High Country calls:

a commentary on the presence of feral horses

Photo: Mike Bremers

Aboriginal people visited and occupied the High Country of south-eastern Australia regularly for thousands of years, living in harmony with the land and leaving little trace. Their main activity was a summer one: socialising, and harvesting and feasting on the Bogong Moths that, in spring, fly in to aestivate in mountain caves and rock crevices.

Call for grazing

It was not very long after European settlement that the first stock animals – cattle and sheep – began to be grazed in the High Country. By the late 1830s, all the main pastoral runs on both sides of the Alps were occupied. As the century progressed, summer grazing of sheep and cattle, with burning of the vegetation to promote fresh growth, became well-established practices. It was formalised in 1889 by the NSW Department of Lands, with the introduction of a snow lease system of land tenure. Inevitably, the grazing had costs to the natural environment: the broader landscape suffered from soil erosion; the health of the unique alpine flora, which had attracted study by three of the greatest botanists of the time – Ferdinand Mueller, George Bentham and William Hooker – was threatened. In 1898, NSW Government Botanist Joseph Maiden, warned of these burgeoning problems, but grazing continued to take precedence.

As well as cattle and sheep, horses arrived in the mountains, the trusty steeds of stockmen. Inevitably, there were escapees: they found a good and fecund life at lower elevations of the High Country and their numbers grew. Their existence came to wide community attention with the publication in 1890 of A.B. (‘Banjo’) Paterson’s celebrated poem ‘The Man from Snowy River’, which tells the tale of the ride to recapture a valued colt that had been seduced by the ‘wild bush horses’, which became, poetically, ‘brumbies’, though Paterson himself did not use the term in his poem.

The origins of the word ‘brumby’ are unclear, but its first recorded use in print comes from 1871 when an article in *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser* accorded it ‘the connotation of an inferior or worthless animal’, adding that the ‘culling of feral horses as a pest soon became known as Brumby shooting’. At around the same time, feral horses were also seen as a problem on the Cooleman Plain, now part of Kosciuszko National Park. Historian Matthew Higgins studied the diaries of grazier George de Salis (1851–1931), held by the National Library of Australia. He notes: ‘Wild horses, especially up at Cooleman Plain, figure in the diaries. In large numbers they were pests which George and others shot ruthlessly’.[1]

Returning to the poem, we could note that, whether or not ‘the colt from Old Regret’ was recaptured, the heroic horseman rounded-up the whole mob.

> And he ran them single-handed till their sides were white with foam.
> He followed like a bloodhound on their track,
> Till they halted cowed and beaten, then he turned their heads for home,
> And alone and unassisted brought them back.

But that was only that mob.

Paterson loved horses and hated to see them killed, but he was a pragmatist. In a talk about wild horses he gave in 1930, he noted that during the 1800s they had become a plague in some ‘rough country stations’ and, when rounded up, would be shot ‘just like vermin’. He opines: ‘It seems a terrible thing to us nowadays to think of shooting horses wholesale … but it had to be done for, if they didn’t get rid of the horses, the horses would get rid of them’.

Club Lake, Kosciuszko National Park. Photo: Mike Bremers.

Call for water

The next big issue in the High Country story was its value as a water catchment, a factor that became pre-eminent and has remained so right up to the present day. Following the construction in the 1920s of the Hume Weir (now the Hume Dam), which collected water from the western slopes of Kosciuszko for use in irrigated agriculture, it became clear that soil erosion demanded catchment remediation. Three decades later, the Snowy Mountains Scheme, on which work began in 1948, faced the same problem. The NSW Soil Conservation Service, established in 1938, was busy in the 1950s and early 1960s, up past Blue Lake in Kosciuszko, stabilising the soil on the eastern side of Carruthers Peak, to prevent much of it sliding into the Snowy River and silting Guthega Dam, which was completed in 1955. The dam and its associated power station were the first operational structures of the Snowy Scheme. In addition to electricity, they produced valuable PR for the scheme's authority when there was still some community scepticism about the value of the whole endeavour. Perversely, construction activities of the scheme itself caused significant erosion and landscape damage, some of which proved impossible to fully remediate.

Call for conservation

Meantime, by 1958 livestock grazing had been withdrawn from all areas above 1,370 m of what was then the Kosciusko State Park. It was declared a national park in 1967, following which grazing in all areas was banned in 1969. Thus it was that the authors of *Kosciusko Alpine Flora*[2] published in 1979, were able to write that, through natural recovery and remediation 'many alpine species which became rare during the period of grazing and burning are now making a spectacular recovery, with a massed flowering in summer which is surpassed in few other parts of the world'.

A summer show near Guthega, Kosciuszko National Park. Photo: Ed Highley

They added a cautionary note, however: ‘Although grazing, burning and hydroelectric works no longer threaten the Kosciusko alpine area, new problems are arising’. Feral horses were not listed among those problems because, at that time, they had not been seen as encroaching on the highest parts of the park.

The Anenome Buttercup, unique to alpine Kosciuszko, was a threatened species during the time of High Country grazing. It has made a strong recovery since domestic livestock were banned. Photo: Brian Slee.

It’s now a different story. A recent fact sheet from the Reclaim Kosci campaign, a broad coalition of individuals and groups determined to see action to humanely reduce the number of feral horses in Kosciuszko National Park, notes: ‘Horse herds move annually into the main range during spring and summer and they have also been seen on the alpine plateaus’. If the damage caused by feral horses in subalpine parts of the park is replicated in the highest country, the gains of the past there will be lost. And there are two big new factors affecting the whole of the park – climate change and Snowy Hydro 2.0 – the latter, like its precursor, certain to leave scars on the landscape.

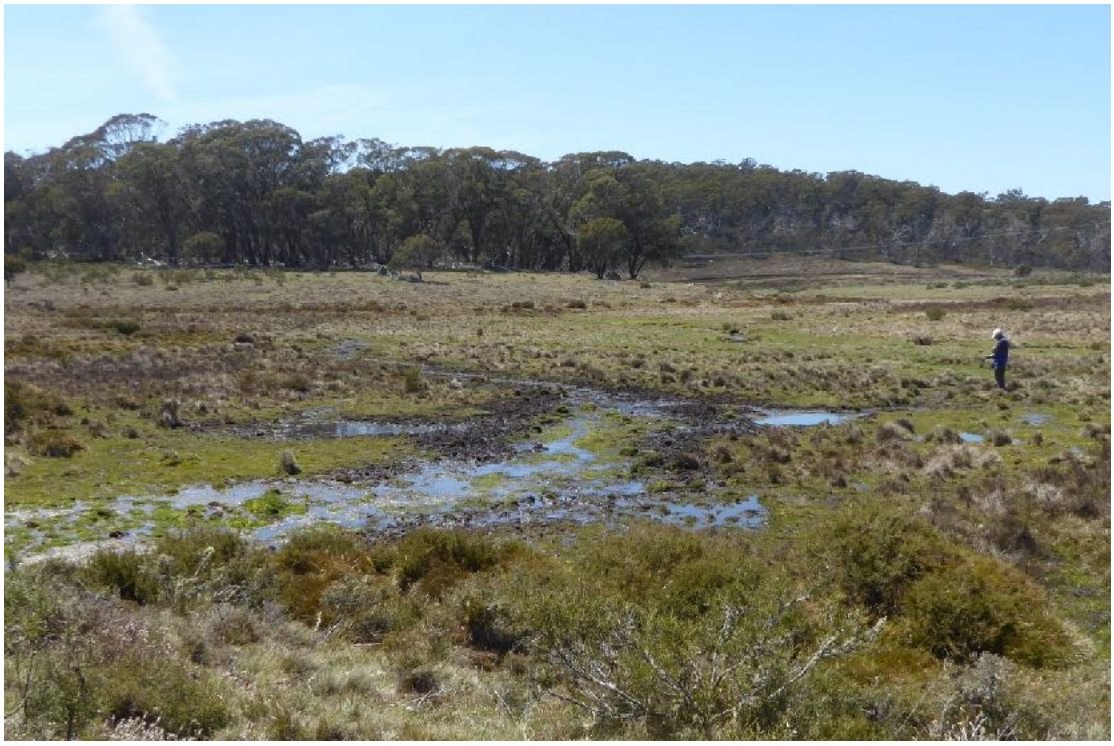
Call to arms

The presence of feral horses in the High Country is a burning issue. In Victoria, a bitter battle between those who wanted to keep feral horses in the state’s alpine areas and those who wanted them removed, came to a head in the early part of 2020. The former were insisting that the horses should be left alone because they were part of our national heritage and had little effect on the landscape and natural environment; the latter, on the other hand, provided ample scientific evidence that the horses caused untold damage to alpine ecosystems and the environmental and socioeconomic benefits they provided. In May 2020, it was good news for groups supporting that

view, when the Federal Court determined that Parks Victoria was obliged to manage feral animals in its parks; in other words, its plan to reduce the number of wild horses could proceed. Quickly thereafter, however, the 'heritagers' took out an injunction against the court's decision and the legal fight went to the Supreme Court of Victoria, which subsequently upheld the earlier decision of the lower court. But still the battle is not over: feral horse supporters are taking the matter to the High Court.

Feral horses on the Ramshead Range, Kosciuszko National Park, high up in the High Country. Photo: Mike Bremers.

The presence of feral horses in Kosciuszko National Park (KNP) is the cause of similar conflict between groups in NSW and, because KNP abuts the ACT's Namadgi National Park, the matter should also be one of concern to the people of Canberra and surrounds. The promulgation by the NSW Government of the *Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018*, strongly supported by protagonists whose interests in the park are primarily commercial, accords a low priority to protection of the natural environment, the object of the Act being 'to recognise the heritage value of sustainable wild horse populations within parts of Kosciuszko National Park and to protect that heritage'. One wonders what is meant by 'sustainable' here. There were estimated to be more than 19,000 feral horses in KNP in 2019, up from around 6,000 only 5 years ago, an annual population increase of over 20 per cent. The numbers for the whole alpine region are 25,000 and 9,000. 'Population explosion' is surely an appropriate descriptor. Understand too, that these animals are there all year round, not just spring and summer. It is a glaring anomaly that managed cattle and sheep were banished from the park 50 years ago because of the damage caused by their grazing, while unmanaged herds of feral horses graze, roam free and multiply. The Reclaim Kosci slogan 'It's a park, not a paddock' puts the paradox nicely.



One of the many, once discrete free-flowing streams in subalpine Kosciuszko National Park that feral horses have pulverised to dysfunctionality. Photo: Esther Gallant.

Reclaim Kosci's case was further supported in July 2020 when the NSW Land and Environment Court ruled that the urgent, post-bushfire removal of feral horses from fragile conservation areas in the northern part of KNP could proceed, overturning an earlier injunction taken out by a group supporting their protection.

Call to Canberrans

There is ample evidence – research, photographic, anecdotal – of the damage that feral horses are inflicting on the natural environment and ecological values of KNP. Don Driscoll, a professor of ecology at Deakin University, has an online site[3] providing extensive and graphic detail of the damage caused by feral horses. He also chronicles the long and ongoing campaign to halt the damage. For the moment, however, the depredations continue to increase, not just because of the rising population of horses but also as an outcome of the recurrent bushfires that, at least temporarily reduce the feed available, thereby causing even more severe overgrazing and forcing mobs to extend their range in search of food. Their current range in northern KNP takes them right to the NSW–ACT border, which is also the western edge of the ACT's Namadgi National Park. For all the same reasons as have affected Kosciuszko, such an incursion would cause environmental damage with effects extending beyond Namadgi.

According to the feral horse management plan implemented by the ACT Government in 2007:

> Namadgi National Park has been generally free of feral horses since 1987, however, since 2001 small groups of horses have been entering the Park from neighbouring areas of Kosciuszko National Park. Attempts to prevent these incursions into Namadgi using barrier fences have been unsuccessful. … Although only a few (15–20) horses are involved they have already caused damage to sub-alpine vegetation. If the current small feral horse population in Namadgi is permitted to grow and expand its range there will be increasing damage to sensitive ecosystems with deleterious impacts on biodiversity and the water catchment.

The mountains and valleys of Namadgi are the catchment for the reliable supply of high-quality water enjoyed by the half-a-million people who live in the Canberra–Queanbeyan region. Considering that the most serious damage imposed on the natural environment by horses is that to watercourses, streambanks, marshes and other hydrological features of the landscape, the overall effects will be to disrupt natural flows and storage, and increase sediment loads. From this it can be gauged that, if strong action is not taken to reduce feral horse numbers in adjacent NSW, we may be on the brink of a huge problem with socioeconomic as well as environmental implications. Moreover, the effects of feral horses on our water catchment would compound those of climate change and bushfires, which are already testing park managers. During the 2019–20 summer the second savage fire this century swept through Namadgi, causing enormous damage to the alpine mossy bogs[4] that act like sponges, storing water in the hydrological system. They are now again subject to intense remediation measures by the ACT Parks & Conservation Service: it is alarming to contemplate the extra threat that feral horses pose to their functionality.

Brett McNamara, Manager of Namadgi National Park, provides a hands-on demonstration of the water-holding capacity of sphagnum moss. Photo: Finbar O'Mallon, *Canberra Times*.

Call for support

The latest battles to reduce feral horse numbers in the Victorian Alps and KNP are but two episodes in the war to protect our national parks, and the wider natural environment, from invasive animals and plants, commercial overdevelopment and damage to the ecosystem services that, in the end, we all depend on. While many of our elected representatives may agree we have a problem, they are subject to many pressures, so holding their attention is difficult, and they are soon liable to fall back to 'economic issues'. They fail to comprehend that, in the end, all these matters, like silting dams, non-productive landscapes and degraded streams and rivers are or will sooner or later become 'economic' – and science is repeatedly telling us that 'later' may be 'too late'.

The national parks and nature reserves of the south-eastern Australian High Country together make up less than 1 per cent of the total land mass of the nation. Surely we can afford to protect the unique aesthetic, scientific and socioeconomic values of so small an area of our country? More certainly, we cannot afford not to: almost 30 per cent of the average annual flows in the Murray–Darling Basin comes from the High Country, and what we would lose due to the punishing effects of feral horses 8would be gone forever. If you share this view, you could join or contribute to one of the many brigades of the environmental army working to protect our natural environment and to keep the big issues in front of mind of politicians and government. They're recruiting now and you will be welcomed. The following are major players:

Reclaim Kosci – reclaimkosci.org.au
Invasive Species Council – invasives.org.au
National Parks Association of the ACT – npaact.org.au
National Parks Association of NSW – npansw.org.au
Victorian National Parks Association – vnpa.org.au
The Colong Foundation for Wilderness – colongwilderness.org.au

References

[1] Higgins, M. 'Grazier's diary details pastoral life', *Canberra Times*, 20 June 2020.

[2] Costin, A.B., Gray, M., Totterdell, C.J. and Wimbush, D.J. *Kosciusko Alpine Flora*, CSIRO / Collins Australia, 1979.

[3] https://dondriscoll.files.wordpress.com/2020/07/driscoll-feral-horses-2-july-2020-deakin-for-posting.pdf

[4] McNamara, B. 'Nature's sponge …', *NPA Bulletin* **57**(2), 12 (June 2020).

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