



AUSTRALIAN ALPS NATIONAL PARKS

2016 Operations Workshop: *Deer & other Ungulates*

Howman's Gap Alpine Centre, November 3-5

Overview

In early November 2016, around 40 participants gathered at Howman's Gap Alpine Centre for the biennial Australian Alps Operations workshop. The focus this time round was on feral deer and other ungulates.

For years now, land managers have been referring to deer as *an emerging issue*. Well, they have emerged. Although there is some contention about the exact numbers, recreational shooters at the workshop suggested that around 60,000 deer were shot in Victoria last year. That's a lot of large, heavy ungulates traipsing about the landscape. They are causing damage to our natural heritage, as well as to crops and infrastructure. They are also a major hazard for road users. Hitting a large deer is more like hitting a cow than a kangaroo.

As is usual with Alps events, there were major contributions from all agencies. We also had recreational and professional shooters deliver presentations. All participants showed strong interest in the program and there were many valuable exchanges across the floor. Parks Victoria staff arranged a short field trip to nearby Wallace's hut. They also arranged for some fabulous weather which was much appreciated after such a storm wracked spring. The weather was so good during the field trip, that it was a challenge getting everyone back to Howman's Gap to continue the presentations.

We crammed a lot of information and experiences into this workshop, with activities stretching well into both nights. It speaks volumes about the importance of the subject and professionalism of the attendees that they remained engaged throughout. There was great camaraderie between all attendees and an appreciation that this kind of knowledge sharing can only enhance our capacity to mitigate the threat that feral deer and other ungulates pose to the Australian Alps.



Workshop Highlights & Discussion Points

- Deer are not an emerging pest, they have emerged many thousands are shot in Victoria annually.
- Deer pose a major threat to our natural heritage, road users and agricultural production.
- Although some deer species have been well studied overseas, there is limited knowledge about how they are interacting with the Australian landscape. For example, no sambar deer has ever been fitted with a tracking collar in Australia. Were this to be done, it would likely reveal important information such as range, time spent in sensitive bog areas, seasonal movements and preferred habitat. A deer collaring project was identified as a possible Alps sponsored project in 2017-18. There is a clear need for ongoing research concurrent with adaptive on-ground management practices.
- Challenges of adopting common approaches to management when legal status of deer varies between the jurisdictions. In Victoria they are classified as wildlife and are declared game animals. In NSW there are restrictions on the season, time of day and methods that can be used to hunt deer. The ACT is the only jurisdiction where all deer are simply classified as feral pests. These variations between jurisdictions were subject to some animated discussion as to their relative merits.
- The ACT is an ideal jurisdiction for applied research due to deer having no special protection.
- Cross border mapping of deer distribution, density and changes over time would be a valuable decision support and planning tool for land managers. It would give a landscape wide view of the threat. The 'National Icons & Threats Framework' might be directly applicable for this purpose.



Fig 1: A safety briefing at Wallace's hut



- Parks Victoria is leading the way with engaging volunteers to assist with various aspects of land management including 4WD clubs & recreational hunters. This inclusive approach to land management has its challenges but is leading to positive outcomes in the field.
 - Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) laws mean that more volunteers are obtaining accreditations, using PPE and being trained in safe working procedures for remote areas;
 - There are stronger relationships between park staff and stakeholder/user groups; and
 - Although well trained volunteer groups are an additional resource for park managers to deploy, there are costs to the agency. Parks Victoria is currently making a significant commitment in terms of staff time and other resources to manage the volunteer program.
- Specialist equipment is changing the way we do pest control. It is getting better and cheaper every day. Knowledge sharing in this area is particularly important as new technologies supersede old ones and best practice evolves.
 - Parks Victoria demonstrated a range of field equipment used in remote areas including: motion sensor cameras, GPS transmitters, portable radios and various types of scopes.
 - Strathbogie Wildlife (a specialist contractor employed by Parks Victoria to control deer and the ACT Parks and Conservation Service to control kangaroos) discussed a range of situations where they have successfully used night vision and thermal imaging equipment to undertake deer control programs in peri-urban and other sensitive areas. They noted that the use of such equipment is far less disruptive to animals than spotlighting and together with the use of semi-automatics, increases the likelihood of making multiple kills at one location.
 - Noise suppression devices are another useful tool for shooters, but they are highly regulated and their availability is tightly controlled for obvious reasons.





Fig 2: Mick Keenan (PV) demonstrating a range of field equipment

- Practical options for deer control are currently limited to ground and aerial shooting, however individual jurisdictions may impose their own regulatory restrictions. Victoria for example, prohibits the aerial shooting of deer. Work is being done on target specific bait stations, although at this stage, none of the prototypes have proved effective. It's a work in progress.
- Eradication of deer from the Alps is unlikely unless a form of biological control is developed. In the meantime, it is important to implement strategies to protect high value assets such as EPBC listed bogs and fens.
- Aerial shooting can be a highly effective control method and where possible, should remain an option in all jurisdictions. There was discussion about shared cross-border operations to reduce overall helicopter costs and better utilise the limited aerial shooting expertise. Staff undertaking aerial shooting in close proximity to state/territory borders should consider the option of a shared cross-border operation. A great example of potential efficiencies and cost savings available to program managers when they think landscape rather than borders.
- On the final morning there was a presentation on Namadgi National Park's pig control program. It was a great example of an effective, long term, landscape scale control program. It was pointed out that data collection is vitally important as this provides hard evidence that the program is limiting the impact of pigs in the park. This in turn reinforces the Agencies long term financial and operational support.
- The workshop wrapped up with a case study from Gudgenby Valley in the South of Namadgi NP. This presentation demonstrated to the gathering how an 'out of control' rabbit problem could be tackled with a fully integrated, multi-year approach. Statistics from the valley continue to show that numbers are now low and

controllable with a relatively low cost annual follow-up. Rabbits of course are not ungulates, but the principle of integrated pest management is universal.

In Summary

1. Communications emerged as a key issue. The general public still don't perceive deer as a problem in the Alps. Some members of the public don't even know that we have feral deer. Engaging with stakeholders is equally important. Raising the profile of feral deer as a problem species will in all likelihood, lower the shock value of large scale control programs.
2. Partnerships with key stakeholders is an opportunity in a time of diminishing resources
3. Deer as a declared game animal poses challenges and limits control options in Vic & NSW. It does present an opportunity for the ACT to play a lead role in research and development.
4. Emerging technology – Equipment is rapidly improving and getting cheaper. The Alps Program can play a vital role through reference groups, forums and workshops in highlighting new and emerging technology.
5. Data collection to support all programs is essential to secure ongoing funding from partner agencies.
6. Mapping across the borders is another decision support tool whose time has come. Digital devices equipped with real time online mapping can assist with all aspects of land management.
7. Gathering, sharing experiences and building relationships across the jurisdiction remains one of the most compelling reasons for the Alps Program to sponsor such workshops into the future.



Fig 3: A quick team photo before hitting the road.



And thanks to all presenters and demonstrators

Rhys Coote: Sporting Shooters Association of Australia
Bob Gough: Australian Deer Association
Kurt Stone: Strathbogie Wildlife
Kirk Watter: Strathbogie Wildlife
Elaine Thomas: Parks Victoria
Mick Keenan: Parks Victoria
Rob Hunt: NSW NPWS
Andrew Claridge: NSW NPWS
Tony Stubbs: NSW NPWS
Louisa Roberts: ACT P&CS
Mark Elford: ACT P&CS
John McRae: Australian Alps Program Manager
Brett McNamara: ACT P&CS

Report by John McRae, Program Manager, Australian Alps Co-operative Management Program

