

The urgent need for wild horse control

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.

Managing the wild horse population is a sensitive topic. The link between horses and the Snowy Mountains evokes different images for different people. While this is a complex and difficult issue, the Snowy Mountains are under a very real threat, and the impact of wild horses must be managed. With an estimated population of 400,000 nation wide, there are more wild horses in Australia than anywhere else on Earth.

Wild horses are one of the introduced animals having a serious impact on the plants, native animals and landscapes of the park. The review of the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Management Plan will consider the significance of these impacts and determine the most effective and humane methods to control their population.

Existing control methods

The NPWS is required by law to protect and conserve the native plants, animals and ecosystems of Kosciuszko National Park for current and future generations.

Ten different control options were examined and considered in the preparation of the last plan. These included trapping, fertility control, tranquilising, fencing, ground shooting, aerial shooting, mustering from the air and brumby running and roping.

Low stress mustering and passive trapping of wild horses, and their removal, are currently the only methods adopted to manage the increasing wild horse population in NSW national parks, as they were operationally feasible and acceptable to the community. In Kosciuszko National Park, current control methods are insufficient to manage the wild horse population, which continues to grow.

A key objective of the Wild Horse Management Plan is to make sure that all horses are treated humanely throughout the removal process, and their treatment complies with current animal welfare Codes of Practice. A guiding principle of the plan is to monitor advances in horse control methods, such as fertility control, to ensure the most effective methods are being used in the program where appropriate and possible.

The numbers

In the early 1800s, it was estimated there were around 3500 horses in the wild across the whole of Australia. **Commonwealth Government figures** estimate there are now up to 400,000 wild horses in Australia. This is the largest wild horse population in the world. The United States, for example, only has an estimated 40,000 wild horses and burros on rangeland, with a further 47,000 that have been removed to holding facilities.

In 2009, an aerial survey of wild horses in the **Australian Alps** estimated there were up to 7000 wild horses living the Kosciuszko National Park alone. Despite trapping and removing more than 2000 horses since 2009, the population is still increasing. This is an unsustainable number and if left unmanaged, this growing population will have significant environmental consequences for the park.

Research indicates that without intervention, wild horse numbers can grow anywhere between 8 and 22% each year and there are few natural checks or limitations to this growth. As the population grows the impacts increase, and even greater challenges are created. These include: increasing animal welfare concerns as ever-more horses need to be removed, re-homed or culled each year; the high costs of wild horse management; and the ongoing decline of the natural ecosystems.

Since 2002, the NPWS has removed more than 2600 horses from the Kosciuszko National Park through passive trapping, which is where horses voluntarily enter a yard. However, in the last three years, there was only enough community demand to re-home 36% (490 of 1360) of the horses that were trapped and removed. The remaining 870 horses were taken to an abattoir.

The latest scientific evidence suggests the population of wild horses in Kosciuszko National Park could grow by between 8 and 22% each year if left unchecked. As wild horses are an introduced species, there are few natural checks or limitations on their population growth. There is mounting evidence that this significant population increase is having damaging impacts on native flora, fauna and ecosystems within the park.

As the population grows, the problem of managing wild horses increases. More animals need to be trapped, removed and then rehomed or destroyed. In addition to the animal welfare concerns inherent in wild horse management, the diversion of resources away from other vital areas of conservation and management of the park will also have long term impacts.

The NPWS acknowledges that as with other introduced species, it is not possible to eradicate wild horses completely from the park. Instead it is imperative to strike the right balance in order to protect the unique landscape and native wildlife.

The Kosciuszko National Park horse trapping and removal program has cost in excess of \$2.8 million so far to remove 2600 horses. The cost per horse removed is more than \$1070.





Wild horses in Kosciuszko National Park. D. Isaacson/OEH

Limestone rock outcrop, Northern Kosciuszko National Park.
D. Isaacson/OEH



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 both present 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 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 public 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 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.



Pugging damage to fragile sub alpine peat soils caused by wild horses. Pilot Wilderness Area, Kosciuszko National Park
D. Isaacson/OEH