



**CONSERVATION
COUNCIL** ACT REGION

Amending the Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan.

September 2023

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region. Since 1981, we have spoken up for a healthy environment and a sustainable future for our region. We harness the collective energy, expertise and experience of our more than 40 member groups to promote sound policy and action on the environment.

We campaign for a safe climate, to protect biodiversity in our urban and natural areas, to protect and enhance our waterways, reduce waste, and promote sustainable transport and planning for our city. Working in the ACT and region to influence governments and build widespread support within the community and business, we put forward evidence-based solutions and innovative ideas for how we can live sustainably.

At a time when we need to reimagine a better future, we understand that the changes we need will only happen with the collective support of our community.

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Introduction

The Conservation Council ACT Region supports the amendment to the Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan to allow aerial shooting of feral horses, owing to the significant toll that horses place on our sensitive alpine environment. Indeed, there is no way to protect the environment or end extinctions¹ without rapid and targeted action on feral horses in the alps.

We nevertheless are concerned that populations of feral horses will continue to increase. A long term National feral horse management strategy, developed with State and Territory Governments is required.

The Problem with Feral Horses

Feral horses disrupt natural ecosystem functioning and damage habitats by: trampling, track creation, pugging (soil compaction), wallowing, erosion of streambanks, sphagnum bog and wetland destruction, and overgrazing.² This impacts many native alpine species, including more than 40 listed threatened species such as the northern and southern corroboree frog, alpine she-oak skink, mountain skink, broad toothed rat and anemone buttercup.

Ineffective control by State governments has allowed feral horse populations to climb to alarming rates with recent estimates showing over a 300% increase in less than 10 years.³ Not only are feral horse populations being ineffectively reduced, but concerningly in NSW they are actually being protected.

The catastrophic environmental impacts of feral horses to native ecosystems and wildlife must be considered against the backdrop of Australia's current environmental crisis. The State of the Environment Report 2022 demonstrated The state of our environment is "poor and deteriorating"⁴. Across the country, there are now more non-native plants than native ones. Rivers, the lifeblood of our inland landscapes, are drying up as only 2 of the 450 gigalitres of water promised under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan has been delivered. Despite Australia being a biodiversity hotspot, it is a leader in the extinction crisis having the highest rate of mammalian extinction in the world.⁵ More than 100 Australian species are now listed as either extinct or extinct in the wild. The Australian Alps are arguably one of the most at-risk

¹ The Threatened Species Action Plan 2022-2032

<https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/biodiversity/threatened/publications/action-plan-2022-2032>

² See Driscoll, D.A., Worboys, G.L., Allan, H., Banks, S.C., Beeton, N.J., Cherubin, R.C., Doherty, T.S., Finlayson, C.M., Green, K., Hartley, R., Hope, G., Johnson, C.N., Lintermans, M., Mackey, B., Paull, D.J., Pittock, J., Porfirio, L.L., Ritchie, E.G., Sato, C.F., Scheele, B.C., Slattery, D.A., Venn, S., Watson, D., Watson, M. and Williams, R.M. (2019), Impacts of feral horses in the Australian Alps and evidence-based solutions. *Ecol Manag Restor*, 20: 63-72. doi:10.1111/emr.12357.

³ Australian Alps feral horse aerial survey, 2019.

⁴ State of the environment report, 2022.

⁵ Ritchie, "Gut-wrenching and infuriating": why Australia is the world leader in mammal extinctions, and what to do about it", 2019.

ecosystems of this crisis owing to the compounding effects of climate change.⁶ Considering this, the lackadaisical approach that has been undertaken toward feral horse management is not just negligent, but has ramifications for the valuable and fragile ecosystems of the Australian Alps and must be urgently addressed by reducing feral horse numbers.

Trapping and rehoming of feral horses has been used in Kosciuszko National Park for well over a decade but has consistently failed to reduce the population, has delayed meaningful action and is expensive. There are too many feral horses in the Alps and not enough demand for rehoming for it to be relied upon for the reduction of the population.

Fertility control as a management tool is only effective for a small, geographically isolated, and accessible population of feral horses where the management outcome sought is to maintain the population at its current size. It is not a viable option to reduce the large and growing feral horse population in the vast and rugged terrain of Kosciuszko National Park

The burden suffered by out-of-control feral horse populations is not just ecological. It has been reported to the Council that people feel depressed and disheartened by the obvious damage of feral horses that they see when visiting the Australian Alps. In addition to this immense emotional cost every year that the NSW government fails to take effective action will mean that more horses have to be removed, the damage to ecosystems, threatened species and Indigenous heritage will increase and the cost to taxpayers will rise.

Recommendations

The Conservation Council ACT Region recommends the following:

1. Amend the Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan to allow aerial shooting of feral horses.
2. Develop a long term strategy to continue to reduce and ultimately eliminate feral horse populations in the Australian Alps, including co-investing with state and territory governments in feral horse management in the Australian Alps.

⁶ Climate change impacts on Australia's alpine ecosystems, Rachel Slayter, 2010