



**CONSERVATION
COUNCIL** ACT REGION

Submission to the Senate inquiry on the impacts and management of feral horses in the Australian Alps

April 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.

Introduction

The Conservation Council ACT Region welcomes the opportunity to comment on the impacts and management of feral horses in the Australian Alps. The Council strongly supports rapid action to reduce the number of feral horses in the Australian Alps owing to the significant toll that horses place on our sensitive alpine environment. Indeed, there is no way for the Australian Government to meet its statutory obligations to protect the environment or its commitment to end extinctions¹ without rapid and targeted action on feral horses in the alps.

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 concerning in NSW they are actually being protected. This protection is in NSW legislation where feral horses are secured over native wildlife, and the current Kosciuszko National Park management plan seeks to permanently retain feral horses in 30% of the park.

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

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., Porfiro, 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.

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 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.

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 governments fail 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.

Summary and Recommendations

The Conservation Council ACT Region recommends the following:

1. Develop a national feral horse Threat Abatement Plan and co-invest with state and territory governments in feral horse management in the Australian Alps.
2. All jurisdictions should use the full suite of control tools available (within welfare requirements) to reduce populations of feral horses in the Australian Alps; notably, ground and aerial shooting.
3. The Federal Environment Minister should use powers in the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act to require states and territories to effectively and urgently remove feral horses from the Australian Alps National Parks and Reserves National Heritage Place.
4. Australia's national environmental laws should be reformed to provide for the Australian government to rapidly intervene where areas of national and international environmental significance are not being effectively managed. This should include:
 - a. Providing legally binding 'actions' that relate to the management of National Heritage Places like the Australian Alps, as well as World Heritage Areas, or wetlands of international significance (Ramsar wetlands).
 - b. Strengthening the framework for threat abatement planning, including creating a clear, scientifically-led process for listing and abating major threats like feral animals.

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

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

- c. Creating new triggers for the assessment of actions, including: actions that exacerbate a key threatening process and actions that negatively impact on Australia's national parks and reserves
- 5. Develop strong national environmental standards that require the effective management of invasive threats and apply to the management of National Heritage Places like the Australian Alps, as well as World Heritage Areas or Ramsar wetlands.