

Editors' Perspective

Feral horses in the Australian Alps – an introduction to the special issue

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This issue of *EMR* is focused on the theme of feral horses in Australia's Alpine Parks. Its papers are largely but not exclusively drawn from presentations at the "Feral Horse Impacts: The Kosciuszko Science Confereee" held on Thursday 8th November 2018 at the Australian Academy of Science, Canberra. All papers have been peer reviewed through *EMR*'s rigorous external review process.

Five research reports have been prepared, and provide peer reviewed evidence to inform the debate surrounding the environmental impacts and management of feral horses in Australia's alpine parks. These studies, involving many authors from a range of universities and government agencies, identify that damage (attributable to feral horses, as well as deer to a lesser extent) has been widespread and is likely to increase with the increasing populations predicted by modelling. Alpine meadow structure is already showing evidence of impacts from grazing in locations frequented by horses, alpine stream banks are being compromised, and wetlands (that provide critical habitat for populations of Threatened animals) are showing evidence of trampling and draining. These papers are supported by a synthesis paper that also provides an in-depth analysis of a range of options for efficient and effective action.

Two editorials provide perspectives on the current controversy surrounding prohibition of culling of feral horses in alpine parks in New South Wales and Victoria. One of these provides an ecosystem management viewpoint, emphasizing the wisdom of humane culling informed by ecological evidence, while the other provides a social science perspective that highlights the complexity of social factors that need to be addressed if solutions are to be found.

Providing an important context to the recent research on impacts of feral horses is a paper by Stuart Johnston and the late Roger Good, documenting the long, difficult and expensive (\$10M) work already undertaken to restore Kosciuszko National Park after damage by livestock in the 19th and 20th centuries. Many additional millions have also been invested in restoring the Park's alpine wetlands after the 2003 wildfire. Clearly this work is highly relevant to the feral herbivores debate given that, should feral herbivore damage be allowed to continue, a massive restoration effort would be needed; and this time it is likely to be more expensive and more uncertain given climate change. The unconscionability of this is reflected in the Kosciuszko Science Accord, signed by 90 scientists including those present at the Australian Academy of Science conference. This Accord is published in this issue, as is the NSW Scientific Committee's Final Determination of Feral Horses as a Key Threatening Process. This provides yet another independent assessment of the seriousness of feral horses as a threat to the important task of biodiversity conservation.

Providing peer reviewed data can assist with informing agencies, governments and communities at a range of levels about the impacts. It can draw inferences and make recommendations. But it cannot provide the ultimate solutions. The solutions must come from society through informed and civil discourse and the development and implementation of more thoughtful policy, well informed by the biological, ecological and social sciences. We hope that assembling these papers and contextual material will provide clearer information for the future development of policy with regard to this challenging management issue, an issue that extends well beyond the Australian alpine parks to many parts of Australia and other parts of the world.

Editorial team

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