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Engagement Conclusions

Wild Horse Management Plan Review

28 March 2015

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1 Introduction

The management of wild horses in Kosciuszko National Park is a complex issue. It requires a well-considered approach which marries both the scientific evidence and community views, so that NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) is able to get the balance right between competing interests and needs, and effectively implement the plan over the coming years.

To assist with understanding the views of the community, Straight Talk was commissioned by NPWS to develop a communication and stakeholder engagement strategy, and a suite of engagement activities, to support the review of the Wild Horse Management Plan for Kosciuszko National Park. The objectives of the engagement strategy were to:

- Proactively and effectively engage with internal (NPWS) stakeholders, external stakeholders and the broader community
- Increase understanding about wild horse management in Kosciuszko National Park and why it is so important
- Allow nuanced and balanced discussions that consider the issue in all its complexity and build support for a balanced approach to wild horse management
- Ensure the broad range of views across the community are heard and captured, and limit the ability of any one stakeholder group to dominate public dialogue
- Contribute to the public discussion about wild horse management in such a way that the Wild Horse Management Plan can be effectively and successfully implemented.

The strategy was approved by the (then) Minister for the Environment and subsequently implemented through a range of engagement activities which were designed to effectively reach and involve both the general public and stakeholders who had a pre-existing interest and involvement in wild horse management issues, and whose views were already well-known to NPWS. Reports on the outcomes of these engagement activities are available elsewhere, see Appendix A for a listing of the relevant reports and associated documents.

The purpose of this report is to highlight some of the issues associated with the implementation of the engagement strategy and some of the key learnings about the engagement process, particularly as they relate to stakeholders.

2 Analysis

Promotion of engagement

The community engagement approach proposed to support the review of the Wild Horse Management Plan for Kosciuszko National Park was intended to ensure that mainstream community members had a voice on this important issue. This was particularly necessary because stakeholders with polarised views had long dominated both the public dialogue and policy debate about this issue. NPWS had already expended significant time and resources consulting with stakeholders, in particular horse advocates, and their views were well-known. Up until the point of this process limited consultation and engagement had been undertaken with the broader community, using the standard public exhibition processes for draft plans, and the views of the broader community were not known. Engagement activities which were designed to reach a large community audience and which required active and broad promotion included the Kitchen Table Discussion Guides and the 'Protecting the Snowies' engagement platform, as well as the second online survey.

Unfortunately, the engagement was compromised because approval was never given to actively promote the engagement with the broader community. Promotion was limited to emails to registered individuals, who were already engaging with NPWS on the issue, and to advising participants at stakeholder meetings about activities, many of whom where the same registered individuals . Consequently, the most active voices throughout the engagement were those of stakeholders whose views were already well-known, many of whom participated in multiple activities and whose views were captured multiple times.

The views of the broader community were obtained through focus groups, the initial online (panel) survey and the 21st century town hall meeting, and the outcomes of these activities indicated that community and stakeholder views are not aligned on this issue, although there is a closer alignment between the views of the community and environmental advocates than horse advocates.

Given this non-alignment of views the challenge now is to ensure that the views of the broader community are not lost amongst the loud and insistent voices of stakeholders.

Government announcement

It is disappointing to note that, prior to the completion of the analysis of the outcomes of the community and stakeholder engagement, and before a complete understanding of community views about the management of wild horses in Kosciuszko National Park were known, the NSW Government announced that aerial shooting and brumby running and roping would not be considered as potential population control methods in the review of the Wild Horse Management Plan for Kosciuszko National Park.

The engagement indicated that the community did support lethal control methods, including aerial shooting, when given accurate information about what they involve and time to reflect on the relative humaneness of different population control methods. Similarly, environmental advocates strongly supported lethal control methods, including aerial shooting. Brumby running and roping was not supported by the community or the majority of stakeholders.

Results also clearly indicated that the effectiveness of control methods was the most important consideration for community members, that community members value native flora and fauna in Kosciuszko National Park and support the effective protection of that flora and fauna by NPWS through the management of the wild horse population.

That being the case, should aerial shooting be found by the Independent Technical Reference Group to be an effective, and humane, control method, and the justification for controlling the wild horse population in Kosciuszko National Park be clearly articulated, it is possible to conclude that the use of aerial shooting would have community support.

Stakeholder engagement

Often with contentious issues some stakeholders become highly engaged, if not over-engaged, and this results in them wishing to 'own' the conversation and silence other views. In this instance, there are a number of over-engaged stakeholders with an interest in the management of wild horses in Kosciuszko National Park. Many of these stakeholders live within the local area which appears to have further increased their sense of ownership of this issue and their view that they hold the only legitimate opinions about it. Interestingly, both horse advocates and environmental advocates believe each other to have a greater level of power and influence with Government and NPWS on this issue.

It is important to note the wish to 'own' the conversation, because some of these over-engaged stakeholders have previously engaged in inappropriate and intimidatory behaviour towards those with alternate views. Environmental advocates in particular have felt threatened and intimidated by some of the tactics and past interactions they have had with some horse advocates, to the point that many are reluctant to speak up and express their opinions publicly.

Within this engagement process, inappropriate behaviour was demonstrated by some horse advocates - labelling on social media a specific NPWS officer a 'Nazi' and making personal attacks on the character of NPWS staff. The sale of bumper stickers that read "Aerial cull a greenie, save a Snowy brumby" can be viewed as intimidatory to both environmental advocates but also NPWS staff, given the claim made by horse advocates that NPWS staff are 'greenies' and NPWS is aligned with environmental stakeholder organisations. This is especially concerning given that many of the NPWS staff involved in this review live and work in close proximity to Kosciuszko National Park and have ongoing interactions with these over-engaged horse advocates within their local communities.

For many of these horse stakeholders there is also a complex history of government land management decisions and actions, such as the removal of high country grazing access, wilderness area declarations, and restrictions on recreational horse riding access, which have all created a sense that they have been displaced and disenfranchised by the declaration of the park. Fire, weeds, recreational access and other pest management practices, have also influenced their perceptions and motivations, and their relationships with the organisation. This history, their sense of ownership of the issue and the idea that theirs are the only credible views all impact on their engagement and interaction with NPWS on this issue. Their refusal to acknowledge the right of NPWS to publish factsheets about this issue, on the basis that they do not agree with the views being presented, is an example of this.

A key feature of the engagement with horse advocates during this process has also been their lack of acceptance of the evidence of damage being done to the park by wild horses and of wild horse

population numbers, and a demand that no changes be made to the plan (and in some cases no population control activities be undertaken) until evidence that meets their satisfaction is provided. This, along with the claim that NPWS are unfairly 'targeting' wild horses when there are other feral animal issues in the park that are being ignored (despite the range of feral animal and pest management plans and programs that apply to Kosciuszko National Park of which they would be aware), is a tactic to obfuscate the issue and avoid genuinely engaging on it.

The outcome of this is that a great deal of time has been spent consulting, and trying to gain agreement on some matters, with horse advocates. As a consequence, horse advocates have had significant influence on this issue and how NPWS conceives, discusses and promotes it. This has been at the expense of other views such as those of environment advocates, who believe they have not been given an opportunity to be involved in shaping how this issue is considered, and the broader community. The Government's decision to exclude aerial shooting from the revised management plan, a control method that is supported by environmental advocates and many community members, is an example of the undue influence horse advocates have had over the management of this issue.

Promoting NPWS's position

The results of the engagement process clearly indicated that although many people identified as being informed about the issue of wild horse management in Kosciuszko National Park they are in fact not as well informed as they believe. The level of knowledge that horses are feral animals in the native Australian environment and that they are causing damage to rare and threatened native flora and impacting on rare and threatened native fauna is also low amongst the broader community. This lack of knowledge may be accounted for by the fact that NPWS is not the main source of knowledge about this issue for the general public.

This is an important point because the outcomes of different engagement activities, for example the initial online (panel) survey and the 21st century town hall meeting, clearly indicate that, when given credible and accurate information about population control methods and the need to control the wild horse population, and the time to reflect on that information, community members will reassess their initial thoughts about the use of lethal control methods.

For community members to feel comfortable about the use of lethal control methods they need to know there is a legitimate reason for controlling population numbers, that there is an objective or goal for doing so, and that the methods that will be used are effective, and to a lesser extent humane. Community members expect NPWS to protect native flora and fauna in the park and the engagement activities clearly indicated that if there a trade-off between horses and native flora and fauna is necessary, they support the protection of the flora and fauna.

Creating a higher level of public awareness about the need to manage the wild horse population and about different population control methods and what they involve will be necessary to limit the impact of any emotive campaigns run by horse advocates against to use of effective population control and to ensure broad community support for effective population control.

3 Conclusions

The management of the review of the wild horse management plan, and the community and stakeholder engagement associated with it, is complex. Engaging and negotiating with stakeholders alone will not result in a successful long-term outcome. Listening to, educating and engaging with the broader community is also necessary.

As indicated in the Communication and Engagement Strategy, a 'whole of process' approach is required and the ongoing active management of this issue will be required throughout the review, public exhibition, approval and implementation phase. Seeking the support and public advocacy from credible, high profile individuals, providing accurate information and evidence for use by the media and keeping influencers and decision-makers informed will all be required. The engagement approach suggested in the strategy is still valid and is provided here as the model for the ongoing management of this issue:

Stage two – Public release of the draft amended Wild Horse Management Plan for comment and submissions (May - July 2015)

- Engage with all stakeholder groups to:
  - Keep them informed and involved in the process (ensure they remain 'in the tent')
  - Support the public release of the amended plan and encourage a reasoned public discussion about the issue (through their inclusion in the process)
  - Build on established stakeholder trust and the commitment to an ongoing, productive relationship with NPWS
  - Inform them of the scientific and technical advice of the established Independent Technical Reference Group and how it is reflected in the draft plan
- Engage with the wider community to:
  - Ensure those in the community that do not reflect special interests are heard and participate in the public comment and submission process
  - Continue to build momentum within the community for a more balanced approach
  - Inform them of the scientific and technical advice of the established Independent Technical Reference Group and how it is reflected in the draft plan
- Deployment of advocates supporting the NPWS position
- Engage with the Regional Advisory Committee and Advisory Council
- Briefing and support to the Minister's office and other points of attack by proponents of maintaining or increasing Kosciuszko National Park horse numbers
- Full social media campaign around 'Protecting the Snowies' rolling out social media packages around the key themes/messages
- Supporting media engagement around 'Protecting the Snowies' including the release of media packages around the key themes/messages
- Issues management and media handling advice based on stakeholder intelligence gathered through social media/media/engagement activity

- Gather and summarise data and information gained from stakeholders and wider community to help inform Stage three.

Stage three – Assessment of public comments/submissions and the approval of the amended Wild Horse Management Plan (August - September 2015)

- Engage with all stakeholder groups to:
  - Keep them informed about the process (ensure they remain 'in the tent')
  - Ensure they have confidence in the engagement process and understand their participation is valued
  - Maintain their commitment to maintaining an ongoing, productive relationship with NPWS
  - Report the outcomes of the review and how their input contributed to the final outcome
- Engage with the wider community to:
  - Continue to build momentum within the community for a more balanced approach
  - Report the outcomes of the review and how their input contributed to the final outcome
- Continued deployment of advocates for the NPWS position – in a second wave to address significant issues from opponents
- Briefing of the Regional Advisory Committee and Advisory Council
- Tactical responses to issues of significance – through targeted briefings, social and traditional media, release of fresh information
- Briefing and support to the Minister's office and other points of attack by proponents of maintaining or increasing Kosciuszko National Park horse numbers
- Monitoring of social media around the issue and response as needed
- Continued proactive social media around 'Protecting the Snowies"
- Prepare ground for reaction to approval of the Wild Horse Management Plan as some groups and individuals will continue to oppose any management or the management approaches endorsed within the final plan.

Stage four – Ongoing implementation of the Minister-approved Wild Horse Management Plan (until June 2019)

- Engage with all stakeholder groups to:
  - Keep them informed and involved where appropriate (ensure they remain 'in the tent')
  - Maintain their commitment to maintaining an ongoing, productive relationship with NPWS
  - Periodically report on the effectiveness of the new Wild Horse Management Plan and discuss issues relating to its implementation
- Engage with the wider community to:
  - Maintain a commitment within the community for a more balanced approach
  - Periodically report on the effectiveness of the new Wild Horse Management Plan and discuss issues relating to its implementation
- Prepare for possible 'breakouts' of opposition to the final plan – including staged images and incorrect information
- Monitor social media around the plan's implementation and respond as needed
- Continued proactive social media around 'Protecting the Snowies'

- Continued deployment of advocates for the NPWS position – in a second wave to address significant issues from opponents
- Reinforcement of the government decision makers in their support for the plan – do not rest or lapse into just focusing on implementation as the opposition will continue in some quarters.

4 Appendix A – Associated documents

Relevant documents and reports associated with the community and stakeholder engagement in support of the review of the Wild Horse Management Plan for Kosciuszko National Park are:

- Communications and engagement strategy
- Communications and engagement delivery plan
- Community engagement report
- Focus groups report
- Initial online questionnaire survey report
- 21st century town hall meeting report
- Kitchen table discussion guide report
- Online engagement report
- Second online questionnaire survey report.