

The impact of feral deer, pigs and goats in Australia

Submission to Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications

From Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater Inc.

Prepared by Gaye Gadsden (B.App.Sci Conservation Land Management)

info@helmetedhoneyeater.org.au

Context:

Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater Inc. are approaching our 30th birthday in 2019 and have worked tirelessly for 3 decades to improve and restore habitat for the critically endangered Helmeted Honeyeater. This work includes seed collection, growing over a million local plants in our volunteer nursery, thousands of hours of weed control and revegetating hectares of habitat both within Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve (YNCR) and on surrounding private properties.

In addition, governments at all levels have invested substantially in the recovery of the Helmeted Honeyeater and its habitat.

One of the biggest threats to the incredible habitat gains that the group and government agencies have made is the explosion of feral deer populations in the past 5 years and the impacts these populations are having on the natural environment in this area.

a. Current occurrence of feral deer with 10km radius of Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve

I am currently working with some 80 landholders that share a boundary with YNCR and Creeks that flow in to the YNCR. I am also a landholder with a conservation covenanted property that adjoins one of the breeding populations of Helmeted Honeyeater within the YNCR.

Two years ago it was unusual for landholders to see herds containing more than 10 deer and deer were sighted fortnightly or monthly. In 2018, landholders are reporting herds of up to 35 deer. I see deer almost daily on our property, on the properties I work with and as I drive through the area. Deer jump out on to the roads during the day and at night, also posing a significant traffic risk.

b. The biosecurity risks and impacts of feral deer on the environment in this area

The Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve (YNCR) contains the total known wild population of the endangered Helmeted Honeyeater and a lowland population of the endangered Leadbeaters possum, 285 native flora, 230 native vertebrate species and areas of sedge rich Eucalyptus Camphora Swamp. This Swamp community is classified as of National Significance.

Unfortunately, the riparian and swamp vegetation community habitat of the Helmeted Honeyeater is also the preferred habitat of the Fallow, Sambar and Red deer populations in the area. Impacts of deer on the natural environment in this area include:

- grazing and trampling of vegetation
- browsing everything within reach, from trees ferns to the smallest orchid
- preventing regeneration
- killing trees and shrubs by antler rubbing
- creating wallows in billabongs and other wetlands
- accelerating erosion by collapsing creek banks and wallowing
- spreading weeds and increasing nutrients favouring weeds through urine and faeces
- destruction of revegetated areas

c. The efficacy of currently available control and containment tools and methods and potential for new tools and methods

Parks Victoria have run a deer control shooting program with the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia and the Australian Deer Association for 4 years on the Cockatoo Creek arm of the Reserve. Some 150 deer have been killed over this time. A number of landholders also have arrangements with licensed deer hunters on their properties.

While these programs have been important, the population has continued to increase rapidly in this area.

Professional shooters who are licensed to have silencers on their rifles have a much better chance of getting multiple deer at one time. Deer herds quickly scatter when a shot is fired by sporting shooters.

Professional shooters are employed on vineyards and with strawberry farmers in the Yarra Valley at a significant cost to landholders. Significant government investment in professional shooters is required to initially get deer populations back under control. Investment is required in grants to private landholders and to public land managers.

I believe a recent trial of helicopter shooting in the Alpine National Park resulted in 8 deer shot for some \$35,000 expenditure. This indicates that this method is extremely cost inefficient.

The professional shooter I have worked with experiments and has success with luring deer through the use of pheromones he collects from shot animal scent glands. He also has success with deterring deer with 'Fox lights' and leaving cloth bearing human scent. This is just one example of how people who are very experienced with the animal can contribute to the development of new tools and methods.

No revegetation works survive in the area now without deer proof fencing. A number of methods of protecting revegetation have been trialled in this area by Melbourne Water and community groups. Deer proof fencing needs regular maintenance to mend incursions initially made by wombats.

d. Priority research

Research into controls other than shooting is an essential and immediate need.

Assessments should be made of a range of other control methods, such as genetic and biological controls and targeted baiting.

Much further discussion is needed on how to best protect remnant habitat, revegetation and habitat rehabilitation works. For example, Parks Victoria, Woori Yallock is leading a discussion on habitat protection fencing in this area with scientists, public land managers, community representatives and fencing contractors.

Pooling together the vast experience and knowledge on management of deer in Australia would be an extremely valuable start to formulating research questions and developing threat abatement plans.

e. Benefits of developing and fully implementing national threat abatement plans for feral deer

Development and implementation of a national plan is needed, primarily because different states are not in agreement on how to tackle this catastrophic threat.

Victoria is failing to address the deer problem through a weak Draft Deer Management Strategy that focuses heavily on protecting a hunting resource which includes refusing to declare deer as a pest species.

Victoria's Biodiversity Implementation Framework (2018) makes it clear that the aim of the deer management strategy is to "maintain sustainable hunting opportunities while reducing the impact of deer on biodiversity on all land tenures of the state",

Both the Wildlife Act and the Catchment and Land Protection (CALP) Act should be altered to recognise all deer as pest species and simultaneously acknowledge their status as game species, able to be hunted in appropriate circumstances.