

ASJ

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The political voice of the SSAA

Hunting in perspective

*Recreational hunting and
its place within Australia*

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The political voice
of the SSAA

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A word from the National President

Welcome to the special 'Hunting in perspective' edition of the *ASJ*. The information presented in this edition has been prepared by the SSAA to draw attention to hunting and its place within Australia.

In this 'plastic-wrapped' and sensitive world, where our meat is sourced, prepared and packaged for us by retailers and we do little more than drive to the local supermarket to buy our groceries, it is the hunter who still understands the relationship between the environment and ourselves. Those uninitiated with hunting often scorn the thought of harvesting a wild rabbit, deer or duck for the family dinner table, yet, they are happy to have others grow and 'process' their food for them. Hunters, on the other hand, *know* where their meat has come from and what it took to obtain it; they have educated themselves about the animal and its habitat.

Hunting is as old as human society and it is a denial of the historical truth to dismiss or outright reject it as a valid pastime. While it may no longer be necessary for all of us to hunt to obtain our food, there is an abundance of scientific evidence to suggest that recreational hunting provides many benefits.

Hunting has provided social, economic and environmental benefits in the past and will continue to do so in the future. It is a pastime that has been enjoyed by country- and city-based Australians alike. For many years, hunters have undertaken this activity knowing that each pest animal they take is one less to harm the environment and in doing so will reduce the pest animal's economic cost to society. Hunters also know that game species are better managed within an open season arrangement that guarantees the utilisation of a sustainable resource year after year when conditions allow.

The following research piece provides a snapshot of the history of sustainable hunting and the way hunters were and continue to be at the forefront of conservation well before it became 'fashionable' to mainstream society. Hunters lobby for the better and 'wiser' use of land. They cull pest animals and manage other species - something that has aided native animal populations much more than the 'protectionist' or 'lockout' viewpoint of people who do not support hunting or are not aware of its benefits.

Hunting and its place in society has always been questioned by minority groups with extreme animal rights views. Unfortunately, these groups don't respect the science of game management that

would safeguard sustainable populations of game species and protect other animals from predation and overpopulation. These minority groups prefer to push their extreme ideologies onto the ordinary citizen and mainstream animal welfare organisations. These groups demand a change in lifestyle and thinking that only suits *their* extreme beliefs. Such a position puts many animals at risk of having no value, which does little to protect an animal's future. An animal with no value in today's society is not treated as a resource and is destined to be mismanaged.

Hunters have a very proud history of maintaining sustainable populations of game species that they wish to utilise, as well as protecting other species from exotic animals. This has been demonstrated by the success of many wetland rescue and restoration projects undertaken by hunters and the joint pest animal control projects between state agencies and hunters on public lands across the country. Conservation hunting is a valuable pest management strategy where many thousands of volunteer hunters can get involved. The sheer size of this available resource should not be underestimated in terms of its potential impact on feral animals and its economic cost savings to society.

Unfortunately, this resource is not being used or valued enough by governments and there is a real need for a more coordinated approach across the nation. Some states are beginning to adopt new policies to use the hunter resource, but there is still much work to be done and some issues to be reviewed, such as allowing waterfowl to be destroyed as pests, instead of having a regulated hunting season in each state, to allow the legal use of the public resource for food. Most successful pest control programs attempt to use as many pest management strategies as they can within budget constraints because there is no single method of pest control that works on every pest animal. The use of low-cost volunteer conservation hunters, who freely offer their time and services, is one way to assure the success of a program, as well as resulting in additional social, environmental and economic benefits. ●

Bob Green



Hunting after the era of wildlife protectionism

For a long time, hunters have shown a keen interest in the hunting of game and the preservation of the environment that forms the habitat in which wildlife shelters and breeds. Around the world, wildlife in general has declined dramatically as a result of various human land uses with little regard to maintaining natural habitat. Wildlife in general has failed to benefit from a 'protectionist' ideology, which, at times, was forced upon many communities. The fundamental flaw of the 'protectionist' approach to managing wildlife is that it gives wildlife no economic value. In the past, this has opened the door to poachers and the illegal trade of the wildlife and its products. This mismanagement has led to the devastating decline of wild animal populations across the world, where both landholders and villagers displayed limited interest in something that had no economic value.

The 'protectionist' approach that caused the 'lockout' of many parks in Africa resulted in an opposite outcome to what was intended. That wildlife management strategy led to the reduction in numbers of many wildlife species it was supposed to protect. For instance, the black rhinoceros population fell from about 65,000 in 1970 to only 2500 by 1994.¹ Such a negative impact on the 'protected' black rhinoceros population surely illustrated that protectionism was the incorrect path to follow and a more valuable form of conservation would have come in the form of wildlife utilisation. This is a fact that the most ardent protectionist can no longer deny and ignore.



The 1980s saw Africa become a testing ground for new philosophies in practical conservation. The CAMPFIRE program initiated in Zimbabwe allowed people living in remote and poor communities to legally use wildlife for commercial and conservation gain. The introduction of trophy hunting into these areas created an avenue for substantial amounts of foreign money to flow into these mainly disadvantaged communities. The economic incentive created by so-called 'game ranching' caused landowners to reduce the level of exotic livestock, which made a heavy impact on the landscape, so native game herds could breed and re-establish populations. Animals such as the rhinoceros were then worth tens of thousands of dollars each as hunting trophies and their populations began to recover under the true protection of a new 'wise use' wildlife management regime.

In 1990, the General Assembly of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) agreed to a landmark resolution in regard to the conservation of wildlife through the 'wise use' of a renewable natural resource. This clearly indicated that protectionism was no longer seen as the solution and that 'wise use' management was the answer. The IUCN recognised that managed sustainable use of wildlife is a powerful incentive to retain wildlife habitat and also has the potential to undermine any illegal exploitation that can occur.

In Australia, there is unfortunately still a strong philosophy of protectionism among our policymakers. There

are signs that a shift in thinking is slowly spreading, particularly after a disturbing picture of our environmental performance was painted in the *1996 State of the Environment Report*. The report questioned the sustainability of land use in Australia and indicated that in many cases habitat destruction, the main cause of biodiversity loss, was still continuing at an alarming rate.

The *OECD Environmental Performance Review of Australia* in 1998 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development also reached similar conclusions regarding habitat loss. The OECD indicated that Australia's way of declaring reserves and making new laws to protect its wildlife did not achieve an adequate conservation outcome and that it needed to develop new creative mechanisms for conservation both inside and outside of these protected areas.

The OECD's latest report delivered in 2008 indicated that the overall conservation effort within Australia has not been proportional to the economic benefits derived through tourism and environmental services. Resources available for the management of a national reserve system have not increased at the same level as the expansion of protected areas.² Australia in general has still not got things right. Some of the reasons for this include the fact that policymakers haven't fully embraced 'wise use' wildlife management principles and they have also failed to appreciate hunters as a valuable conservation resource. >

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The introduction of trophy hunting into disadvantaged areas in Africa created an avenue for substantial amounts of foreign money to flow in. Photo by Viv Moon.

Hunters value habitat

Recreational hunters have been concerned about the environment and the effects of habitat loss on wildlife populations in Australia for a long time. Long before the term 'conservation' became 'sexy' in the wider community, wild duck hunters were calling for the end of wetland destruction. In the past, the destruction of wetlands was usually sanctioned by governments to turn what was previously perceived as 'wastelands' into productive agricultural land. As a result of such destruction, there are wetlands found in agricultural areas across the country that are only there due to intense lobbying by duck-hunting groups. Duck hunters were one of only a few groups of people to put a value on these so-called 'wastelands'. These wetlands, in fact, offered a high conservation value and provided habitat and breeding areas that supported the populations of hundreds of different species of birds and other animals.

One such example can be found in the South-East of South Australia. One of the most remarkable wetland systems in South Australia was almost entirely destroyed under state government approval. The wetland system stretched from the Victorian border to Lake Alexandrina in the lower lakes of the Murray River. Most of this vast wetland was located between the multiple ridges of a stranded ancient dune system that formed as a result of a receding coastline over many thousands of years. The dunes ran parallel to the coast for many kilometres and this prevented any rainfall in the area from running directly off into the sea. The form of the landscape allowed winter rains to form shallow water lagoons in the swales between the ridges of the dune system that would stretch as far as the eye could see. In summer, the water would recede as rainfall decreased, leaving remnant areas of deeper lagoons that provided refuge for countless waterbirds.

The establishment of the South Eastern Drainage Board coincided with the beginning of the government-sanctioned systematic destruction of this vast wetland system. By the early 1970s, 90 per cent of the wetlands in the area were destroyed. Duck hunters became very alarmed over the destruction of habitat they had seen occurring in the area. When duck hunters discovered that the wetland complex known as Bool Lagoon was scheduled to be destroyed, they lobbied strongly with the assistance of other conservation groups and the wetland was spared. This wetland is now listed as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention due to its outstanding habitat for a range of waterbirds.

The lesson from these past events is not so much about the destruction of this and other precious wetlands, it's more about the motivation that conserved them. It was the tangible value that duck hunters put on Bool Lagoon that formed the most persuasive argument for its protection against destruction. If hunters add value to areas normally perceived as 'wastelands' and assist in practical management, habitat restoration and protection of the environment, why does it seem that in these current times hunters are not valued enough by governments? Why does it also seem that Australia doesn't have a coordinated policy on recreational hunting when examples from overseas and even here show the benefits of wildlife utilisation as a powerful conservation tool? Are governments being confused by the ideology of extreme animal welfare groups who say they represent the public when they really don't? The conservation of animals and their habitat is a complex issue, which needs to be addressed with all the tools available. There is no doubt that hunters are a key tool that should be included in the toolbox.

Hunting and its place in society

At times, it seems as though Australia as a nation is unable to decide whether recreational hunting has a place in our society. This is quite a puzzling situation, particularly when you compare the important social, economic and conservation outcomes that have been achieved both overseas and locally due to hunting. We as a nation are unfortunately missing out on the full benefits of what coordinated hunting policy could bring by having inconsistent government policy at state level. Our society should be using all its talents and strengths to diversify our rural economy, especially in this current economic climate, and advance our efforts in nature conservation.

Listening to extreme animal rights ideology provides no practical conservation gains or solutions; nor does it increase the economic value of wildlife, which is essential in today's world to maintain its survival. No matter what is said by animal rights groups regarding the placing of a monetary value on an animal (ie, it's unethical to treat animals as property with a dollar value), the fact of the matter is, we all live in a financially driven world and nothing short of life as we know it ending, will change it. The best way to work the system is to implement practical conservation measures, not to exclude them.

Respected vertebrate ecologist Dr David Carter¹ has indicated that our disordered national thinking is best displayed by the management of our native waterfowl hunting. Duck hunting has for some time been on the frontline of a battle involving the extreme animal rights movement, who seek to have all forms of recreational hunting banned. This makes legal duck hunting a key issue for all hunters and not just those who participate in it.

Duck hunting has and should continue to be permitted in accordance with the scientifically sound and proven principles of game management. Licensed hunters should only be able to hunt during an open season after birds have completed their breeding cycle. This normally coincides with a period of high natural mortality of a 'surplus' population, where harsh climatic conditions cause waterbirds to die. There are millions of birds from this 'surplus' population that are subjected to and die naturally through starvation, predation, disease, exposure and injury. The decision by a number of states to ignore the sound principles of game management and ban a regulated season makes no scientific sense. Hunters always ensure that they despatch their quarry as soon as possible. Unfortunately, nature is not so kind and this is a fact that animal rights activists fail to acknowledge.

Western Australia, New South Wales and Queensland no longer permit recreational hunting of ducks, but are nevertheless happy to permit the destruction of them as pests. This is a truly dysfunctional approach, which makes no sense and is just plain stupid in terms of wildlife management.

Such policies practically treat our native species as worthless pests, instead of the valuable native resources that they are. These policies fail the principles of game management, particularly when viewed in the current New South Wales context. The New South Wales Government has introduced a regulatory authority known as the Game Council New South Wales (where conservation hunters are being utilised for feral animal control within its parks and forests and private land) to manage hunting

in that state. Under this management regime, wild ducks are culled via a 'duck mitigation' system because there is no regulated duck season. Culling is conducted without a set bag limit on the number of ducks that can be taken.

This so-called 'duck mitigation' can occur throughout the breeding season when the rice crop is at its most vulnerable. In terms of game management, destroying ducks during their breeding cycle cannot be viewed or classified as a 'wise use'. Instead of being able to legally take ducks at a time of natural population surplus prior to the natural population decline, these current policies allow culling at a time when the population could be at its lowest. This is an opportune time to target a pest animal that you are trying to eradicate, but surely not a valuable native resource such as wild duck. This type of approach is definitely not an ideal example of sustainable management.

If the calls for banning duck seasons were about potential negative impacts that duck hunting may have on duck populations, then the 'no-season' policy of the New South Wales and other state governments has the potential to do what all regulated duck seasons do not; that is, cause a potential negative impact on duck populations. In terms of animal welfare, this no-season policy opens up the possibility of adult birds being culled, leaving dependent young ones in nests to suffer a slow death through starvation. This is something that would not happen during a normal regulated open season.

Without funds raised through hunting permits, the resources required to enforce each state's wildlife laws become more limited. This is one of the most basic economic advantages of having managed game bird seasons. Fees provide funds to resource the enforcement of current wildlife regulations and conservation work.

Hunters always ensure that they despatch their quarry as soon as possible. Unfortunately, nature is not so kind...

To add further dysfunction to the way governments handle hunting, there are laws that permit Aboriginal people to hunt a wide range of native species, which include species that are deemed rare and even threatened. Aboriginal people are also permitted to hunt in some national parks. Could permitting one group of people to hunt game and not another be deemed as a case of double standards? Why can't a licensed hunter go out and legally harvest their own kangaroo or emu steaks? Why does a person with the skills to harvest and butcher their own meat need to legally obtain it only from the shop?

In 1998, the Australian Senate agreed to a confusing motion calling on 'all state and territory governments to ban the cruel and environmentally damaging practice of duck hunting'. This motion was moved by an Australian Democrat Senator and was supported by Australian Labor Party Senators. This led to the production of a report into the commercial use of wildlife three months later, where a Senate Committee then 'backflipped' to recognise and acknowledge the benefits of hunting. The committee described

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how hunting has considerable potential to achieve conservation objectives, particularly in areas of perceived low economic value such as swamps and wetlands. This contradiction was not at all surprising because the majority of those politicians sitting in the Senate who first supported the motion are like many others in Australia's 'urbanised' community - poorly informed regarding the facts surrounding the issues and the real positive relationship between conservation, game management and hunting.

Unfortunately, the concept of hunting if viewed superficially can be shocking to naïve people, where an emotional reaction may prompt them to moralise the activity and seek prohibition as a consequence. If the same people were to examine the subject fully, they would gain and shape a more balanced understanding of all the issues in their mind. The result of such a deeper examination would be an appreciation of the fact that it would be a far more sensible policy to permit and manage hunting rather than prohibiting it. A deeper examination will enable the full appreciation of the hunter's perspective, as well as understanding the wider benefits to society and conservation.

The ultimate question is, however, is it right or wrong to hunt? This is one that needs careful consideration. As discussed previously, under the principles of game management, regulated hunting will never cause the decline or extinction of a game species. Scientifically, regulated hunting has more benefits than negatives and on this level, it not wrong to hunt. Morally, this question is exploited by animal rights groups at an emotive level.

Extreme animal rights groups such as Animal Liberation are founded on a philosophy that sentient beings (animals) should be treated according to the same ethical standards applied to humans and in some cases, people are deemed inferior. This philosophy basically means that because it's not ethical to eat humans, you should not eat animals. Unless you are a canvas-shoe-wearing vegan and only buy products not tested on animals, you are very much living an unethical life according to them. These groups make the point that it's not possible to eat meat or use leather products without causing pain and suffering of some degree to animals. This not only applies to hunting, but also intensive farming and laboratory animals. The banning of hunting is the tip of the iceberg for these groups. Activities such as fishing, sports involving animals such as horse racing and rodeo, and livestock farming are also attacked as being unethical and should be banned in their eyes.



Wetlands found in agricultural areas across Australia are only there due to intense lobbying by duck-hunting groups. Photo by Damien Edwards.

Such a philosophy has some very obvious holes in its reasoning. Unfortunately, when put under the microscope, the question does arise. How can *they* be ethical by their own standards, when they live in a house or eat food from crops? The land cleared for their houses has destroyed habitat, which, in effect, has killed or at least caused wildlife to suffer. Large areas of habitat have also been cleared to make way for the plant crops they eat. This too has resulted in the death and suffering of wildlife. Pest animals are killed in their millions to protect the food crops they are eating because there is no other commercially viable alternative. Do animal liberationists own or drive cars? Hopefully, they do not because cars are responsible for countless thousands of animal deaths and injuries every day, not to mention the damage caused by the pollution they emit. This would be just plain 'unethical'.

Why can't a licensed hunter go out and legally harvest their own kangaroo or emu steaks? Why does a person with the skills to harvest and butcher their own meat need to legally obtain it only from the shop?

Animal welfare groups in their opposition to hunting have always raised the issue of wounding. This fact cannot be denied because, on some occasions, a hunter may not despatch an animal instantaneously or it may not be able to be retrieved. Depending on the nature of the wound, a target animal may die soon after being shot, it may suffer a short time before dying or it may actually recover to be able to function almost normally. Although these outcomes may seem unpleasant to some, the fact is that wild game animals live the ultimate free-range existence where they are largely unaffected by people. However, nature is cruel and natural causes of death including starvation, disease, illness, predation, exposure and injuries can be quiet unpleasant.

Dr Carter suggests that evidence from duck rescues by animal liberationists indicate the majority of ducks hunted die quickly. Most hunters seek to develop the skills necessary to hunt in an ethical manner so to reduce the likelihood of wounding and losing game. The ethical hunter of today is aware of their obligations and will seek to minimise any suffering of an animal as a priority. This awareness to animal welfare issues when hunting should be viewed in the same context of that displayed by livestock producers and farmers. Animals that are bred to be slaughtered will ultimately suffer to some degree during the field-to-plate process, but ethical animal production seeks to minimise the suffering of these animals. This process is viewed as quite acceptable to mainstream society. Harvesting wild free-range food such as a wild duck, rabbit, goat, deer and even kangaroo should also be viewed as acceptable by mainstream society. Each process has the potential to cause some degree of suffering to an animal because it can be unavoidable at times, but those involved in the process endeavour to eliminate or minimise suffering. To accept commercial meat production and eat meat from a shop or restaurant, but not accept the harvesting of game through hunting is completely hypocritical.



Regulated hunting should be legally permitted for those who choose to partake in it. Photo by John McDougall.

Hunting policy issues

When it comes to making policies relating to hunting, what should governments do? The first thing should be to avoid policies based around extreme animal rights views. To prohibit something based on extreme ideology is just plainly not fair and when there's a wealth of scientific research to support hunting, then it would be just plain stupid.

In the case of hunting, the issues surrounding the activity are too complex to be addressed by the simple 'just ban it' mentality. A study by Bennett and Whitten³ into the costs and benefits to society of duck hunting concluded that a deep examination of the issues is required. Apart from identifying the benefits to hunters and the costs of hunting on the wider community, the benefits of greater wetland protection and the protection of protected species must be recognised. When examined in this manner, evidence supports the notion that duck hunting improves the well-being of society.

The New South Wales recreational duck season was banned after a private members bill was introduced in Parliament by self-professed animal liberationist Richard Jones MLC in 1995. Although the state government at the time had indicated to the hunting fraternity that it was not interested in such a bill, it unfortunately backflipped and gave it support in what many saw as a political compromise for support on other issues. As expected, the few that pushed animal liberationist ideology used emotive arguments instead of facts to make a point and in doing so, disregarded the need to make an assessment based on all the related complex issues. Proper game management was the victim of 'legislation by ambush' where Legislative Council members were not given much time to consider the legislation or fully understand its ramifications.⁴

On the issue of duck hunting, the state and territory governments of South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania and the Northern Territory have held strong to their game management policies under increasing pressure from animal rights groups. When conditions are favourable, they still allow a regulated open season where both conservation and economic benefits are the result of hunter fees and the money hunters spend in the process of bagging a few ducks for the table. The governments of Australia must continue to develop fair and inclusive policies in regard to hunting. The moral question of whether hunting is right or wrong is ultimately unresolvable because of the two extremes in viewpoint between those who desire to hunt and those pushing animal liberation ideologies.

To hunt or not hunt is a matter of choice based on personal beliefs or preference and it should be left as that. Regulated hunting should be legally permitted for those who choose to partake in it. Like fishing, it's not for everyone and nor should a single viewpoint prevent many from participating in it. Fishing is now more popular than hunting and there would be a loud outcry if fishing was banned. Many fishers have shown their disgust at the thought of being excluded from areas destined to be declared marine parks. Such parks will have regulations that dictate the type of activities allowed in them, which may result in preventing people from fishing. Do not think for one minute that fishing is safe from the ridiculous ideologies of extreme animal rights movement. Animal activists want fishing banned too and will quickly start lobbying to achieve this once their efforts on hunting are not required any more. The government must ensure that they make policies that provide maximum benefit to society when dealing with the management of commonly owned resources such as wildlife.

Effective hunting policy design

Dr Carter also expresses the view that it would be rare that any policy, particularly those on wildlife management issues, would satisfy everyone. Simplistic or extreme policies such as prohibition will not work and only those that fully recognise the complexity of the subject and incorporate the full range of issues can be seen as effective policy. Australia should have a coordinated national policy on recreational hunting and as identified by Dr Carter, it should include the following elements.

- Recognise that properly managed recreational hunting is an appropriate use of Australian native and exotic game animals.
- Acknowledge that recreational hunters are a motivated force that have been behind practical conservation for many years and therefore should be an integral part of any national approach to biodiversity conservation.
- Outline our country's responsibilities in assisting international wildlife conservation by allowing Australian hunters to import trophies and products obtained on overseas hunting trips in accordance with Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) resolutions. This should also allow the export of similar items obtained here by overseas hunters participating in hunting safaris.
- Encourage recreational hunters to participate in the management of certain public lands and water bodies in which opportunities for managed hunting would be available.
- Support both private and Aboriginal landowners who would like to conserve wildlife on their properties and at the same time receive some economic benefit by entering into arrangements with recreational hunters.

- Support the acquisition of land by both individual hunters and syndicates of hunters where managed wildlife habitat is used for recreational hunting.
- Facilitate a role for recreational hunters to use their skills and contribute to pest animal management and enable Aboriginal people to re-establish their hunting practices.

By putting these elements into policy, governments can embrace the concept of sustainable use of wildlife to achieve a conservation benefit.

The Ecological Society of Australia (ESA) supports the practice of sustainable wildlife use where populations of wildlife species can be regularly harvested within the capacity of the species to provide both economic and conservation benefit.⁵ The ESA's view is based on integrated ecological ethic, rather than an anthropocentric, animal liberationist or monoculture ethic in regard to the environment. This approach displays the use of science as the foundation to any decision that is true to the principles of wildlife management.

Apart from government policies based solely on game animals, the call to develop new approaches in regard to the conservation of other wildlife species is becoming much louder and clearer. For this to occur, there will need to be an emphasis put on developing policies that permit a variety of land uses for economic, social, cultural and recreational reasons. This will enable the development and recovery of diverse landscapes that conserve native wildlife and maintain biodiversity. Biological diversity can only be conserved by ensuring landscapes and habitats hold a diverse range of species. People hold the strongest influence over the composition of landscapes and the habitats on their properties. The modifications that they do on their land as a result of the land use undertaken will either affect biodiversity in a positive or negative way.



Australia should recognise that properly managed recreational hunting is an appropriate use of Australian native and exotic game animals. Photo by Tim Blackwell.

Kangaroo should be available on the hunter's menu

Many respected scientists such as 2007 Australian of the Year Dr Tim Flannery have called for the consumption of more native wildlife such as kangaroos, possums and emus to decrease the impact on our natural systems caused by the production of exotic livestock animals.⁶ Although the thought of using the national 'Coat of Arms' as a food source may upset some people, the fact of the matter is that these animals have adapted to and thrive in our natural systems, especially with the introduction of water points.⁷

Kangaroos (and some other native animals) are currently utilised by commercial hunters for meat and hides under a quota system. The quotas are based on a scientifically estimated yield and represent the upper harvest limit independent of industry demand.⁸ This approach clearly displays evidence of sustainable use principles. Rarely is this quota fully achieved by the actual total commercial harvest. In 2007, the total commercial harvest quota for all species of acceptable kangaroos was 3,738,982. The actual number of kangaroos harvested was only 2,986,470.⁹

One must pose the question, if kangaroos can be taken by commercial entities for profit, why isn't there opportunity for a personal consumptive harvest? Why can't part of the quota be offered to a recreational hunter who would like to go out and bag a kangaroo or wallaby for the table? These questions make sense, particularly when Ross Garnaut, the Australian Government's chief climate change advisor, insisted that Australians should think about replacing beef and lamb on the dinner table with kangaroo.¹⁰ In current economic times, the cost of food is forever increasing and this certainly leads to another question: why is it necessary to pay a premium to obtain commercially harvested food when a person with the skills and desire can acquire it themselves?

Landowners across the Australian rangelands would surely benefit economically by allowing recreational hunters access to their properties to harvest a specified quota of kangaroo and wallaby. The environmental and conservation benefits of reducing the level of exotic livestock in response to increasing native stock have already been discussed. The management needs of such a proposal would not be complicated. The foundations of such a scheme have already been laid within the framework of the existing commercial harvest quota system and would only require the recreational hunter harvest to be taken into account and managed.

A simple tag system for recreational harvest should be introduced. This could be as easy as distributing a set number of tags determined by yearly quota calculations and estimates to landowners within a specific region. Landowners would then be allowed to sell them to hunters. Such a proposal would certainly incorporate the principles of the sustainable use of wildlife. To offset any issues regarding animal welfare, the regulations surrounding a recreational harvest would incorporate the current Code of Practice for the Humane Shooting of Kangaroos. This is a national code, which all current harvesting activities must be conducted under. The harvesting of kangaroos under this code is considered one of the most humane forms of animal harvesting. The animal is killed instantly within its own environment and that creates less stress compared to domestic stock that have been herded, penned and transported prior to commercial slaughter.¹¹

There is increasing evidence to suggest that Australians should eat more kangaroo. Photo by Dick Eussen.



Hunting in perspective

Hunting and its role in pest management

Hunting involving ground shooting is one of many methods used for pest management across the country. The introduction of exotic animals into the landscape and the subsequent need to control some of their populations has created an important role for the 'conservation hunter'. The conservation hunter is willing to do something practical about conservation by targeting pest animals that are having an impact on both native flora and fauna. Many hunters go out individually or in groups to target feral animal species such as rabbits, foxes, cats, goats and pigs. Although it is rewarding in some cases to bring back some food for the table, it is certainly also rewarding to know that the hunter has prevented environmental damage caused by these pest animals.

To be a well-educated conservation hunter, it is necessary to know as much as possible about the targeted pest animals and their impacts. Self-directed education regarding a particular species also increases the chances of hunting success. Gaining knowledge about a species and its impacts can be especially important when a hunter may need to discuss their hunting activities in public and provide a credible argument as to why a particular species should be controlled. Organisations such as the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia provide their members access to education programs and materials.

The key thing to remember about the majority of pest species is that they normally have high reproductive rates and can establish populations rapidly. For populations to remain at levels that have minimal impacts on both native fauna and flora, it is necessary to apply continual downward pressure on the pest animal population. It's quite safe to say that the public purse is not bottomless and the reality is that governments and their agencies cannot fund all of the necessary control activities in every region across the country. It would certainly seem odd for governments not to utilise the 'free' resource that the conservation hunter across Australia can provide.

The New South Wales Government's establishment of the Game Council New South Wales under the *Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002*, provides an example where an Australian state government has made the decision to "harness the efforts of licensed, accredited hunters to assist in the reduction of some of the nation's worst pests such as pigs, goats, foxes and rabbits".¹² This model and example of large-scale government-sanctioned hunting on public land may not be suitable in every state, but it is surely a start and a step in the right direction for New South Wales. The Game Council's objectives are: to provide for the effective management of introduced species of game animals; and provide responsible and orderly hunting of those game animals on public and private land, and of certain species of pest animals on public land. These objectives seem to sit well with the needs of the hunter, government and the environment. The key results of the establishment of the Game Council are: increased opportunities for recreational hunters to hunt; the outsourcing of pest management to a low cost alternative (volunteers) to reduce costs to taxpayers; and the reduction of pest animal populations that negatively have an impact on native fauna and flora. This displays a positive outcome for all sides, a real win-win situation.

Will this system work in all states? This is certainly a difficult question to answer. One thing to consider is the different way

each state manages its park systems. There are different classifications in parks in every state. South Australia, for instance, has conservation reserves, conservation parks, game reserves, national parks, recreation parks, regional reserves and wilderness protection areas.¹³ Victoria has national parks, wilderness parks, state parks, metropolitan parks, regional parks, nature conservation reserves, natural features reserves, bushland reserves, coastal parks, coastal reserves, wildlife reserves, wildlife management cooperative areas and historic reserves.¹⁴ Western Australia has national parks, conservation parks, nature reserves, marine parks and state forests.¹⁵ The Northern Territory has nature parks, coastal reserves, national parks, recreation parks, hunting reserves and recreational areas.¹⁶ Queensland has national parks, recreation areas, conservation parks, forest reserves, marine parks and state forests.¹⁷ Tasmania has national parks, world heritage areas, marine reserves, conservation areas, nature reserves, nature recreation areas, state reserves and game reserves.¹⁸

To be a well-educated conservation hunter, it is necessary to know as much as possible about the targeted pest animals and their impacts.

There have been many cases of organised hunting on private land under some sort of agreement or game management plan. Many hunting organisations including the SSAA have formed arrangements with both private and public bodies to control pest animals and undertake conservation activities. State authorities are slowly seeing the light and becoming aware of the benefits of managed hunting.

Ground shooting is one of many methods used for pest management across Australia. Photo by Patrick Kerin.





The introduction of exotic animals into the landscape and the subsequent need to control some of their populations has created an important role for the 'conservation hunter'.
Photo by Anton Jurasovic.

In November 2005, the Commonwealth Government House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry tabled its report on the impacts on agriculture of pest animals. *Taking control: A national approach to pest animals*¹⁹ included a section discussing Tasmanian Property Based Game Management Plans (PBGMP). These PBGMPs were part of a Tasmanian program aimed at managing game species that have acquired pest status for hunting. PBGMPs are written plans that are developed and implemented by private landholders with the assistance of Tasmanian Game Management Services Unit (TGMSU) to provide a basis for hunters to hunt pest animals on properties. It was identified that this type of approach assisted landholders in managing pest animal problems on their land, while, at the same time, providing an opportunity for an additional source of income. Income was derived through payments by hunters in return for the opportunity to hunt. These programs also provided the opportunity for organised hunting and sporting organisations to be involved in pest animal control projects.

At the time of compiling the report in 2005, the Tasmanian Government, through the TGMSU, had already helped implement plans for more than 500 properties covering 1.5 million hectares.

These plans provided a platform for regulated hunting to take place where rules were set and observed by hunters participating in pest management activities. The Standing Committee indicated that it was impressed by the success of the Tasmanian model, which involved private hunters helping to reduce pest animal numbers. The committee also proposed that the possibilities of expanding this program further throughout mainland Australia should be explored.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment in Victoria is now working in partnership with hunting organisations to develop their own property-based game management project that will operate on privately owned land. Property owners have been requested to register interest to become a PBGMP property. By doing so, they will gain access to expert advice on management practices that can have the potential to increase the number of game species on their properties, provide access to resources to reduce the impact of pest animals and create an additional income source. The three main objectives of the PBGMP project are to: increase biodiversity across the Victorian landscape; provide opportunity for the farming community to manage game animals on their property for reward; and increase hunting opportunities for licensed hunters. >

Hunting in perspective

Conservation hunting in parks

As discussed, each state runs a representative park system that provides a different level of recreational access, conservation status and protection. Both Tasmania and South Australia operate dedicated game reserves and the Northern Territory has hunting reserves, which allow the hunting of waterfowl during an open season.

Groups such as the SSAA's Hunting & Conservation (H&C) and Conservation & Pest Management (CPM) have gained hunting access to different types of parks across the country as part of organised pest animal control programs run in conjunction with park agencies. The next step for states outside of New South Wales is to develop policy framework similar to PBGMP projects, which allow further utilisation of the conservation hunter resource. Such a direction will allow hunting pressure to be applied to pest animals on an ongoing basis, which can maintain a constant intensity and frequency level to achieve results. Conservation hunters will provide constant pressure on pest animals at limited cost to the taxpayer.

Safety is the key issue in any management plan and as demonstrated by the Game Council New South Wales model, hunting in public parks and forests is conducted safely. The number of hunters in parks at any one time is limited, depending on the size of the park or forest. Numbers are determined and when hunters book a hunt, the online system in place only allows for a predetermined number of permits to be available for any particular park. Additional safety measures include that all common entrances provide notification by way of signage to indicate that conservation hunting may be taking place.

Educating the public is the key to accepting these programs. The public must be provided with information, so they can understand the importance of conservation hunting and realise that

being in the same park as hunter does not lead to an increased chance of harm. Those who are aligned to gun control and extreme animal rights groups have in the past and will certainly continue to in the future lobby against regulated hunting on public lands. These groups will try to use emotive statements to scare people into thinking that there is a risk of being shot if they enter parks that allow conservation hunting. The unsupported emotional ranting and raving of these groups must not take precedence to the importance of conservation outcomes. Unfortunately, these groups aren't out in the parks every night 'rescuing' native animals from predators such as feral cats and foxes, so, in a conservation sense, these groups are unhelpful, irrelevant and actually hamper practical efforts to improve the situation.

The public must be provided with information, so they can understand the importance of conservation hunting...

There are thousands of willing hunters out there keen to do their bit for conservation. It's certainly up to each state government to look at what has been introduced in other states and then endeavour to work out how they can best utilise the conservation hunter resource that they have present in their particular state. It is understandable that not every park would be suitable for conservation hunting. Parks close to metropolitan areas may be too problematic with the number of people that use them. However, in saying that, money saved by 'outsourcing' pest animal control to conservation hunters in other areas can be redirected to these unsuitable locations. Depending on a state's individual policy design, certain situations may allow for the incorporation of a small conservation hunting registration fee to participate in hunting in parks. This sort of arrangement should only be made in consultation with hunting organisations in that state to assess the appropriateness of such a fee being applied. This could also provide additional funding for pest management and cover the costs involved in the administration of such programs.

Public participation in all facets of conservation work is good for society in general. It develops a certain level of community empowerment, which results in many economic, environmental and social benefits to society. Just like the volunteer planting a tree in a revegetation project, the conservation hunter should feel the same level of satisfaction knowing that they have prevented a pest animal from destroying the habitat that others may have regenerated or in many cases, prevented the killing of native species. Commonsense should prevail and the general public should see through the one-dimensional views that surround many animal rights groups. Conservation hunting is a useful tool for environmental management of Australia's natural resources. Once all of the facts have been reviewed and then all of the relevant issues have been brought to the table and discussed, informed decisions can be made resulting in many conservation, economic and social benefits. ●



The conservation hunter is willing to do something practical about conservation by targeting pest animals that are having an impact on both native flora and fauna. Photo by Brad Hook.

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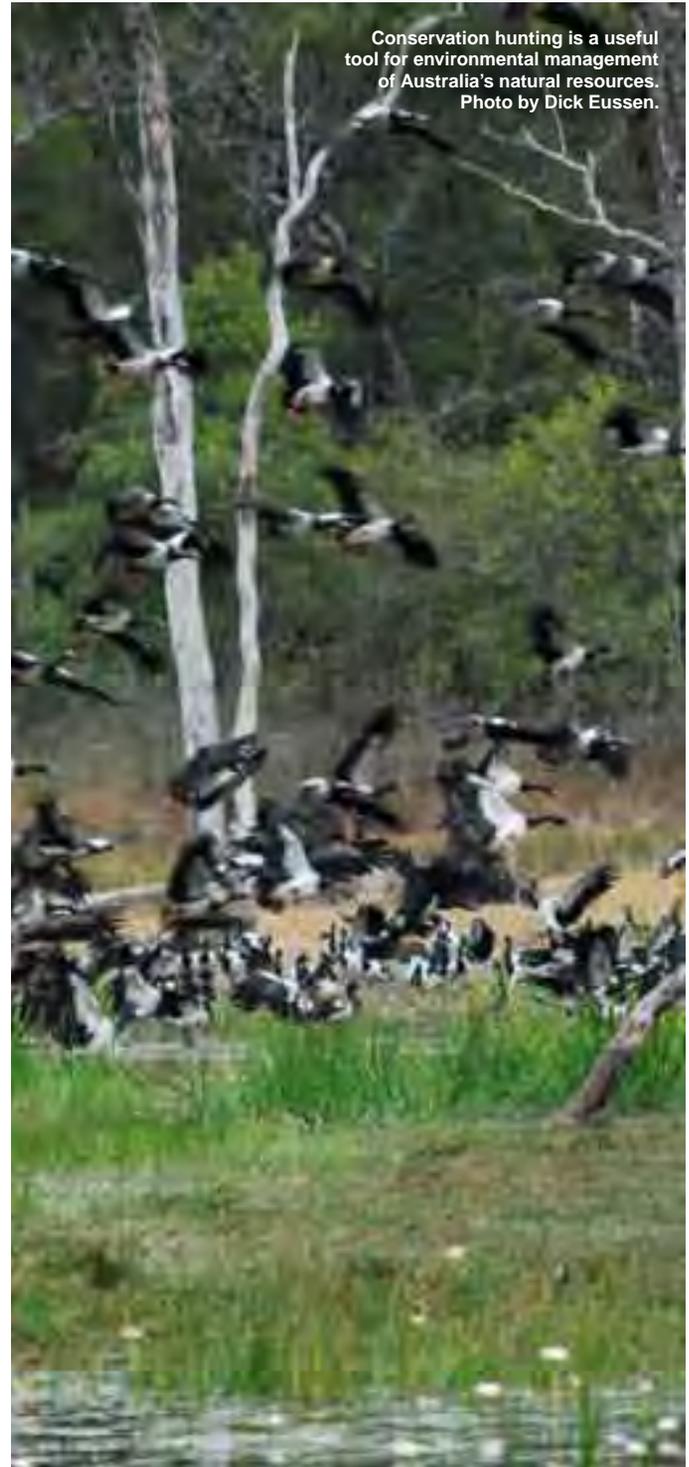
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Conservation hunting is a useful tool for environmental management of Australia's natural resources. Photo by Dick Eussen.

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