Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee
Victoria

Inquiry into the Control of Invasive Animals on Crown Lands

5th September 2016
Synopsis.

The SSCV introduces itself, its President and the base from which it makes this submission. The Council discusses “Invasive Species” preferring to use the term “Pest” species. The submission then discusses several animal species quoting culling and control experiences (or otherwise) by its member organisation the SSAA Victoria.

Species are, rabbits, foxes, feral goats, feral cats, feral dogs, sambar, red, fallow and hog deer, feral pigs and eastern grey kangaroo. The Council discusses the characteristics of each species and the costs and safety aspects for each species.

The submission talks briefly about culling of birds on private orchards and vineyards. Council concludes that pest control on public and private land, have its ongoing support provided it is safe and effective. It applauds Government support and funding of pest control projects. Council requests this be ongoing and enhanced if possible.

Finally Council makes a series of recommendations. They include;

- That safety be a priority
- Deer hunting in more parks be allowed.
- That field overseeing of all projects be a high priority.
- That all deer species be allowed to be hunted in National Parks where deer hunting is allowed.
- That feral and other species be allowed to be taken in Alpine National Parks and State Game Reserves.
- That self-loading firearms and sound moderators be legalised on these projects.

Background.

The Shooting Sports Council of Victoria has 8 affiliate associations and a total membership in the order of 40,000. The Council is non-political and it provides objective advice to Governments and also is a platform for affiliate organisations to make representations to Government on firearms, ownership, hunting and other related subjects.

The current President and Secretary of the SSCV have been employed by the SSAA Victoria on pest control programs with Parks Victoria during the formative period from 2004, and thus have direct experience managing problem species, particularly on Crown land.

In this inquiry the term ‘invasive species’ is undefined, however unfortunately many consider it is restricted to introduced species only, regardless of how long these animals have been a part of the
Victorian environment, or of the problems they cause (or otherwise) to the environment or agriculture. Similarly many regard all native species as faultless with no environmental or agricultural impact. The facts are that some of both native and introduced species may be an environmental or agricultural problem in certain circumstances. Certainly this has been the SSAA Victoria experience.

Of course there are some species that are a problem at all times, basically regardless of their numbers, but obviously they are a far greater problem when their populations are high. They would include foxes, Indian mynas, pied currawongs, and grey headed flying foxes (fruit bats). Many species are primarily a problem on private land. Their refuge areas however are frequently public land.

For the purpose of this submission we shall use the term “pest species” and we define the term as; ‘Any animal or bird species, fully protected by law or unprotected by law, game species or not, indigenous or introduced (to Victoria), which because of its local circumstances or large population density, inflicts significant damage on the natural and desirable environmental values and/or upon agricultural or horticultural industries.’

The council submission will proceed to examine the practical aspects of controlling/managing a variety of pest species with which the SSAA Victoria has had experience. Most species will be discussed in some detail to establish a perspective.

All species are in the Victorian context. Species of animals to be covered are rabbits, foxes, feral goats, feral dogs, sambar deer, fallow deer, red deer, hog deer, feral pigs, grey headed flying fox, eastern grey kangaroo and various birds.

**Rabbits.**

They are a well recognized plague animal capable of massive destruction of vegetation. Experience has proven these animals can be effectively controlled using firearms on a local basis at least. The SSAA Victoria has orchestrated successful rabbit control programs on Parks Victoria managed land. The success of the projects was possible only with a large pool of qualified and competent volunteers, a cooperative land manager, determination to apply unrelenting management attention to the operation itself (diligent overseeing), so that it continued whenever possible, with as high an intensity as practical.

**Costs.** Costs are restricted to the man-hours the land manager commits to the project, and the man-hours the hunting association’s operations overseer commits to the project. The hours provided by the volunteer are, of course, free.

Initially land manager hours may be considerably higher than the ultimate long term running hours. The long term running hours for the hunting association overseer will also be high initially but will not fall off substantially. A permanently employed overseer is considered imperative to project success. Some equipment costs are also necessary.

**Safety.** The rabbit destruction project has invariably been a night project. Groups of 2 persons using night vision or spotlights, rimfire rifles or shotguns are used. The Council consider the safety of the public to be sound provided the Operations Plans are prepared and competent on-site supervision of projects is
ongoing. The use of sound moderators would enhance the success and self loading firearms would do likewise.

**Foxes.**

Foxes are widespread across Victoria. They are omnivorous survivors credited with being the most destructive predator of native wildlife. Whether or not this is true, they are also indisputably a serious pest to many agriculturalists. Currently foxes cannot be destroyed by hunters in any Alpine National Park deer hunting area.

The fox is subject to a bounty (of $10 for a skin strip) and this is quite effective, along with fox drives, in controlling/containing their numbers. There are large areas of public land, urban land and urban fringe, in which foxes exist well. Most of these areas are not huntable by the average hunter.

The SSAA Victoria has conducted successful fox operations and fox drives. Their success relies heavily on very skilled operators, particularly with fox whistling programs. Their success also demands a good relationship with the land manager. Comments regarding overseeing are much the same as for rabbits above.

**Costs.** The fox operations (whistling or drives) are less dependent on overseeing and land manager involvement. Again this assumes the volunteers are available. Driving and whistling employ shotguns mostly. Spotlight operations mostly employ rimfire and centre-fire rifles.

**Safety.** The fox programs are considered to be safe as long as the operational procedures are adhered to and a sound level of overseeing is in place.

The use of sound moderators and self-loading rifles would enhance the spotlighting success and reduce the operator’s risk of hearing loss.

**Feral Goats.**

Goats are natural survivors and can exist with minimal food and water. In Victoria real problems exist mainly in the North West of the state although there are small pockets in other locations. There is every possibility that population growth is limited by predation on young kids by wild dogs, dingos, foxes and eagles. Feral goats in some locations can have a very serious impact on native vegetation. Also, in some locations, the breeding rate is high. Feral goats cannot be destroyed in any Alpine National Park deer hunting area.

SSAA Victoria has organized several successful feral goat control programs. They are conducted in daylight using centre-fire rifles handled by trained operators. Again, the cooperation of the land manager is vital and intelligence in advance can be of great importance. Yet again the emphasis on sustained effort cannot be too lightly stated and the role of the association’s overseer or operations controller is pivotal.

**Costs.** Assuming volunteers have little or no cost, the outlay is limited to man-hours from the land manager and man-hours from the association’s overseer. Both will diminish after the inception of a program, however given that goat programs tend to be in remote areas where ground support is required,
and given ongoing monitoring by an overseer is required, overhead cost for goat programs may be higher than for other animal programs.

**Safety.** Provided operations plans are followed and field operators are fully qualified and overseen as required, we consider goat control programs to be safe.

The use of sound moderators and self-loading rifles would enhance success and reduce the risk of hearing loss to operators.

**Feral Cats.**

These animals are notorious for their environmental impact on native fauna. Their true impact is uncertain with far more research required. Feral cats cannot be destroyed in any Alpine National Park deer hunting area.

No serious control trial using firearms to control cats has been undertaken to our knowledge, nor are we aware of any serious cat control programs. Suffice to say that destroying feral cats in forested terrain is no easy matter, while moderate success may be achieved in open country with night operations.

In summary, a proper and effective control program needs to be developed for this species and this is an area in urgent need of attention. There is every chance that a sound pest management program employing hunting techniques to destroy feral cats could be established.

**Feral Dogs.**

This animal is also notorious in that its impact on farmed livestock is well known. The DPI employs dog control officers specifically to trap, poison and destroy these pests. There has been no association orchestrated field operation using volunteer hunters to destroy feral dogs to our knowledge. It may be feasible to organize operations. Feral dogs cannot be destroyed in any Alpine National Park deer hunting area.

Despite the best efforts of the employed staff, feral dogs still appear to be out of control. There are several pertinent issues when it comes to the control of feral dogs.

a) They are an extremely wylie adversary and a hunter must be highly skilled in calling and shooting to hunt them effectively.

b) There is serious uncertainty and an element of controversy regarding what is a dingo and what is a wild dog.

c) The relatively new boundary situation which limits the huntability of state forest is a serious complication.

d) As with feral cats, rabbits and foxes, no species other than Sambar deer may be hunted (in the National Parks where hunting is permitted) and this leaves all the National Park areas, some 4.5 million hectares, unhuntable for wild dogs without special permits and operations.
**Sambar deer.**

This animal is a prolific and a much revered game animal. It is widespread in most Victorian high country areas. In excess of 60,000 Sambar deer are taken by 30,000 licensed hunters in Victoria annually.

Sambar deer are a native of India and Sri Lanka and were introduced to Victoria in the mid 1800’s. They have very successfully adapted to the Victorian forests. The Sambar is equipped with very acute senses of hearing, sight and smell. It is fast in the forest terrain, tenacious and wary.

It is not well known that for one reason or another, between national park exclusions, reserves, catchment exclusions and limited private land access, Sambar can only be free range hunted in what we estimate to be approximately 33% of their habitat. This “exclusion” of hunters (progressive over years) has led to a major increase in sambar deer in many regions, particularly in areas where they have become semi-landlocked, like Dandenong Ranges NP and Warramate Hills NCR.

Indeed the resulting population densities in some areas are so high that despite their “game” status, they could truly be considered as “pests”. It is to be deplored that the situation with sambar deer has been allowed by Government agencies, to get so out of control.

Expanded hunting areas (into the Alpine National Park) have been discussed and promised by Governments and Ministers, yet as far as we are aware to date nothing has come of it. Areas that should be involved include parts of the Bogong unit, parts of the Coberras – Tingaring unit, large parts of the Snowy unit and expansion of the Mitchell River hunting area, at a minimum. All are quite remote and would present no tangible safety risk if hunting was allowed. We believe these changes should now occur as a matter of urgency.

The SSAA Victoria is conducting several Sambar control programs. This has included the Dandenong Ranges National Park. These programs have removed in the vicinity of 100 Sambar deer in two locations close to Melbourne. It is probable that these can be judged as successful in controlling the Sambar (on a locational basis only). Eradication seems unlikely however. The passage of time should give a greater understanding of what can be achieved.

The Sambar in these two programs are examples of animals finding refuge on public land yet inflicting environmental damage on both public and private land. It seems a reasonable argument that Government should be responsible to control (or remove) species which refuge on public land yet are responsible for private land damage. There is a third program underway in the High-Country parks but it is too early to judge its success.

The actual agricultural damage caused by Sambar deer is rather difficult to quantify. It is quite clear that they can be a serious problem for some vineyards, however other damage might be best described as nuisance than anything. Eating of some grass, some fence damage and disturbance of stock. There are of course cases where the Sambar takes a liking to a particular crop. In such cases serious damage will occur.

**Costs.** Again, the costs are restricted to the land manager’s representatives and the Associations Overseer man-hours, presuming the actual operators are unpaid volunteers. The land manager could have a responsibility to block the access/entry points in some locations and sometimes there are several possible public entry points. At times other volunteer groups or the hunting Association may provide individuals to
block entry points during Sambar operations. It could always be soundly argued that time input from the land managers staff, should not be included as a cost since they are a salary commitment in any event.

**Safety.** The safety of these Sambar deer operations are sound provided the operations plan, incorporating the Job Safety Analysis (JSA) and the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) are adhered to. Pre-hunt briefing and well defined block boundaries are also imperative, as is ongoing effective project overseeing.

The ability to use self-loading rifles and sound moderators would greatly aid in successful hunts and markedly reduce the risk of hearing damage to the operators.

**Red Deer.**

There has been no attempt to organise a program to cull Red deer as far as the Council is aware. Should such a program be required, no doubt it would be along similar lines to those programs already in place for Sambar.

Red deer are primarily confined to the Grampians National Park. They do of course “overflow” onto the surrounding private land. There is a tendency for Red deer to overpopulate the Grampians Park. Responsibility for this overpopulation and the resulting damage to private land and any tendency to spread out of the Grampians, rests with authorities who have thus far steadfastly refused to allow hunting there. It is hoped that some form of controlled public hunting, rather than an orchestrated cull, will eventually be promulgated in the Grampians. These deer are a “game” species.

**Fallow Deer.**

This species are widespread across Victoria. They have a tendency to ‘herd up’ and prefer open and fringe grass-land. They again freely use public land including National parks, as refuge. Our comments are similar to Sambar in respect to agricultural damage. These deer are not able to be destroyed in any Alpine National Park deer hunting area.

In some areas vineyard damage is also beyond dispute.

There has been no attempt to undertake a cull of Fallow deer in Victoria using association volunteers, to the best of our knowledge. No doubt a program such as the present Sambar programs could be initiated if an over-population situation is identified. These deer are a “game” species.

**Hog Deer.**

This species is smaller than Fallow. It is native of Sri Lanka and apparently listed as endangered in that country.
In Victoria it is for the most part confined to a coastal strip from Inverloch to the Victoria and NSW border. It may be hunted by licensed hunters who may take only two animals during the month of April each year. Tags are required for the animals taken.

Any tendency for the animals to over-populate is unusual however this does appear to have occurred in the Wilsons Promontory National Park, where no hunting has been allowed. Two orchestrated culls of this species have been conducted. They were both successful, the most recent occurring just one week ago.

The agricultural damage this species will inflict can generally be expected to be minor and restricted to the eating of grass. It is to be hoped that there will be little if any requirements to cull these deer further in the future. Such culls may well be avoided if some form of controlled hunting is permitted in specific areas. This is a small, shy and relatively scarce deer. We believe culls should be an absolutely last resort for this species. These deer are a “game” species.

**Costs.** Comments as for Sambar deer.

**Safety.** Comments as for Sambar deer. Sound moderators for rifles are highly desirable.

**Feral Pigs.**

These animals are nothing like as prolific in Victoria as they are in the Northern States. They do however have serious potential to become a forest problem in the future. The animals are difficult to hunt in heavily wooded areas and specialised techniques may have to be established to hunt/destroy them should their numbers escalate in specific locations. Feral pigs are not able to be destroyed in any Alpine National Park deer hunting area.

The SSAA Victoria has had one project culling feral pigs. It has met with limited success in a relatively open woodland area. More work is needed on techniques for hunting feral pigs. What are satisfactory methods in the open country of NSW and Queensland do not work well in heavily forested areas of Victoria.

**Costs.** Similar comments as for Sambar deer.

**Safety.** Similar comments for Sambar deer. Self-loading rifles and sound moderators would greatly enhance the culling of feral pigs.

**Eastern Grey Kangaroo.**

These animals are fully protected (native) wildlife. They are capable of serious pastoral and crop damage. They also damage fences and alarm stock. These kangaroos habitually feed on grassland, pasture and crops primarily at night, yet take refuge in forested areas (mostly state forest and National Parks), during the daytime. Permits to cull these kangaroos are issued by DEWLP to private landholders annually. We understand permits are issued for some 30,000 animals per annum. The Council believes the State
should take greater responsibility for control of these animals, by conducting culls on public lands. In many areas Eastern Grey Kangaroos would have to be regarded as a pest species.

The SSAA Victoria has not conducted an orchestrated kangaroo cull on public land to the Council’s knowledge. Council is aware of many occasions when association members have undertaken kangaroo cull programs for private landholders. These culls have been quite satisfactory, however public objections have occurred when such culls are located near populated areas.

**Costs.** There are/ have been no significant costs.

**Safety.** The operations that SSAA Victoria have supported have all been considered safe. The use of self-loading rifles with sound moderators fitted would greatly assist in the efficient conduct of kangaroo culls.

**Fruit Bats and Birds.**


Orchard and vineyard owners alike, regard many of the above bird species and fruit bats as serious pest species. Fruit bats (grey haired flying foxes) are fully protected by federal law. They may not be destroyed at all despite the large amount of damage they inflict. Native bird species are protected by State law, however limited permits are issued for destruction. Introduced bird species may be destroyed without a permit (except in populated areas).

Sulphur-crested cockatoo, Galah and Long billed Corellas may be destroyed without permit provided the farm owner can substantiate damage. Many of the bird species and bats breed and refuge on public land. The SSAA Victoria has regularly conducted bird culls to protect vineyards and orchards. These culls are conducted within the law and have been quite successful. They have included only SSAA Victoria qualified operators.

**Costs.** To landholder have amounted to the cost of providing cartridges and a minimum overseeing fee.

**Safety.** The operations have been safe and rely on an overseer to allocate blocks and time brackets. Shotguns only are used employing small shot sizes.

**Conclusion and Recommendations.**

The Council remains very supportive of pest control projects using firearms and hunting techniques on public land, provided the present basis of operations is maintained. Council considers there is considerable room for enhancing existing projects and creating new projects targeting other species and/or in new areas. There is also considerable scope for the use of new hunting techniques and/or improved equipment or firearms.

There is in Councils view, a need for Government and their agencies to take an increased responsibility for pest animals and other species which find sanctuary on public land, then damage
conservation values on that land, as well as doing considerable damage to infrastructure and farming interests on private land.

Council nonetheless congratulates Governments and Parks Victoria for embracing this innovative pest control initiative thus aiding it to become a success. Council considers it very healthy to be directly involved in conservation of the National Estate.

Council also calls for a relaxation in the use and availability of sound moderators and self-loading firearms, at least to the qualified association members involved in these pest control projects.

The following points are therefore considered imperative to enhance ongoing pest control projects using firearms;

- that human safety remains paramount
- that a sound pest management course continue to be a pre-condition for all field operators on these projects
- that effective field overseeing by the association involved be maintained
- that effective overseeing by the land manager continue
- that fallow and red deer hunting be allowed in National Parks where deer hunting is currently allowed
- that the destruction of feral species, foxes and rabbits be allowed in National Parks where deer hunting is currently allowed
- that hunting of all species of deer be allowed in a greatly expanded area of National Parks
- that the Firearms Act 1996 be amended so that self-loading firearms and sound moderators can be used on these pest programs.

The Councils representatives would be happy to answer any questions that the Government Committee may have on this submission.

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