Vilification of Horses

We have to remember that wild equines are different to domestic horses. Domestic horses are the ones in paddocks, but the wild horse is nomadic and moves lightly over the land with soft concave hooves. They live in small family mobs, not huge thundering groups.

The nature of horses has been grossly maligned in representations to the public. For example, the government's own documents proposing aerial culling cited the "negative interactions with park visitors, including vehicle strikes and aggressive horses in and around campgrounds."

Horses are prey animals, not predators. They run from people, not toward them. If they are being aggressive (and this is unusual), then it is because they are being provoked, cornered, or their family is being threatened.

Instead of shooting them violently and causing untold suffering, perhaps encourage horses to live further away from human settlement. There is a lot of room in the KNP.

And let's not forget, this was their home for 200 years. Once again humans are invading the wilderness and pushing animals from their own habitat. Calling the wilderness a "park" immediately sets it up as a scenic human playground.

The sentence about negative interactions with horses is very revealing. A recent visit to Sydney reminded me how disconnected many city people are from the natural world. I was at a Starbucks and there were some pigeons minding their own business, pecking at crumbs on the ground. Several women were freaking out, afraid.

Of pigeons.

It reminded me that many city people are not used to wild animals, or living close to the earth. So perhaps they are afraid of wild horses. Indeed I saw a paid post by the Invasive Species Council on the Reclaim Kosci page about a tourist complaining about horse manure.

There is an indigenous saying about humans having a tendency to kill what they fear. And the fear came from not knowing the animal in question.

When Ms Sharpe says she wants to encourage more visitors to the Park (than the three million who already visit annually) one wonders if the desperation to eradicate the horses is more to do with having “pest free havens” for humans, than worrying about the extinction rate of numbers of wildlife that change with every TV broadcast.

The problem with the Snowy wilderness started when it became a park for humans. Before then wild equines and everyone else co-existed extremely well. Horses helped other smaller animals to survive through the winters, kept the fire fuel down, increased biodiversity and took the place of the keystone large herbivore.

But today the horse is being blamed for everything in an effort to tarnish the love people have for them and to paint them as “feral pests” to be exterminated.

The Corroboree frog for example, is not being decimated by horses.. but by the Chytrid fungus — brought in by tourists.

The Broad Toothed Rat was being poisoned by employees of Snowy Hydro 2.0, but that barely made the news. (Their habitat is also more at risk from four wheel drives than rambling brumbies) Snowy Hydro 2.0 also have been fined at least three times for water pollution, which is something the brumbies, unless they are dead and rotting in the water ways, don't do because they know they need the water to survive.

Habitat degradation? What horses do is nothing compared to what people do by camping, hiking, littering, 4WD driving, or on a larger scale, building ski resorts or putting powerlines through the park.

By nature, horses are gentle and protecting.

Our next door neighbour's sheep come through the fence to give birth in our brumby paddock, knowing the brumbies will protect them. And they do.

I also have witnessed them protecting kangaroos who are either stuck in fences or injured. An example of this recently was when my husband found a small family of our wild horses standing in a circle. He immediately knew there was a problem, and found them protecting a little kangaroo we called Shinti , who dislocated her hip during the previous night's storm. They stayed with her until she was transported away to Possumwood Wildlife Hospital several hours later.

They didn't leave their post for a minute.

How do I know? Because I was there for hours with them. We never leave vulnerable injured animals alone to fend for themselves.

Below is a photo of Shinti and her brumby protectors. She also had a little joey and if the horses had not alerted us to their predicament, both would have died. But today she is healing well and receiving vet care and physiotherapy.



Violence Begets Violence

Aside from the obvious animal brutality of a decision in favour of aerial culling, there is a wider problem, which proponents of this violence fail to grasp.

Violence begets violence.

We live in an extremely violent world and people are craving peace and gentleness. They are tired of the daily horror. Too many of our young people are not coping. Too many are committing suicide. Too many are depressed, anxious, traumatised.

We have a situation where the government is calling for cruelty and extreme violence to animals. There is an active propaganda machine that vilifies these innocent animals to make this violence seem acceptable. Further, the number of those animals are wildly exaggerated to further make it seem necessary. All of these things contribute to normalising this violence in the community.

Studies have shown that perpetrators who are violent to animals are more likely to be violent to humans. As it is, we have too many women dying in domestic violence situations. See: *Understanding the Link between Animal Cruelty and Family Violence: The Bioecological Systems Model* at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7246522/>

Is this what we want? To be a violent society? Or do we want to be a loving, supportive community who thrives through acts of kindness?

To be violent towards animals is not a great example to set for children.

And it sets a very poor example for all society. It says it is okay to be violent and cruel to animals. And by association, each other,

We need a leader in this country who sets the standard for kindness. And goodness. One who says that the other animals we share this planet with are important, sovereign and to be respected.

Famously, Gandhi said, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

To choose aerial culling is hardly the mark of a great nation. It shows Australia to be morally corrupt.

We have a choice. We should choose kindness and compassion.

One Way People are Being Affected by the Violent Abuse of Wild Horses

The negative propaganda and demonisation of free-living horses has filtered into the community with alarming side-effects.

Once revered and printed on our coins, stamps and notes, the brumby is today painted as a dirty feral pest,

The abuse Australians now dish out on the noble horse who once served Australians in war, is shameful.

Take, for example, the story of a frightened tiny foal forlornly stuck in a KNP bog. Campers ignored the baby's plight, except for one woman who waded in with her children to save him. When she called out for help to all the horsey people across 13 camp sites, not one person offered to help.

"It's just a brumby," they said... as they filmed her struggle on their phones.

Cold.

This was an orphaned baby animal, dying slowly in the bog. And only one decent human offering a kind act of rescue.

One woman.

Out of 13 camp sites.

This story always gets me in the heart. This is a terribly cruel side effect of the conservation and invasive species camp's chilling marketing campaign, turning Australians into cold-hearted, animal-hating zombies.

And they really are.

You can tell a Reclaim Kosci-indoctrinated person by their bullying, name-calling and repetitive banter about “parks, not paddocks,” “protect the ski resorts,” “horses are bad for the ‘pristine’ environment,” and “the only good horse is a dead one.” If you don’t agree with them, you are a lunatic or a fanatic.

It’s quite disturbing.

Can you see what has happened? Australians supposedly love their horses. We say we are an animal-loving nation. But we are actually an abusive nation that apparently only loves animals we can use and exploit.

Is it right to ignore any animal in trouble? Is it right to turn your back on a baby dying in front of you? Is this humane?

Where is people’s humanity? Compassion? Empathy? Kindness? Benevolence?

If we don’t make changes now, then when will we?

By bringing back extreme cruelty to animals, we go down a dark and violent path.

By making a different, kinder choice, we make our society a better, kinder, more emotionally healthy place for our children’s children.

I am always chilled when I hear people call for aerial culling. Any culling. But shooting at frightened families from the air, over and over and over, and saying it is humane is so disconnected and cold and robotic. It’s frightening.

I think we can do a lot better.

How about we try adopting Compassionate Conservation (see: <https://theconversation.com/introduced-species-are-animals-too-why-the-debate-over-compassionate-conservation-is-worth-having-163987>).

See also:

- <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cobi.13494>
- <https://australianbrumbyalliance.org.au/introduced-species-are-animals-too-why-the-debate-over-compassionate-conservation-is-worth-having/>

Maybe we could try being ethical and humane.

Concerns about the Minister for the Environment, Penny Sharpe

When brumby supporters invited Penny Sharpe to meet with her in the KNP, she rudely stood them up. Even when they had travelled miles, including from interstate.

She called them “emotional activists”. Even though one is a scientist.

She refused a round table Zoom with brumby specialists, including myself.

The only conclusion we can draw is that she doesn’t want to hear what we have to say and cannot act without bias.

Her advisors from NSW Parks and Wildlife and the Invasive Species Council appear to both have an agenda to eradicate wild horses. Is it really for conservation efforts... or some other agenda? Why are horses allowed to be shot and left to rot, contaminating the waterways? Why are the numbers falsified? Why is the marketing campaign to vilify horses so desperate? Why do the media keep showing clips from the Man from Snowy River to show large mobs of horses — which aren't even brumbies — when the numbers they show just don't exist. Why is mainstream media not reporting on rotting carcasses?

Why is aerial culling back in under a Labor Government?

Why does the Minister refuse to stop shooting horses until a new and proper count can be done, which includes at least one pro-brumby person? Why does the Minister insist on breaking best practices, like allowing the shooting of pregnant mares or mares with foals at foot? Why does she continue to allow shooting in foaling season?

Why is she being so ruthless, when she has been advised of the true numbers in August, but in September tells Australia on national television the hugely inflated numbers, all so she can fulfil her agenda to bring in aerial culling and eradicate all the brumbies despite 3000 being allowed by Legislation?

Why does anyone think any of this is okay, humane or ethical?

The Minister has stated that she wants more than the three million tourists who visit the KNP each year. But after the October long weekend in 2023, tourists were overcome with the sight and smell of dead and rotting carcasses... and will never go back.

Many tourists come just to see free living horses in the wild. Why aren't they being considered?

We are led to believe this ruthless killing spree is about conservation. I would say it is deeply disturbing, psychotic in nature, and shows Australians to be brutish and backwards.

There are other ways to manage horses and land.

Re-introducing barbaric aerial culling is a huge mistake,

Finally

Thank you for considering my submission. I look forward to the government making kind and compassionate decisions about the brumbies we treasure so deeply.

Billie Dean

Writer, filmmaker and former journalist. My film "Ode to Wild Horses" is currently winning awards on the film festival circuit in Europe.

Co-founder, Deep Peace Trust, a charity focussed on non-violence.