



STEP Matters

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This is a special edition of STEP Matters that discusses the agreement by the NSW Government to support legislation proposed by the Shooters and Fishers Party to allow hunting in national parks. We outline the major points of controversy below. There is more detailed background information on these points on pages 2 and 3. The legislation as currently known is described on pages 3 and 4.

STEP Inc, a non political community based environmental group, strongly opposes the legislation proposed by the Shooters Party, as it did in 2009 when the then Labor Government tried to introduce similar legislation. (See STEP Matters No. 151 August 2009). It was bad conservation policy then and is still bad conservation policy today.

What is the justification for the legislation?

The Shooters and Fishers Party argues that hunting on public land by volunteer recreational hunters has a significant benefit in reducing the populations of feral animals. Therefore the extension to national parks will enhance these benefits. They point particularly to the damage caused by feral animals to stock and private land adjoining national parks. However research by the Invasive Species Council demonstrates that recreational hunting by volunteers is unlikely to achieve significant reductions in feral animal numbers and may in fact be counterproductive.

Will it be safe to visit national parks in future?

There will be several controls in place. We leave the reader to decide whether safety can be assured. The basic fact that hunters may be present in a park area may create concerns for a large number of people. There are many stories about deaths and injuries caused by hunters in other states and countries. Information will be provided about hunting locations and signs will be placed on access roads. However no guarantees can be given as national parks have many access points including unmarked walking trails.

Is hunting a suitable activity in national parks?

The fundamental reason for the creation of national parks is the conservation of nature. The idea of hunting of animals, even if they are introduced species, is inconsistent with this ideal. National parks are used extensively for passive and active recreation. Is it reasonable to degrade the experience of our national parks? There are about 20 million visits made to national parks outside metropolitan areas each year while there are fewer than 20,000 recreational hunters (Affected parts of parks will be closed to other visitors when hunting is taking place).

Is there an economic benefit in the legislation?

The Shooters and Fishers argue that the activity of hunting in regional areas is of significant economic benefit to these areas. We cannot see how this argument can be extended to national parks if the level of tourism activity is going to be diminished. We also need to consider the cost of administration and control of hunting in national parks. The Game Council has incurred a net cost of \$2.8 million in managing hunting in the year to April 2011 and this shortfall has to be met by NSW taxpayers. NPWS staff will have to take the design and management of voluntary hunting operations in parks under their control. They already have to manage their existing workload with a reduced budget (see STEP Matters No.163). They themselves say that they will not be able to manage the additional workload and at the same time ensure the safety of the public and themselves.

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Is the recreational hunting of invasive feral species effective conservation?

Barry Tomkinson reviews this thorny issue. Most of the information in the article is drawn from research conducted by Dr Carol Booth on behalf of the Invasive Species Council [1].

The decision by the NSW Government to cut a political deal with the Shooters Party to allow the hunting of feral animals by recreational hunters in some of our national parks has resulted in widespread public reaction. As is often the case in such issues, public opinion is split, both as to the moral and ethical aspects of the decision, as well as to the claims by the hunting lobby (and now also the Premier) that such hunting actually amounts to good conservation practice. This article will attempt to summarise the facts behind the latter claim, leaving our readers to make their own assessment of the ethics behind the Government's volte-face.

Both conservationists and shooters seem to agree that feral invasive species are too often neglected as a conservation issue as they are widely regarded as being one of the top three threats facing Australia's natural environment. There seems to be general agreement that under certain circumstances the use of guns to hunt feral species can be helpful in controlling feral animal populations in areas where they are proving to be a threat to native animals and livestock.

However, that is where the points of agreement between the hunting lobby and the conservationists appear to end. Dr Booth examines a number of fallacies and risks which she believes are inherent in allowing the recreational hunting of feral animals. These include some key claims by the hunting lobby, such as that their hunting and killing of feral animals equates to some form of effective control over their numbers. While simplistic logic would seem to indicate that any reduction in feral numbers must be of benefit to the environment, this is seldom the actual outcome. Most feral animals are both highly mobile and fecund and soon replace killed numbers. In fact, for population numbers of many invasive species to be effectively curtailed requires an annual cull rate of 50% or more (65% for foxes).

The almost universal failure of bounty schemes in Australia is testament to their lack of efficacy in feral population control. A further unintended outcome of much recreational hunting is to disperse feral populations more widely by driving them away from frequently hunted areas, into more inaccessible areas, which they quickly learn are less often used by hunters.

The ineffective performance of recreational hunting, compared with supervised professional hunting programmes, is highlighted in a numerous studies. In South Australia, for example, one professional helicopter shooter shot more than four times as many deer in four hours as did 65 recreational hunters over four days. In New Zealand most deer populations have been reduced to 75-90% of their peak numbers in the mid 1900's as a result of helicopter hunting, not on ground shooting. In fact on ground shooting has been shown to be one of the least effective methods of feral animal control, with professional cullers who employ methods such as aerial and night time shooting, trapping and "Judas" animals being significantly more effective.

The issue is not that there are no skilled recreational hunters; clearly there is a sub set who are skilled and who are able to contribute to well managed control programmes. The difficulty is to limit involvement in such managed control programmes to those who are highly skilled enough and motivated to attain conservation objectives. Unfortunately research quoted by Dr Booth indicates that many recreational hunters are driven more by the need to achieve long term access to hunting grounds rather than a desire to reduce or eradicate feral animal numbers.

One of the talking points recently mentioned by the Premier on air was that recreational hunters offer their services for free, whilst the national parks currently spend good money on employing professionals to eradicate feral animals, thereby implying that this is a good deal for the public under the current tight financial circumstances. This approach however fails to take into account the costs associated with recreational hunting, particularly in conservation areas such as national parks.

These costs include the nearly \$3 million annual taxpayer subsidy to the Game Council to license and regulate the hunters and the additional costs to national parks in having to manage their on-ground activities so as not to compromise human safety, animal welfare and basic conservation objectives. It also includes the political costs, for there is no doubt that the hunting lobby has gained increased power and is determined to use it to gain further concessions when its vote is again required by the Government. It also seems likely that under the current budget conditions, "free" recreational hunting may be used as an excuse to not continue funding the current suite of professional control programmes.

There are a number of risks clearly associated with recreational hunting. The primary risk is that the ad hoc killing of feral animals outside of a managed control programme may actually result in higher densities of animals due to higher rates of breeding, as more young survive to replace those killed. Foxes for example respond to moderate reductions in their numbers by increasing the number of females that become pregnant, leading to an overall increase in fox numbers. Hunting is also known to push feral animals into new locations to find areas safe from hunting. Wild deer and pigs in particular are believed to move away to avoid hunting pressure.

There is also a risk that unscrupulous hunters will act to maintain or expand feral animal populations, rather than seriously attempt to eradicate them. Dr Booth cites the fact that there is well documented evidence of a rapid

increase in wild pig distribution since the 1970's in NSW and Queensland, due to the deliberate release of piglets and juveniles by unthinking hunters. Similar evidence exists for the deliberate and illegal translocation of feral pigs in southwest Western Australia, while more than half of the 218 feral deer herds in Australia identified in 2000 appear to have been derived from illegally translocated deer. This practice has dramatically increased since then, including many instances of deer being shifted into national parks and state forests. These include deer being found with ear tags from deer farms far away.

It would seem therefore that while there is some common ground between conservationists and hunters on the question of feral animal's control, their long term goals may be very different. The Victorian Government's review of the 2002-2003 trial fox bounty reported that there was anecdotal evidence that shooters reduced their activity during the fox breeding season to ensure future supply for shooting.

Clearly not all hunters are this bloody minded, but it only needs a small number to cause serious damage. When governments allow hunting in national parks they create expectations that hunting opportunities will be maintained; closing the hunters' Pandora's Box is not easily done and any future restrictions are likely to be resisted. Such resistance also acts to stymie professional control programmes, as in Victoria where the Australian Deer Association bitterly opposed a proposal to declare sambar deer a threatening species in that state. While it is known that feral deer cause serious harm to rainforest and other vegetation, the Association wants them to be introduced into all tenures and to be regarded as a "valuable public resource" to be "protected and nurtured".

Human safety is also at risk when there are hunters with widely varying levels of skill allowed to hunt in public places. In the five year period ending 2008, there were nearly 1500 deaths or injuries reported in the media in the USA due to hunting. This human damage is matched by unthinking hunters causing environmental damage with their shooting activities. Biologists in Victoria report that deer hunters have left several hundred tonnes of deer carcass in the forest, as they only want the trophy antlers. The leftover remains in turn bolster the populations of feral predators such as pigs, dogs and foxes.

Controlling feral animal populations for conservation purposes is very difficult, and programmes need to be carefully planned and coordinated, as well as being funded. The idea that amateur shooters can do the heavy lifting in this regards is appealing, but is undoubtedly wrong. The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that recreational hunting is ineffective as a primary method of feral animal control, and in fact can seldom be justified on any grounds. Control programmes should not start from the premise that recreational hunting will be used. They should only include hunting if it meets the goals and conditions of effective control programmes.

It is a job for the professionals, not the enthusiastic amateur.

[1]. See: <http://www.invasives.org.au/>

Details of the Legislation

Currently hunting on private and public land is undertaken in accordance with the Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002. This Act established the Game Council as the body administering the legislation. The main features of the legislation in relation to hunting on public land are:

Animals that may be hunted

Game animals are deer, California quail, pheasant, partridge, peafowl or turkey
Feral animals are pigs, dogs (other than dingoes), cats, goats, rabbits, hares or foxes.

Qualifications Required for Hunting on Public Land

Hunting on public land can only be carried out by holders of a restricted game hunting licence. The requirements for this licence are to be a member of an approved hunting club and to have completed adequate training as determined by the Game Council. There are proposals to allow children as young as 12 to hunt unsupervised but not with a firearm. Currently children may participate in hunting but under close supervision in all circumstances.

Determination of Public Land Where Hunting May Occur

The Minister responsible for the public land, for example a state forest, makes a declaration of the public land available for hunting game animals. In determining the declaration the Minister has to consider factors such as public safety and current usages or management of the land

A declaration may be limited to particular parts of the land, to particular types of hunting, to particular times or to other circumstances. There are approximately 400 declared State forests and Crown land areas available for hunting access under the Game Council NSW game hunting licence system.

Provision of Information about Hunting in Declared Areas

The responsible Minister must, before making a declaration of land areas where hunting may occur, give public notice covering details of the land area, the type of hunting that may be carried out and the period the declaration will remain in force (usually 5 years). The land manager has to put up signs on access roads that hunters may be operating in the declared area.

Hunters need to obtain written permission to hunt in a particular area. An online booking system controls the number of hunters in each area. The hunter has to carry this written permission with him while hunting. The hunter nominates the period of a hunting operation. The hunter has to submit a results summary at the end of the period.

Amendments to the Legislation

On 14 June 2012 the Shooters and Fishers Party members of the Legislative Council presented a bill to amend the Game and Feral Animal Control Act. This was duly passed by the upper house and will be presented to the lower house on 21 June.

The Bill amends the definition of public land to include the national parks estate. The Minister responsible, the Minister for the Environment, will be able to declare certain areas of the national park estate to be available for hunting. The declarations may start being made 6 months after the legislation is passed.

The original announcement stated that 79 out of the 800 parks would be made accessible for hunting. However the Bill takes a completely different approach by nominating exclusions rather than inclusions and therefore significantly increases the number of affected parks. 48 parks are excluded that are close to the Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong metropolitan areas. Other exclusions are the parts of other parks that are World Heritage property (this affects 19 parks such as the Blue Mountains NP) or declared as wilderness areas. Parks that will be available include many popular national parks such as the Snowy Mountains and the Warrumbungles.

STEP is a community based environmental organisation with over 400 members based in Ku-ring-gai, Hornsby and surrounding suburbs of northern Sydney. Our primary aim is to preserve natural bushland in the local area from degradation and alienation. We publish books, walking maps, informative newsletters and conduct walks and talks.

To join STEP and help make a difference go to www.step.org.au



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