

Feral Horse Management

Background

Feral horses (also known as wild horses or brumbies) have existed in the Australian Alps for over 150 years after escaping from early settlements.

A.B. (Banjo) Patterson captured the spirit of the wild bush horses and the early mountain settlers in his 1895 book *The Man from Snowy River and other verses* - forever enshrining them in our national psyche.

The close link between wild horses and the European culture of the Australian Alps is well recognised.

The stories, legends and myths of the mountains and mountain lifestyles have been romanticised in books, films, songs, and television series. Many, such as the Elyne Mitchell's Silver Brumby novels, are part of Australia's national identity (Commonwealth of Australia 2008).

The tourism brand for the Australian Alps national landscape draws strongly on the heritage of mountain settlement (AANL 2009). Horse riding in the Australian Alps (both through clubs and tour operators) reflects the desire to emulate the early pioneers and their life in the saddle.

But 150 years of horse escapes and breeding have resulted in the large number of feral horses that currently occur in the Kosciuszko National Park in NSW, the Alpine National Park in Victoria and adjacent areas of state forest in both jurisdictions.

Feral horses have previously been removed from Namadgi National Park in the ACT, but they have the potential to re-invade from adjacent areas.

While many people are familiar with the popular image of quintessential horsemen racing across the mountain ranges after the elusive animals, the impacts and threats posed by these feral animals are not so well known.



Feral horse impacts

Horses are a foreign introduction into the delicate alpine environment, and they are considered a significant threat to the natural values of the Australian Alps because of their impacts, widespread distribution, and the challenges involved in their management (Coyne 2001).

Horses have significant impacts on streams in particular stream banks in the Australian Alps. Prober and Thiele (2007) observed a striking effect of feral horses on streams with significantly more incision and damage outside of feral horse exclosure plots.

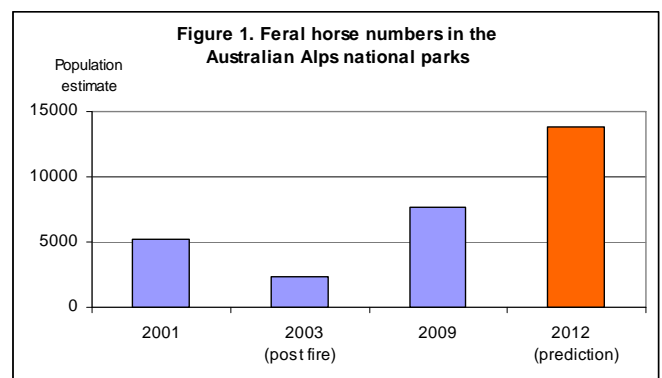
Dyring (1990) noted that feral horses disturbed stream banks particularly in open areas with easily-penetrated vegetation.

Tolsma (2008) recorded evidence of feral horses in 63 of 65 alpine and sub-alpine peatlands in the eastern part of the Alpine National Park.

In alpine and sub-alpine areas, threatened species such as corroboree frogs, the broad-toothed rat, the alpine water skink and bog skink and a variety of plants are at risk from feral horse impacts.

Feral horse numbers

Aerial surveys have been used to locate and count mobs of feral horses in the Australian Alps national parks in 2001, after the 2003 fires and in 2009, using standardised methods to enable comparisons of populations over time (Figure 1). (Walter & Hone 2003, Walter 2003, Dawson 2009).

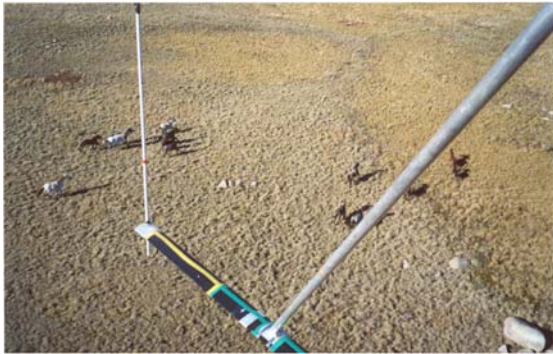


The feral horse population size dropped dramatically between the surveys in 2001 and 2003, probably reflecting the effects of severe and extensive wildfires across most of the core areas occupied by feral horses in the Australian Alps (Walter 2003).

In 2009, feral horse population numbers in the surveyed areas had rebounded to 7679 animals (+/- 25.4 per cent) (Dawson 2009).

The estimated increase in the feral horse population between 2003 and 2009 was 224%. This translates to an estimated average annual rate of increase (21.65%); very close to the maximum reproductive rate (~ 20%) predicted by Walter (2002: p.70) for the Australian Alps.

If the feral horse population continues to grow at this rate, it is predicted it will reach around 13,800 feral horses in 2012 (see Figure 1).



Aerial surveys enable population comparisons (Photo: J Bean 2005)

Management controls and implications

Feral horses present a complex management problem because they have emotional and historical significance to many people; and effective and acceptable control methods are yet to be identified to match the growth in feral horse numbers (Nimmo and Miller 2007).

Each of the management agencies for the national parks of the Australian Alps has specific management programs to attempt to reduce the population of feral horses, and subsequently reduce the damage being caused to natural environments (ACT Parks, Conservation and Lands (2007); NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (2008); Pascoe and Foster (2004)).

Most of these programs involve capturing mobs of feral horses in specially constructed yards (and additionally through permit-based brumby running in Victoria). Captured horses are removed from the national parks.

To date, these techniques have removed several hundred feral horses each year, but such removal is well below the natural replacement level (currently at least 1400 extra horses per annum).

Fencing has occasionally been used to keep feral horses out of sensitive areas, but this method of impact control is difficult in most rugged mountain terrain.

Other management techniques (such as fertility control and selectively removing fertile adults) need to be further investigated for their efficacy in alpine areas.

Agencies responsible for managing the Australian Alps national parks operate under park and threatened species legislation that require the intrinsic natural values to be protected.

It is likely that the impacts of feral horses on alpine and sub-alpine communities (particularly wetlands, karst

areas and peatlands) will become more widespread and more intense without a substantial reduction in the number of feral horses in the Australian Alps.

Removal rates by current techniques would need to increase many-fold to match the current and projected population increases. Improved control techniques will need to align with community expectations for humane removal, and also increase the number of feral horses removed from national parks.

The cultural significance of horses within the community must be balanced against the effects of feral horses on the environment. Left unchecked, horse numbers have the potential to further degrade one of Australia's most significant and sensitive environments.

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