Wild horses and the unique value of the Snowies

The Snowy Mountains are a unique Australian landscape and an irreplaceable natural asset for all Australians. The Country in Kosciuszko National Park has continuing significance for Monaro Ngarigo, Wiradjuri, Wolgalu and Ngunnawal Aboriginal people. The ecosystems of the Snowy Mountains are under significant and increasing pressure from introduced animals and plants.

Kosciuszko National Park is the largest national park in NSW and one of the largest conservation reserves in Australia. It contains the highest mountains on the Australian continent, unique glacial landscapes and unusual plants and animals, some of which are found nowhere else in the world.

The park’s cultural landscapes are wide-ranging in type and significance. They contain many Aboriginal and settler cultural artefacts and diverse land use histories. The mountain’s snow-fed bogs, wetlands, rivers and streams provide some of Australia’s most important water catchments.

Kosciuszko has significant recreational, tourism and thus economic value, with its natural and cultural features attracting over 2.3 million ‘visitor days’ each year. These visitors go bushwalking, camping, mountain biking, skiing, horse riding, car touring and four-wheel driving. As well as managing the impacts of these human activities in the park, it is critical to manage impacts from introduced species, including wild horses.
Why is there a Wild Horse Management Plan for Kosciuszko?

The park’s alpine and sub-alpine environments are home to many threatened and endangered species. The fragility of the park's environments makes them particularly susceptible to the damage caused by horses, which are heavy and hard-hoofed. This damage not only impacts the park and its native animals and plants, but the local communities relying on its rivers and streams for drinking water.

Why is there a review of the Plan?

The 2008 Wild Horse Management Plan stated that it would be reviewed after five years.

The review will evaluate the current methods of population control to ensure they remain humane and effective. It will also determine other actions that could be undertaken to protect the park and its visitors from the impact of wild horses.

In addition, analysis of the horse monitoring program, which was rolled out in an Australian Alps Liaison Committee sponsored program in 2011-2012, indicates that despite current efforts, horses are having a significant impact on the park’s endangered ecological communities and alpine environments. As wild horse numbers increase, so does the damage they cause.
The Snowies are unique

The Snowy Mountains are one of the few places on Earth with subalpine treeless flats and valleys. They contain over 204 species of flowering plants and 33 of those species are rare. An incredible 21 of them are unique to the Snowies – they are not found anywhere else on Earth.

The Snowies are the only habitat for a number of rare animal species like the mountain pygmy possum, the southern corroboree frog and 13 other species declared threatened or vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

In recognition of the international significance of the Snowies, Kosciuszko National Park has been declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and been included on the National Heritage List.

Important water catchment areas

As the area that contains the headwaters of the Snowy, Murray and Murrumbidgee rivers, Kosciuszko National Park is one of the most important water catchments in south-eastern Australia. It contains alpine and sub alpine sphagnum bogs, otherwise known as fens or peat bogs. Sphagnum bogs hold significant amounts of water, filtering it slowly and ensuring high quality water continues to flow throughout the year and importantly, during periods of drought.

Rare landscapes

Many of the landscape features within the park are unusual or rare in Australia. The spectacular glacial and karst landscapes around Yarrangobilly’s limestone caves are a superb example, as are the Blue Water Holes. The park also has deep river valleys and many frost hollows. Its vegetation includes alpine heaths, snow gum woodlands and subalpine grasslands. Visitors can also enjoy extensive eucalypt forests, cool temperate rainforest, box woodlands and stands of native cypress pines. All of these ecosystems are being impacted by wild horses.
Getting the balance right

For many people, wild horses are an iconic part of Australia’s national heritage, and also an important part of their own family history. For many others, the value of the Snowies is found in its unique Australian landscape and its native plants and animals. It is also widely acknowledged that wild horses have tourism value.

The challenge is to get the balance right between the wild horses and our native wildlife and landscapes. The review of the Wild Horse Management Plan for Kosciuszko will help to identify how that balance can be reached.

Managing the Snowies

We need to protect the Snowy Mountains from further damage, for current and future generations.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) is responsible for the Snowies, within the bounds of Kosciuszko National Park. The NPWS is working hard to manage all the impacts and threats to this unique Australian landscape, and is collaborating closely with other land management agencies, neighbouring landholders, the scientific community and interest groups.

In 2006, a management plan for Kosciuszko National Park was developed to protect its unique alpine landscapes and wildlife. The plan aims to put in place targeted control measures for introduced animals to protect the environment. The management plan required the development of a series of sub-plans, including a Regional Pest Management Strategy to address specific threats to the park. The Wild Horse Management Plan is one of those plans and it aims to manage the impact of wild horses in the park. The plan was released in December 2008 and is now being reviewed.

This information sheet is part of a series describing the review of the Wild Horse Management Plan for Kosciuszko National Park.

The Wild Horse Management Plan review

The review will run until approximately May 2015 (Stage One). An Independent Technical Reference Group will:

- review and identify wild horse numbers, distribution and impact across the park
- provide advice on the most effective and appropriate methods the NPWS could use to control the wild horse population
- identify objectives for managing the wild horse population within the park.
The Independent Technical Reference Group has an independent chair and its membership includes scientists and individuals with expertise in the native plants and animals of the Australian Alps and Kosciuszko National Park; horse ecology and population control; animal welfare and veterinary science; and soil processes and erosion.

In addition to the work of the Independent Technical Reference Group, there will be a comprehensive communication and community engagement campaign throughout the review. This will ensure stakeholders, special interest groups and community members are actively involved in the process, and that the broad range of community views are heard and contribute to the final outcome. Consultation activities will include:

- meeting with stakeholder and special interest groups
- conducting focus groups with community members
- undertaking random telephone/email surveys of community views
- inviting community members to share stories about their personal experiences in the Snowy Mountains
- running a 21st Century Town Hall meeting (a large group meeting in which issues are discussed and views captured and reported electronically throughout the meeting)
- facilitating Kitchen Table discussions (where interested community members hold structured discussions with their family and friends, and then provide the collective feedback from the group).

Following the completion of the review, and after considering the recommendations of the Independent Technical Reference Group and the outcomes of the community engagement activities, the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Management Plan will be redrafted, it will be exhibited and a call will be made for submissions on the draft (Stage Two).

Finally, submissions will be reviewed and the draft Kosciuszko Wild Horse Management Plan amended accordingly (Stage Three). The final plan will be implemented by the NPWS (Stage Four).
Have your say – get involved

For more information about this project and to get involved, go to the project website at www.environment.nsw.gov.au/protectsnowies.