

# SOUTH ENDEAVOUR TRUST

## **Submission to Senate Inquiry on the impacts and management of feral horses in the Australian Alps**

### **Standing**

South Endeavour is an Australian conservation land trust which owns and manages 20 privately protected conservation reserves in New South Wales and Queensland.

We own one reserve, Crooks Racecourse, which sits around 1650m above sea level and which borders the high country of Kosciuszko National Park on three sides. We also own a number of reserves on Cape York where we have to deal with feral horse issues. As a consequence, we are both impacted by the failure to manage feral horses in the Australian Alps and we have significant experience in managing feral horses on conservation reserves.

### **Responses to Terms of Reference**

#### **a) identifying best practice approaches to reduce the populations of feral horses in the Australian Alps and their impacts**

In our experience feral horses do substantial damage to the Australian environment and that damage is greatest in the delicate environment of the Australian Alps. Our Crooks Racecourse Reserve has significant areas of endangered bogs and fens highly susceptible to damage by feral horses. Further, we have substantial areas of key habitat around these bogs and fens occupied by endangered species including the broad-toothed rat and the alpine sheoak skink. For this reason we have expended very substantial funds on otherwise totally unnecessary fencing to try to keep feral horses from the National Park out of our reserve. That is, we have had to spend substantial amounts of very scarce conservation funding simply on trying to keep the NSW Government's feral horses out of our conservation reserve. This is beyond a sub-optimal situation.

On Cape York feral horses do very substantial damage to rainforests and stream banks. This has led to significant areas of horse induced erosion and the production of fine sediment that ends up threatening the health of the Great Barrier Reef. For this reason, amongst others, we have long sought to control feral horses on our Cape York reserves.

While the environment on Cape York is certainly very different climate wise to the Australian Alps, in terms of feral animal control challenges it has a similar mix of woodlands, open forest and semi-closed forest, similar topography and a similar degree of inaccessibility to those found in the Alps.

Methods we have used include trapping and attempted rehoming, ground shooting and aerial shooting.

***Our experience is that by far the most effective, efficient and humane method of controlling feral horses is helicopter based aerial shooting using skilled marksmen and high powered firearms.***

In our experience, trapping is hugely expensive, largely ineffective and causes distress to the animals. Ground shooting is ineffective on a landscape scale as access is often challenging with

limited tracks and this sort of shooting simply makes those animals not shot very wary and much harder to follow up on.

As a consequence, we and most other broad area land managers primarily rely upon aerial shooting to control large feral herbivores/omnivores such as pigs and deer....and horses.

It is totally illogical to suggest that somehow methods which are totally ineffective at controlling other feral animals will work on horses or that methods that are relatively effective and efficient for other feral animals are somehow inappropriate for horse control.

When we are conducting aerial culling of feral horses our experience is that one higher grain round will usually kill a horse, but our practice is that we usually use 3 rounds per animal with a strict fly back policy and we make sure each mob is humanely destroyed before moving on to the next. We use two rapid shots to the heart/lung and then one more to ensure that each animal is dead as quickly as possible with the least distress possible. We fly back over each animal and count them again to make sure it is a clean shoot.

***Our experience is that it will be impossible to effectively control feral horse numbers in the Australian Alps without aerial shooting.***

#### **b) Commonwealth powers and responsibilities**

Clearly and without any doubt feral horses are a very significant threatening process to the environment of the Australian Alps, their natural heritage values and the endangered species they house. The fact that this threatening process is being allowed to run unchecked by any effective action means that either:

1. The EPBC Act is not being enforced, or
2. The EPBC Act is entirely ineffective

From our reading of the Act we believe that 1. above is the case. The failure of the states to take effective action to control this threatening process is an action and a breach of the Act and the Commonwealth has been derelict in not enforcing the Act.

Further while the Environment Minister appears to have got the buy in by the States for the clear policy objective no further extinctions, this has not been followed up by appropriate actions, at least insofar as the Australian Alps are concerned.

***Unless feral hoses in the Australian Alps are fully controlled, further extinctions WILL occur.***

#### **c) the adequacy of state and territory laws, policies, programs and funding for control of feral horses and other hard-hoofed invasive species in the Australian Alps, and their interaction with Commonwealth laws and responsibilities;**

The Senate would not be holding this Inquiry if existing laws, policies and programs were adequate. The evidence is abundantly clear in terms of expanding hoses numbers and compounding damage being done by those horses that current policies and programs are **a total failure**. We are not talking here about policies and programs that are inadequate. Rather they have been a total and absolute failure. As a consequence, the problem is getting rapidly worse.

In NSW the problem is not just policies and programs but obviously laws. But it must be recognized that even before the Wild Horse Heritage Management Act was passed, the policies and programs

enacted in NSW were grossly inadequate and totally ineffective. Just repealing the Act will in no way address the real onground shortcomings caused by the policy decision to exclude aerial shooting.

In Victoria, again it is the exclusion of aerial shooting that is at the root of the ineffectiveness of control activities.

What is required is:

1. The repeal of the Wild Horse Heritage Management Act in NSW
2. Policy decisions to enable aerial culling of feral horses as is currently done for other feral animals and for horses in other states
3. A substantial boost in short term funding to effectively and efficiency knock numbers as low as possible, followed up by sufficient funding for a lower but still substantial level of ongoing control effort.

**d) measures required to repair and restore native habitats for species impacted by feral horses and other hard-hoofed invasive species in the Australian Alps, including for iconic species like the corroboree frog and the platypus**

Our experience is that the Australian environment is remarkably resilient and that normally just the removal of threatening processes is enough to allow nature to recover. With limited funding, by far the highest spending priority should be on controlling the threatening process of feral horses, deer and pigs rather than on specific species recovery efforts.

However, in the Australian Alps there is a significant compounding factor in the impact of climate change on seasonal drying of the alpine bush and hence its susceptibility to large scale fires. Our experience in the Alps in the 2019-20 fires is that virtually no priority was given to protecting the environment and that the fires were only addressed when they threatened property. For example a small lightning fire in the Jagungal area of Kosciuszko, that could have been contained by a single bulldozer, was left to burn for many days until it took off and destroyed a very large area of threatened species habitat. It was only when it was a very big fire and started to threaten property that any fire resources were dedicated to it.

If we want to protect the unique values of the Australian Alps in the face of climate change then we are going to have to commit many more resources to, and place a much higher priority on, containing small fires that threaten the environment before they become big ones. The current priorities of 1. Life 2. Property and 3. The environment, really mean that the environment is zero priority. This is not a sustainable situation for the Alps and must change.

The other exceptional issue is the threat of chytrid fungus to the Corroboree Frog. Twenty or more years ago these frogs used to be common on what is now our Crooks Racecourse Reserve. Today they are totally absent due to the fungus.

Elsewhere on South Endeavour's conservation estate we have seen endangered species like the Common Mist Frog on the Atherton Tablelands stage a significant recovery due to natural selection of those individuals that have some resistance to chytrid. It is our view that investment in trying to breed chytrid resistant Corroboree Frogs is very worthwhile, but just reintroducing them in what are effectively cages is not a long term solution and a poor investment of capital.

**e) other matters** It is our very strong view that the solution to the public interest in "wild horses" lies not in the further degradation of the conservation estate in the Australian Alps, but rather on the private land surrounding that conservation estate.

There clearly is a political issue that needs a solution.

***In our view the Australian Government, with the states, should move to break open the current impasse by buying private land in or adjacent to the alpine area to be used as "Wild Horse Reserves"***

We would propose that three such reserves be established, each of not less than, say, 1000ha. A suitable selection of feral horses bloodlines in the conservation estate should be translocated to these reserves with the numbers actively managed by the rehoming of excess animals as breeding occurs.

The remaining feral horses in the conservation estate should be eradicated insofar as this is possible.

Just maybe we can have our conservation estate untrammelled by feral horses and we can have wild horses living free in their own reserves.

South Endeavour Trust  
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