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AUSTRALIAN SHOOTERS JOURNAL

The political voice of the SSAA

Heart
of the hunter

**Facts about crippling and
wounding rates in waterfowl**

**The changing
face of hunting
in Australia**

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of the SSAA

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The changing face of hunting in Australia

by the SSAA National Research Team

Red Deer Research Project members provide much-needed volunteer labour and field assistance.

Recreational hunting in Australia is a legitimate pastime involving people of all ages on both private property and on government land as permitted. These hunters provide direct and indirect social, economic and environmental benefit to communities across the country.¹

Australian hunters are perhaps in a unique position of being unable to hunt any of their native animals; instead, only those that were introduced with European settlement are permitted. Hunting regulations vary between all Australian states and territories and focuses on different pest animal problems and game animals, depending on population numbers and the climate. Rabbits, foxes, cats and pigs are among the species generally classified as a 'feral' or 'pest' and can be hunted at any time, while species such as deer, duck, quail and pheasant are often the subject of a specified open season with limits applied to individual hunters.

Hunting is often a controversial issue in Australia, especially in the political arena, with anti-hunting groups and political parties often fuelling the debate. However, the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia (SSAA) is working to spread a more educated and balanced message about the value of hunting as a conservation tool, as well as hunting for the table as being a

legitimate and positive activity, the same as fishing.² In late 2009, the SSAA began a national campaign³ promoting this message and encouraging people to recognise that hunting can be part of the solution to managing problems where wildlife and the surrounding environment may be at odds.

This chapter will examine hunting in Australia. It will look at the current situation for hunters across all states and territories and the SSAA's initiatives to gain acceptance of hunting as a recreational pastime and useful tool in maintaining a balanced ecosystem.

Hunting in Australia

Hunting in Australia is as diverse as its unique landscapes. Australian hunters have many species available to hunt, ranging from small-game birds such as stubble quail to large-bodied exotic species such as water-buffalo. The status, perception and management of these species differ immensely across the country. Some species are viewed by government authorities, wildlife professionals, hunters and the general public as simply pests, while other species are valuable game resources.

The changing face of hunting in Australia

The difference in which a species status is viewed is one of the main reasons Australia is seen as having a dysfunctional game and wildlife management regime. The way in which the status of many native and introduced species is perceived creates division within the ranks of hunters, wildlife professionals and the community at large. This is most evident when individual views and acceptance of a particular species clash and cause conflict between individuals and groups.

All Australian states and territories manage their native and introduced wildlife differently. In South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania for example, government wildlife authorities continue to proclaim and manage sustainable recreational harvests of game birds such as duck and quail through managed and regulated hunting seasons. The other states and territories may no longer proclaim an official hunting season, but they do still permit the culling of ducks under 'pest mitigation' permits and programs. This is a clear example of the one state managing the species as a resource and the other as a pest.

This differential management regime on the national scale often leads to political debate. Many anti-hunting groups commonly declare that the hunting or shooting of ducks is banned in the states without a managed and regulated recreational harvest.⁴ The shooting of ducks is indeed continuing but under a different name - pest mitigation. Anti-hunting groups constantly make an oversight of this fact while trying to influence public opinion by using the states that are, unfortunately, without a managed and regulated recreational harvest as a reason to ban duck hunting in their particular state or territory.

Australia's dysfunctional approach to hunting, duck management and other game species across the country has allowed

valued resources to be managed and treated as pests instead of a sustainable recreational food and economic resource. Although most animal rights groups would disagree, one of the best ways to preserve and maintain a population of any species is to put an economic value on it. An animal with no value to the local community is one that is not looked after and is often viewed negatively if it impacts the local community in some way. In countries such as Namibia, for instance, sustainable wildlife use through the development of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) programs provide many economic and social benefits to the local community, ensuring they are valued.⁵

The lessons learned from African countries, where countless populations of endangered species have been brought back from the brink of extinction, are invaluable. On many occasions, the survival of the population simply came down to how the local communities viewed the species. Once the community began to value the animal as an economic and social resource, they no longer viewed it as a crop-eating or livestock-killing pest. Sustainable utilisation was a new paradigm that produced benefits beyond the protectionist regimes of the past. The thought of big-game hunting may be unpalatable to some, but the fact remains that it was very successful in achieving what protectionist regimes could not and this continues today.

Slowly, this new management paradigm has made its way to the shores of Australia. Unfortunately, there's a long way to go and it is far from being fully recognised and accepted by wildlife management authorities that are still tied to protectionism policymaking. Sustainable utilisation in Australia is limited to only a few species, but there are some species that can provide economic and social

SSAA SA Hunting & Conservation groups have been controlling goat numbers in the Flinders Ranges for many years now. This has resulted in an increase in yellow-footed rock wallaby populations too.



benefits to local indigenous communities, such as has occurred in African countries. Crocodile safari hunting is just one example that could provide benefits to the local Aboriginal people in communities within the Northern Territory. Animal rights groups continue to lobby against and provide resistance to any moves to relax protectionist policy to allow sustainable utilisation of animals. A clear example of this was the decision by the previous Australian Minister for Environment Peter Garrett to refuse approval for the Northern Territory Government to undertake a limited safari harvest of crocodiles.⁶

Deer management is another example of dysfunctional wildlife management within Australia. Wild deer have been and continue to be a valued resource to deer hunters across the country. Wild deer have been present in Australia since acclimatisation societies introduced many different species into the Australian environment. The red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) has even found its way to be on the Queensland's Coat of Arms.

The states of Tasmania⁷, Victoria⁸ and New South Wales⁹ view and manage wild deer as a declared game species. These states proclaim wild deer open seasons, where bag and season limits apply for the harvest of wild deer on public lands. Wildlife authorities in the state of Tasmania have gone one step further and have worked with hunting groups to introduce quality deer management (QDM). The introduction of QDM programs in Tasmania in the early 1990s has resulted in a higher quality of trophies and a healthier deer herd. This has created hunting opportunities of a world-class standard for both local and travelling hunters.

The other states and territories also hold populations of wild deer, but the wildlife authorities within those jurisdictions view them in an entirely different manner and see them not as a resource.¹⁰ By not having a 'game' species status, all wild deer species found outside of the above three jurisdictions are lumped together with other introduced animals, such as goats, foxes, pigs and cats, in the 'pest' or 'feral' category.^{11&12}

Although wild deer are introduced to Australia, they have ably adapted and have survived quite well in a variety of Australian environments. The acclimatised wild deer herds have been able to form well-established wild deer populations in many parts of the country. Accidental and deliberate releases from commercial deer farming ventures have enabled populations to expand even further. The collapse of the commercial venison industry resulted in many deer being released through the farm gate into surrounding environments.¹³ This has resulted in new populations forming in areas beyond those established by acclimatisation society releases. Many of these new populations formed outside public deer hunting areas where access to the land was more restricted. The limited management in such areas has enabled many populations to exist and expand. Wild deer, like all other grazing animals, need to be managed and currently, in Australia, a lot of work needs to be done to replace the existing dysfunctional approach.

Most dry-land hunting in Australia is focused on other introduced species. Many introduced species that are widespread across the country are perceived as agricultural 'pests' by those who live and work on the land. Wildlife professionals and environmentalists also view many introduced species as pests and their presence is considered harmful to Australia's natural ecology through their predation of small native animals and their ability to damage critical habitat in which other species need to survive.

Species such as the European fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), European

rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), feral cat (*Felis catus*), feral goat (*Capra hircus*) and feral pig (*Sus scrofa*) have all been held responsible for negative social, economic and environmental impacts. The overall economic cost of a collection of pest animals has been reported to be in excess of \$743 million per year in Australia¹⁴. This takes into account the direct economic costs associated with impacts relating to foxes, rabbits, wild dogs, feral pigs, mice and birds, as well as estimated costs of pest management, administration and research.

The perceived pest status and resultant impacts of these species have provided many hunters and hunting organisations with an opportunity to gain access to both private and public property. Hunters are often seen as a low-cost resource by property owners to help them control problem species and limit the direct impacts of these species, without diverting from their core business tasks. The SSAA assists with the facilitation of this through its SSAA Insurance Brokers¹⁵ arm by ensuring its members are covered by the Association's \$20,000,000 public liability insurance. The policy protects financial members for legal negligence while on public or private property anywhere in Australia.

Hunters in Australia display a history of helping manage both introduced and native wildlife populations in an organised way. At a farm level, hunters have been using formal agreements to develop working relationships with landholders, which enable them to provide assistance with the management of any wildlife species found on their property. In Tasmania and more recently New South Wales (NSW), the Property Based Game Management Plan (PBGMP) is one such tool that is becoming increasingly common for this purpose. Such plans are developed between landholders and hunters and set out in varying detail a plan to manage wildlife on a specific property, as well as each stakeholder's responsibilities.

These tools are predominantly used to manage problem wildlife at the property level, while at the same time providing a provision to allow hunters hunting access to desirable game species such as wild deer. All the hunter has to do in return for access to a desired game species is to provide assistance in conducting other wildlife management activities on the property or another agreed upon task. These tools legitimise the hunter's relationship with the landholder and provide a sound foundation for a long-standing relationship. This type of arrangement will ensure access to the property will continue into the future and will maintain an ongoing management regime that will meet the desires of both parties.

State-by-state perspective

As mentioned, hunting in Australia is regulated and managed separately by each state and territory. This has led to a variety of differences, not only in the way particular species are managed or perceived, but also in the way hunting activities have been legislated and the fees, charges or permits required for the privilege.

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has no regulatory framework for recreational hunting.¹⁶ The ACT has no game management authority or regulations associated with managing any species as a game resource on both public and private land. There is no requirement for hunters to pay hunting fees or have hunting permits while hunting non-protected species on private land. Hunters only need to have a current firearms licence and obtain the landowner's permission to hunt introduced species such as rabbits and foxes on private property.

Queensland also has limited managed recreational hunting. Since Queensland authorities abandoned a sustainable recreational duck and quail harvest regime in 1995, hunting has been mainly restricted to controlling introduced species classified as 'Class 1' or 'Class 2' pests under the state's *Land Protection Act 2002*.¹⁷ Protected species (including waterfowl) can still be hunted if landholders obtain a 'damage mitigation' permit to deal with a specific problem. Hunters also only need to have a current firearms licence and obtain the landowner's permission to hunt on private property.

Western Australia operates in similar fashion to the ACT, where there is no game management. Western Australian authorities abandoned a sustainable recreational duck and quail harvest regime in 1990 and hunting is mainly restricted to controlling introduced species and overabundant native species or Declared Animals¹⁸ on private property. As in the case of Queensland, property owners are able to seek damage mitigation permits, which allow the hunting of protected species causing problems. Once again, waterfowl are allowed to be hunted as a pest and not a public sustainable food resource.

South Australia regulates hunting on both private and public lands. The *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972 (NPW Act 1972)* provides provisions to declare recreational duck and quail seasons when environmental conditions are favourable. The hunting of waterfowl and quail can occur on private land, as well as public lands. Public land hunting is generally restricted to declared game reserves found in various locations across the wetter parts of the state. All native species that are listed as 'Unprotected Species' in Schedule 10 of the *NPW Act 1972* or introduced can be hunted on private land with the landowner's permission.¹⁹ South Australian authorities collect fees from a selection of hunting permits that range from basic to open season endorsement, where 10 separate classes accommodate general, pensioners and junior/sub-junior hunters.

Tasmania has a game licensing system where hunters are able to hunt on private land, state forests and crown land.²⁰ Unlike those above, Tasmanian authorities have listed and manage both native and certain introduced species as 'game'. Wild deer, wild duck, quail, wallaby, muttonbird and pheasant are game species that are available for hunting under a regulatory system, which declares open seasons and approves bag limits. Other introduced species such as rabbits are classified as feral and can be hunted any time. Hunting of any or all game species requires a specific game licence where fees are payable for the privilege.

The Northern Territory has a basic permit system in place for pig and waterfowl hunting.²¹ Hunting of these species can occur on hunting reserves, designated crown land, Aboriginal lands (with permission and often payment) and private lands. Northern Territory authorities only charge hunting permit fees for the privilege to hunt these two species. The *Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 2007* classifies most introduced species as 'feral' and they can be hunted without permit on both public and private land.

Victoria also has a game licensing system where certain native and introduced species are classified and managed as game species.²² Wild deer, quail, pheasant, partridges and wild duck all require a permit to hunt on state forests, state reserves and private land. Victorian authorities regulate and declare open seasons for wild deer, quail and waterfowl. Game licence fees are payable if hunters want to take wild deer and/or game birds. Other introduced species that are classified and declared as pest animals under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* can be

hunted any time without the need of a specific hunting permit.

New South Wales (NSW) operates a dual licence system for the hunting of declared game species on both private and public land. Under the *Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002 (GFAC Act)*, a general licence (G-Licence) enables hunting of declared game species on private property. A restricted licence (R-Licence) extends hunting of declared game species into state forests and other allocated crown land areas. NSW has a long list of species classified as game under the *GFAC Act*, including wild ducks, wild deer, quail, partridges, pheasants, rabbits, goats, hares and foxes. Some of these species are also classified as 'feral', which allows them to be hunted on private land without a game hunting licence. Duck hunting persists under the NSW Game Bird Management Program²³ where wild ducks are shot as pests to agriculture enterprises in the absence of a regulated and managed recreational duck season.

The above summary on each state and territory gives a good indication why the management of hunting across Australia is dysfunctional. One state's pest is another state's resource. One of the most obvious sustainable hunting resources in the form of wild duck can be harvested during regulated and managed seasons in some states, but in others, animal rights activist have been successful in reducing its status to a pest.

Hunter involvement in wildlife management

Since the early 1990s, SSAA members have been formally working with various government authorities to conserve native species and manage species that are negatively impacting the environment on public land. Australia's public land has many classifications that include national and state park systems, forests and reserves. These areas are normally large parcels of land supporting both native vegetation and plantations. Access and activities are generally controlled within such areas and in most cases, recreational activities such as hunting is prohibited.

The management of public land is certainly one area within the realm of government responsibility that suffers from limited funding. Most national and conservation parks do not receive the funds required to completely manage all the wildlife and habitat found within them. The general acceptance of hunters helping control damaging species within public land areas has not yet been achieved in Australia. Slowly but surely, hunting groups such as the SSAA are chipping away at the wall established by an entrenched 'lock it up and leave it' mentality found within most Australian wildlife management authorities.

A SSAA hunting group to succeed in this way was established in 1991. It focused on providing a no-cost service to help government authorities control problem species within national parks in South Australia. The particular group, the SSAA Hunting & Conservation (H&C) Branch of South Australia, formed and assisted the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) with goat control throughout the Gammon Ranges National Park in 1992. At that time, feral goats were devastating the landscape within the park boundaries and were having an impact on neighbouring private properties.

The group developed a training and accreditation program to ensure that each group member had skills and knowledge that displayed to government authorities that they could operate safely within otherwise restricted park areas. The accreditation program that was developed has been used as a foundation for training

SSAA members of similar dedicated groups that are now active across other states and territories. Currently, six states and territories run hunter accreditation programs under the umbrella of SSAA Conservation & Wildlife Management. Most of these groups work with government authorities and private landholding groups to control problem species. One such SSAA member from South Australia, Gil Hartwig²⁴, was awarded an Order of Australia medal on the Queen's Birthday in 2007. The OAM recognised his service to the environment through conservation activities, particularly feral animal control, and to the sport of shooting. SSAA National is committed to promoting its members and these dedicated hunting groups as valuable stakeholders and a low-cost resource in wildlife management. Government authorities and other private organisations are beginning to see the value in using hunters within their wildlife management programs as more examples of the work that hunters do becomes public knowledge. In the past, many activities that SSAA groups have conducted have been subject to confidentiality agreements at the request of the government agencies. This has prevented the groups receiving wider recognition for the work they had done.

By using confidentiality agreements, government agencies literally rebadge volunteer hunters involved in control programs as simply contractors. This gives the impression to the general public that activities are being carried out by paid professionals. In recent times, there has been an effort within the SSAA to reduce this

element of secrecy and allow hunters greater recognition for the services they provide. It's a firm belief within the SSAA community that greater recognition will lead to a better perception of hunting as a wildlife management tool. Greater recognition will also lead to greater hunting opportunities.

The recent increase in private conservation reserves across the country is one opportunity that provides an opening to change perceptions outside the government sphere. Non-hunting conservation groups continue to purchase land, which generally requires the management of problem species. On such reserves, conservation groups should consider working with hunting groups to help achieve their conservation goals. Any cooperative arrangement that can be formed will certainly provide an opportunity for non-hunting groups to recognise that hunters do care for the environment and the conservation of Australia's native species and unique landscapes.

A bridled naitail wallaby recovery project located near Emerald in Queensland is a good example of collection of hunting and conservation groups working together. The SSAA Queensland Conservation & Wildlife Management Branch plays an integral part in a team of stakeholders trying to save this endangered species. This SSAA group is responsible for feral predator control to limit the loss of young wallabies to feral cats and foxes. The SSAA members also participate in other activities, such as ground surveys and data collection, which enhances their value to the conservation project even further.



Hunting and conservation groups work together in the bridled naitail wallaby recovery project. Photo by Mark Woods.

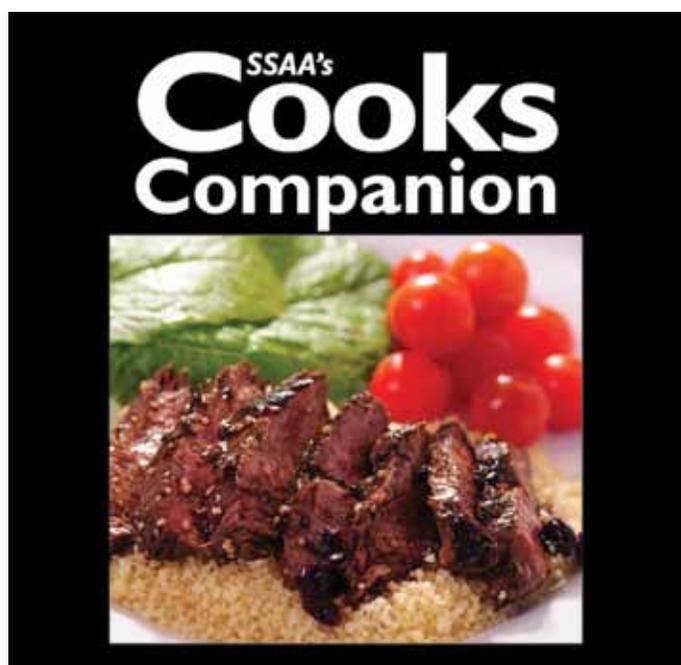
Expert Advisory Group

In July 2009, the SSAA invited a small group of academics from across Australia to be part of an advisory group. The main reason the SSAA decided to form the group was to be able to receive sound external advice from dedicated wildlife professionals to assist promoting recreational hunting and the sustainable use of wildlife.

The group consists of academics who share the belief that recreational hunting is both a sustainable use of wildlife and a useful conservation and wildlife management tool. The group also believes that hunting should be accepted as a lawful pursuit that results in social, economic and environmental benefits to the community. The group has and will continue to provide expert advice on matters that reinforce the SSAA's stance on recreational hunting and its role in society. They have been utilised to provide input and direction into the development of projects that focus on the sustainable use of wildlife, game management and other topics of interest to the SSAA.

Collectively, the members of the group share more than 70 years' experience in biology, environmental science, animal studies, entomology, sustainable use of wildlife, pest control, zoology, vertebrate ecology, land management and conservation policy. Group members have provided educational material for use in both our printed magazines and online resources.²⁵ They have helped provide advice and direction for our Be Part of the Solution campaign and have supported our involvement in The University of Queensland's Red Deer Research Project. The group has been instrumental in helping the SSAA develop a relationship with The University of Queensland, where the SSAA now advertise a Game Management Short Course in its publications. Interest in game management has now increased, which has led to the development of a full-time three-year university wildlife science course specialising in game management.

Any increase in the number of institutions running game management courses across the country will hopefully lead to better management of game and other wildlife, as well as promoting sustainable use. This is certainly a trend that the SSAA and all hunters in Australia should be happy to see.



Be Part of the Solution campaign

In early 2010, the SSAA stressed that hunting was part of the solution to balanced animal management and this way of thinking evolved into the Be Part of the Solution campaign. This campaign was launched on a national level and is aimed at SSAA members, the general public, Australia's Federal politicians and environmental groups. Its primary purpose is to educate these audiences about the benefits of hunting in environmental management, but it also aims to create a true understanding of the impacts of problem species on our environment.

A number of messages and varied methods of communication is required to reach these audiences, taking into account the conflicting views on hunting held by these groups. Firstly, a visual presence was created in Melbourne, Victoria, and in Canberra Airport, ACT, through the use of billboards. Two simple messages were used for this approach, both featuring an image of a fox with a native bird in its mouth. The first message reads 'Save our wildlife - Join us and be part of the solution' and the SSAA Membership phone number and website are included. The second message was more provocative and read 'Going out to dinner tonight? He is!' above the same information.

The location and the image used in this initiative were strategically selected for impact. It was expected that the image of the fox eating the native bird would be confronting to members of the general public. The Canberra Airport billboard was located at the luggage collection carousel for one of Australia's largest airlines, pre-empting the arrival of politicians into the ACT to attend Federal Parliament sittings. Meanwhile, the contrast of the Melbourne central business district against the harsh reality of rural Australia was intentional when choosing the placement of the second billboard. The SSAA strategically selected the green color used in these billboards in an attempt to mirror that used by a well-known animal liberation group and anti-firearm ownership and anti-hunting political group, The Greens. The likeness of the colors to its use in the advertising of these two groups was intended to foster the same feeling of familiarity for the SSAA's advertising campaign among viewers. Additionally, the ambiguity of the message and the contact details was also intentional, to cause people to question the origin of the message.

These billboards were on display in early 2010 for four months and coincided with a press release from the SSAA detailing the campaign to national media and regional media in the eastern states. Press coverage was very positive in the days following, with dozens of newspapers, radio stations, television channels and internet news websites running a story within one month of release. The information shared with the media promoted the idea that the SSAA was asking current and new members to help control Australia's most damaging introduced species, with there being no one solution to reducing the impact of problem species.

The release to media outlets read:

"SSAA National understands that to get serious about reducing the impact of problem species, the community needs to pull up its sleeves and get involved. The general public needs to acknowledge that there is no one simple solution to control Australia's problem species and that strategies that use a variety of management methods have higher chances of success. The use of volunteer resources can certainly improve the outcome of wildlife management activities.



Be Part of the Solution billboards were placed at the Canberra Airport and Melbourne CBD as part of the campaign.



Various promotional material for the Be Part of the Solution campaign.



The majority of the SSAA's 130,000 members across the country have a specific skill set that can be utilised as a valuable volunteer resource. Shooting provides a target-specific control option that can be used in conjunction with other management tools to enhance the results of any control program..."²⁶

In this vein, and supporting the same message, the SSAA has developed further promotional material including calico shopping bags, rulers, key-rings and stickers. These items have so far been distributed to the 9000-plus attendees at the 2010 SSAA Shooting Hunting and Outdoor Trade (SHOT) Expo, reaching both current and potential SSAA members. This merchandise will continue to be used in the future as the SSAA aims to reach further with its message.

SSAA members were also the target of this campaign. It was intended to encourage current and potential members to realise their value as conservationists in their local area. This attempt to empower the SSAA community highlighted safety and skill programs offered by the Association to give rise to the fact that many members achieve marksmanship skills above that required by commercial shooters. The SSAA believes it is much better to utilise and empower a willing and skilled part of our community to carry out species control for free. The money saved can be used on other complementary forms of conservation to achieve the best results. Further to this, the SSAA and its affiliated shooting ranges across the country were provided with a Be Part of the Solution information and merchandise pack to display within the club as another method of reaching members.

Interviews with the SSAA's Executive Director Tim Bannister upon the delivery of the initial press release allowed him to highlight the SSAA's *Cooks Companion* recipe book, a past initiative sharing the 'hunting for the table' message, and tie it in with Be Part of the Solution campaign. The SSAA's *Cooks Companion*²⁷ was released in 2007 to members, the media and to representatives in Australian Parliament. The book features a range of

recipes utilising game and pest animals in Australia as the main ingredient and promoting that more often than not, hunters in this country are hunting for the table. This initiative gave the SSAA an unprecedented amount of press coverage and the book is now in its third edition. The SSAA is also now working on a recipe book for the general public sharing the same message.

The Be Part of the Solution campaign is intended to run indefinitely and new directions and methods of promotion will continue into the future as the SSAA continues to spread the message that hunting is a valuable conservation technique, particularly when combined with other methods.

Red Deer Research Project

An indirect approach to furthering the promotion of the SSAA and its members as custodians and stewards of wildlife resources has been SSAA National's involvement in The University of Queensland's Red Deer Research Project. This is seen as an effective way to develop relationships with non-hunting organisations and increase the positive perception of hunting and the hunting community outside the organisation.

In partnership with SSAA Queensland, SSAA National has provided substantial financial support to The University of Queensland for the project based in the Toowoomba Regional Council area in Queensland. Members from SSAA Queensland provide much-needed volunteer labour assistance with fieldwork and to help keep the research project on track.

The broad aims of the research project are to improve the understanding of the ecology of wild red deer in Queensland and their value as a game species. In the past, management strategies or plans focusing on wild deer have been developed based on unsubstantiated claims relating to their impact on Australia's environment. The study will fill gaps in scientific knowledge regarding wild deer, so informed decisions can be made.

The main aims of the Research Project are to quantify the

cultural and economic values (costs and benefits) of wild deer in Australia. The project will document and understand the motivations of Australian deer hunters, particularly in relation to their role as wildlife managers. The project will compare methods to estimate the size of wild deer populations in Queensland at high and low densities. It will also describe the movement patterns of male and female wild deer populations in Queensland at high and low densities. The project will determine the diet and quantify the environmental impacts of wild red deer in Queensland.

As results begin to be reported from the study, SSAA National's involvement will become evident on a wider scale, both within the environment and conservation sector and the general public. From a public relations perspective, this is an extremely positive association for the SSAA and has the potential to very publicly cement the SSAA's Be Part of the Solution campaign and message.

Further to its involvement in the Red Deer Research Project, the SSAA is developing a conservation and wildlife research fund that will enable it to fund wildlife research that is beneficial to our interests into the future. Many Australian game species have had limited research compared with overseas species in other parts of the world. This is certainly one way that the SSAA can help address this issue for the good of our members and our valued game species.



The Red Deer Research Project is based in Queensland's Toowoomba Regional Council area.

Conclusion

Given the Federal Government's estimate of there being more than 760,000 licensed firearm owners in Australia, there is real potential for hunters to become a valuable conservation resource across the country. The hurdle in this case is a lack of understanding by not only the government, but also environmental groups and of course, the general public. The reality is that many hunters are enthusiastic to commit time and effort towards protecting native fauna and flora. However, the common argument based on misconceptions about hunters and hunting regularly overshadows this fact.

SSAA National is committed to increasing positive perceptions of hunters and hunting and is doing so through a number of avenues. It is doing so through the continuation of its Be Part of the Solution campaign, attendance and sponsorship of wildlife management seminars across the country, and communicating with wildlife management groups to create valuable partnerships. The SSAA's Conservation & Wildlife Management program is just one initiative, which is continuing to reach stakeholders within the political and conservation sectors, as SSAA members work within national parks to reduce problem animal populations. It is unfortunate, however, that hunting is always going to be regulated by each state or territory and there will always be different approaches in each region. We can only hope that those states that have less than ideal management look at and improve the way they operate in an effort to mirror the regulations of the more innovative and proactive states.

Through its future campaigns and initiatives, SSAA National aims to further share its message that hunting is a valuable wildlife management and conservation tool, particularly when combined with a myriad of wildlife management strategies. Ultimately, the goal is to have governments across the country consulting with hunting groups to ensure that an informed, effective and collaborative approach towards wildlife management is achieved.

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Heart of the hunter

by John Elder

photos by Craig Sillitoe

Duck shooters don't see themselves as cruel killers. To them, eating animals you have hunted yourself has more moral integrity than buying meat at a supermarket.

Through the night, an owl tolls mournfully. It throbs on until the coals of the new day begin to glow through the trees with the last of the stars. The camp is alive by then, a choir of mutters and the drinking sound of the river nearby. The fire of the night before continues to smoke from its pit. Breakfast isn't much to speak of in the realm of the hunter and gatherer. Eating can wait.

In a thicket at the back of the camp, a deer hangs by a rope from a tree, one of the hindquarters already cut away and stored in an icebox by the man who felled her. Most of what remains will be shared among the crew. Her pretty head will later lie blindly among the ants. The circle of life, as they say.

The deer was shot with a rifle, the copper-jacketed bullet spreading upon entry to maximise the chance of a quick death from shock. That's the merciful thing about a gunshot; if it's done right, a white flash is all the deer or fox or duck should ever know.

This morning is a shotgun affair. Red plastic shells packed with tiny steel balls. It's duck season, and it's against the law to fill a duck full of lead. Lead sinks to the bottom of ponds and creeks when the shot goes wide, and the ducks, while shovelling for invertebrates with their beaks, have been known to eat the lead and die from poisoning.

There are five men in the party, all from around Melbourne, known to one another as reliable veterans of the hunt: they include a builder, a retired electrician, an education officer for the Department of Justice, and Colin Wood, the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia's Hunting and Conservation manager for Victoria, and organiser of this year's gathering.

This is private property, horses and cows. Another group of hunters is camped closer to the shooting grounds, friends of the Dunn family who have farmed this land since the 19th century, and who have hosted duck shoots for nearly as long.

Wood's party is now walking south of the river where shooting is allowed. Their clothes bear the leaf-litter pattern of camouflage or are simply clay coloured. Oddly, given the good colour-vision of ducks, one of the men is wearing a red hat. His plan is to hide in the shrubbery.

Another fellow hauls a bag of decoys that rattle like bones as he trudges along. The mood is relaxed and expectant as they fan out across the large, damp paddocks flanked by stands of trees and jewelled with a series of ponds born from the floods, each of them looking for a place to hide.

Three hours to the west, at Lake Buloke, near Donald, is a more crowded encampment where the mood is less chilled. The annual clash between hunters and anti-shooting protesters is about to swing into vexatious and ultimately bloody action.

"It's good to be away from all that," says Robert Hodder, 54, who dreams of following in Hemingway's footsteps and shooting ducks in Venice. His greatest concern at this moment is a plague of mosquitoes.

These men have been hunting since they were children, and largely seem bored with the ongoing controversy. As they see it,

there's more honesty and decency in killing your own food - and doing so as quickly and mercifully as possible - than buying a piece of cow or lamb that spent many terrified hours awaiting execution at an abattoir. Every duck that gets shot today will end up in the camp pot, the freezer at home or given to friends.

Hodder, who boasts a masters in creative writing and a doctorate in politics, started shooting when he was six. His father, a career policeman, got him started with revolvers. By his late primary years he was shooting rabbits with a .22 rifle. "In those days [the 1960s], you could legally shoot from your car window just driving down the road...I'd always get a feed."

Colin Wood grew up on farms around Kyabram at a time when society, particularly the sparsely populated rural variety, was more accepting of a boy getting about on a bicycle with a shotgun over his shoulder.

Wood was shooting quail, ducks and rabbits for the family larder "from early on". It was tied to survival, he says, "because times were tough".

These formative years seeded in Wood a belief that the hunter-gatherer experience was fundamental to being human, and latterly has led him to taking on his media-magnet role with the Sporting Shooters' Association. The message he gives politicians is simply a passing-on of what his grandfather, Albert, used to say: a society disconnected from the land would go insane.

"And that's what we're seeing. The urban society has sort of disconnected from the reality that something has to die so it can eat meat," Wood says.

The cost, he says, is a distortion of moral perspective. "Because animals are farmed and slaughtered on a mass basis, somehow this makes it more moral in people's eyes. In my view, it's less moral. If you have the wherewithal, the ability and the moral fortitude to go out and take your own animal, good luck to you.

"But there is an awful lot of people who say they can't hunt but they're eating a steak or a chicken and not thinking about where it comes from." The other central argument here is that farmed animals are marked for slaughter from the moment they are born,



The day's bag.

whereas animals in the wild are rarely easy to track and kill, and at least have a chance to dodge the hunter. Guns may not make it a level playing field, but the outcome is never assured.

Says Lionel Swift, a retired electrician and publisher who has hunted game for most of his 76 years: "If the Buddhists are correct and we come back in the next life as another being, I don't want to come back as a sheep or a cow on a farm. Every one of those animals ends up killed. I'd rather be a duck or a deer. I'd want to have a chance."

This morning's hunt is about three hours long, most of it spent sitting quietly in the shadow of trees. The shooting happens in spurts, with several guns going off at once and then quietness again. One barrage sets a number of horses racing, another causes a herd of cattle to abandon one paddock for another. This is the greater evidence of disturbance.

There are plenty of ducks around, but they are not visible in great numbers. Indeed, according to Department of Sustainability and Environment land managers, ducks were the big winners in the recent floods, which brought an abundance of revived wetland habitat and newly born ponds and lakes to breed in - and to hide in when the going gets tough.

On some of the ponds, mother ducks herd their chicks into reeded spots for cover when the shooting is intense. The RSPCA says that mother ducks tend to abandon their chicks but this doesn't appear to happen today.

The hunt requires patience and a watchful eye. Various duck species fly past quietly, unseen or spied too late for the range of the guns. And they're not easy to hit on the wing. Time and again they seem to anticipate the line of fire and arc away like fighter planes. Now and then, however, a shooter finds his mark and a duck falls heavily to float in the water, all grace gone. But the take isn't spectacular.

Colin Wood finds a good spot behind a large tree stump, islanded in the middle of a long stretch of water. He sits perfectly under a flyover route and manages to bag seven birds, three shy of the day's limit of 10. Hodder bags a small grey teal that needs a second shot to finish it off. It's not pretty, the bird flapping about in shock, but at least the mercy shot comes quickly. Swift comes in empty-handed. The other two men score a couple each.

By mid-morning, the shooters return to camp, each carrying their take in one hand like bowling pins. Most of the men head to their tents for a customary nap. It's a hot day and they already feel weary. The fire is built up, and the ducks are plucked and dressed.

Jeanne Dunn, whose family has farmed this land since the 1860s, has come into camp with her daughter, Marie, to help with the cooking, the dressing of the birds and to socialise. "It's a tradition," says Marie of the camp. "I used to hunt as a kid but I wasn't a very good shot. I don't mind dressing them. You have to do it straight away before they go off."

Wood is planning two big casseroles for the evening meal. One from three ducks, half a bottle of Stone's ginger wine, potatoes, carrots, onions, apples and bacon. He concocts a similar stew from a hare he shot some months ago and has brought along from the freezer at home.

As the sleepers rouse, word comes via telephone that a woman protester has been accidentally shot in the face by a 14-year-old hunter at Lake Buloke. The response is muted: the woman was breaking the rules by entering the water, the boy will no doubt be distressed as well, bad news all round. They're happy to have something else to talk about.



Robert Hodder retrieves his duck.

Hunters are often portrayed as callous souls who get a kick out of killing. And of course, says Wood, there are "idiots with firearms who have misbehaved and done horrible things and done a lot of damage to hunting and shooting in general".

But ask these men about the emotions tied to shooting and killing, and the response is nuanced. Hodder, the shooter with the masters in creative writing, says: "At first there is a feeling of elation that you have done what you set out to do. And then when you go and pick the animal up, it's inevitably very beautiful and there is a feeling of awe and sadness. It's still warm, even cute. And they just look like they're asleep and I think all the feelings of life and death wash over you...Very primal feelings, hard to articulate. The last stage is you feel really satisfied and looking forward to taking the kill home. Something wonderful to eat, something to share. Even six months later you feel wonderful."

Swift, the old man of the group, says: "There are more fundamental emotions that come to play when shooting a big animal like a deer than a dozen rabbits. But having said that, I used to raise pet rabbits as a boy, and at the same time was out hunting wild rabbits.

"I still have trouble when a baby one runs up and looks at me, five or six metres away. The farmers want you to shoot them all, but I must admit I occasionally have not shot them. They are too nice. It's a mixture of emotions."

Recently, Swift says, a family friend accused him of playing God. "A horsewoman, sitting her backside on a leather saddle. Eats meat, makes use of dead animals. The height of hypocrisy. The fact is, I don't feel like God."

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The facts about crippling and wounding rates **in waterfowl in Australia**

by Tony Sharley
photos by Paul Wainwright

Tony Sharley is the chairman of the Conservation and Hunting Alliance of South Australia (CHASA)

Animal welfare and animal rights groups across Australia regularly make outrageous claims about wounding and crippling rates during duck hunting. In 2011, they have quoted that wounding rates are as high as 50% and that crippling rates are as high as 66%. Such nonsense is rarely checked by media and therefore, the public can be easily misled.

The main source of these claims is a discredited computer wounding model developed by an animal rights activist. Models by their very nature are a substitute for real field data; they are based on assumptions and when the assumptions are biased by an advocate for the worst-case scenario, the output will be a nonsense figure.

The alleged wounding and crippling rates also do not apply to duck hunting in Australia. There has been no Australian study of wounding and crippling rates in waterfowl that has found rates anywhere near these levels. The major reason for these high estimates is the determination and single-mindedness of the animal rights activist, who developed the wounding model as propaganda to seek to have duck hunting banned. The computer wounding model was developed, engineered and promoted to produce a desired result - to show high wounding and crippling.

The model has never been accepted by peer-reviewed scientific journals, indicating it has many flaws. These flaws include (and are not limited to) that it has not been field tested and that it selectively uses Northern hemisphere studies to exaggerate wounding and crippling rates in Australia. The wounding model has been subjected to strident criticism from eminent wildlife scientists within and outside the hunting community, including former IUCN-SSC Australia New Zealand Sustainable Use Specialist Group chairman Dr Grahame Webb and Birds SA president Dr Jeremy Robertson.

Animal welfare groups often confuse the terms 'wounding' and 'crippling', which can further mislead the public. 'Crippling' is a term that applies to wild ducks that are downed and not retrieved. 'Wounding' is a term that applies to birds that survive after being hit by shotgun pellets and the pellets remain embedded in a non-vital part of the body.

Hunting organisations have practical experience and knowledge that modern hunting carried out in accordance with a responsible code of conduct, as outlined in the Animal Welfare Code of Practice, ensures a crippling rate of less than 5% and a wounding rate of less than 5% within a local population of birds. These figures take into consideration the vast improvements in hunting technique and hunting regulations since published Australian studies in the 1970s and '80s that reported crippling and wounding rates of less than 20% (Norman 1976, Norman & Powell 1981 & Briggs et al. 1985).

The above published studies reported wounding rates and crippling rates in locally hunted wetland areas in Victoria and New South Wales and therefore, the results apply only to the birds in a population within that vicinity. The results cannot be extrapolated to the population of birds within a larger geographical area such as a region or state, just as Northern hemisphere studies and rates cannot be applied to Australia. Let us not forget that only a minor fraction (less than 1%) of the waterfowl across the Australian continent is subject to hunting pressure and only for a few months in every year, making the exaggerated wounding and crippling claims by animal rights activists a nonsensical statistic when they are not geographically referenced.

As responsible hunters, we are obliged to continue to adopt hunting practices that further reduce crippling rates (ie, using retriever dogs) and wounding rates (ie, knowing the performance of your gun, using decoys to bring birds into close range, placing your decoys to set a maximum firing distance of around 30m, etc). Further reduction in local wounding and crippling rates can be achieved through hunter education programs that reinforce the Animal Welfare Code of Practice, where methods to minimise wounding and crippling rates are reinforced.

Background information

In raising their claims, animal welfare and rights groups choose to ignore the facts on crippling and wounding rates in wild ducks exposed to modern hunting practices in order to drive an animal rights agenda. Hunting organisations can scientifically demonstrate that the call by animal welfare and rights groups for a ban on duck hunting has no credible foundation. Published scientific research in Australia confirms that wounding rates in waterfowl in heavily hunted areas between 1957 and '85 ranged from 6 to 19% in the most common game species (Norman 1976) and crippling rates ranged from 9.9% (Briggs et al. 1985) to 20% (Norman & Powell 1981).

The facts about crippling and wounding rates in waterfowl in Australia

Animal welfare groups' claims are arrant nonsense and their exaggerated wounding and crippling rates are not applicable anywhere in Australia because:

- There is no Australian scientific research on wounding or crippling in waterfowl that produces a wounding rate and crippling rate as high as 50 and 66% respectively.
- The proponent of these exaggerated rates (Mr Geoff Russell) has developed his own empirical wounding model that has never been cited, submitted or accepted by the peer-reviewed scientific literature in Australia.
- The proponent of the wounding model created it to serve his own agenda, which is to ban hunting and promote animal rights.
- In South Australia, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources does not use such a figure when administering the *NPWS Act 1972* and any animal welfare considerations.

Australian research

From the 1950s to '70s, a major Australian study was conducted on wounding rates in wild ducks near Geelong in Victoria (Norman 1976). The study used a fluoroscope to detect lead shot in the bodies of live birds that were caught in traps, analysed and released. In many cases, the birds were banded before release. The results of this research are very conclusive due to the long period of research (1957 to 1973), large sample size exceeding 45,000 birds and analysis of six of the major game species.

The research found wounding rates as follows: Pacific black duck 13.7%, grey teal 9.0%, chestnut teal 6.2%, wood duck 13.6%, hard-head 11.1% and mountain duck 19%. The research also found no significant difference between distances travelled by wounded and non-wounded birds, and no significant difference between the age and life expectancy of wounded and non-wounded birds.

Dr Sue Briggs and her team found a crippling rate of 9.9% in grey teal across New South Wales (Briggs et al. 1985) and Norman and Powell (1981) reported crippling rates of 20% in Victoria between 1953 and '77. Dr Briggs has stated that the use of retriever dogs to retrieve downed birds is the best method to reduce crippling rates (Briggs personal communication).

Relevance of earlier research

Dr Frank Norman's 1976 research provides an indicative baseline for wounding rates within a heavily hunted local wetland region in Victoria between the 1950s and early '70s, as does the work of Dr Briggs for crippling rates. Norman's and Briggs' research was carried out when the number of hunters in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia was much higher than it is today. Therefore, the total numbers of birds wounded and crippled can be expected to be significantly less today, simply because there are fewer hunters.

During the research period (1957 to '85), there was a maximum of 41,000 hunters per year in Victoria, a maximum 24,000 hunters per year in South Australia and a recorded 12,500 hunters per year in New South Wales (Briggs et al. 1985, Norman 1976, Stokes 1990). Today, that number is around 22,000 per year in Victoria and 1500 per year in South Australia. Open seasons ceased in New South Wales in 1995, and hunting pressure in all three states has been significantly reduced, although duck hunting for crop protection purposes continues in New South Wales.

During the research period, there was no Animal Welfare Code of Practice in force and there were fewer hunter education programs to ensure hunters were aware of all of the factors that reduce wounding and crippling. Today, it is now common practice for hunters to know their own effective shotgun range when hunting. Hunters use decoys and duck callers to ensure birds are within their effective shotgun range to minimise wounding rates. Many hunters also use retriever dogs to maximise the retrieval of downed birds and thus reduce crippling rates.

Duck hunting today is carried out by ethical hunters who willingly comply with more stringent regulations than in the past, and who can afford the expense to obtain a licence. Lead was the main shot used during the research period, but lead shot has since been banned throughout Australia for shooting waterfowl. Today, the use of non-toxic shot is compulsory. Recent changes in firearm laws prevent the use of five-shot self-loading and pump-action shotguns, which were once commonly used for duck hunting. Today, a maximum of two shots provides incentive to ensure birds are within effective range before shooting commences and that individual birds are targeted, instead of firing into a flock, thus minimising the risk of wounding and crippling.

Furthermore, the personal observations of experienced hunters and hunting organisations indicate that less than 5% of birds are crippled or wounded around frequently hunted local wetlands. For example, in 1996, South Australian hunting organisation members conducted an exit survey at all the exits from Bool Lagoon on the opening day of the duck hunting season and found just more than 500 hunters took 2718 ducks. After a sweep of the lagoon, by not only Animal Liberation but also the Sporting Shooters Retriever Dog Club, 38 wounded birds were collected - demonstrating that had they not been retrieved the crippling rate would have been less than 2%.

These observations are consistent with the conclusion that there is less hunting pressure on local duck populations than there was between the 1950s and '80s. Recent changes in permitted shot, firearms legislation and adherence to an Animal Welfare Code of Practice ensures that crippling rates and wounding rates are significantly less than in the 1950s to '80s.

The unreferenced claims by animal welfare and rights groups of 50% wounding and 66% crippling in ducks today is highly alarming because it ignores the research that demonstrates that it was never this high in Australia and it ignores the reforms that ensure it affects less than 5% of a locally hunted population of birds.



More than 45,000 birds, including hard-head ducks, were studied from 1957 to 1973 to analyse wounding rates.

The facts about crippling and wounding rates in waterfowl in Australia

Relevant research undertaken in the US demonstrated the significant reduction in wounding and crippling rates at distances less than 40m (Cochrane 1976). The Animal Welfare Code of Practice for duck hunting in South Australia for example recommends a maximum shooting distance of 35m and an optimum shooting distance of 30m. Modern hunting techniques allow that distance to be reduced further to ensure crippling and wounding rates remain well below 5%.

Summary

Animal welfare and rights groups in Australia have assumed and exaggerated the wounding and crippling rates for duck hunting in Australia by listening to an animal rights activist who developed an uncited and non-published wounding model to suit his own agenda. In doing so, they have ignored a sufficient body of Australian scientific research and practical field experience. They appear ignorant of the reforms that ensure wounding rates and crippling rates are less than 5% of birds in a local population and less than 1% of birds in a regional population.

Several factors have changed in the 21st century that indicate significant reduction from the wounding rates and crippling reported in Australia in the 1950s, '60s, '70s and '80s. The factors that combine to reduce wounding and crippling rates to less than an estimated 5% of birds in a locally hunted population are:

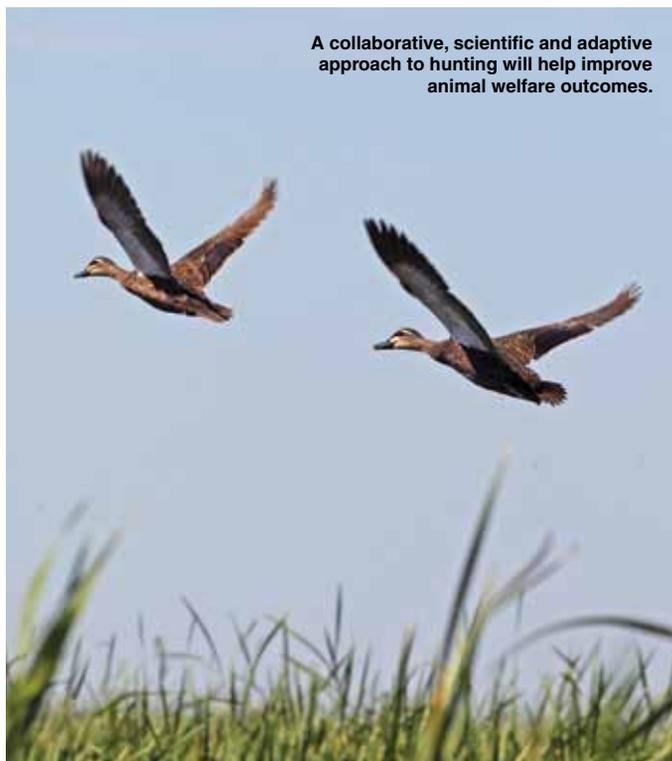
- All hunters must now satisfactorily complete an accredited firearms safety course, which includes basic practical proficiency testing with shotguns before being able to apply for and purchase a firearms licence.
- There are endorsed codes of practice for the welfare of animals in hunting.
- There is a proliferation of simulated field shooting ranges to improve shooting skills.
- All waterfowl hunters must pass the Waterfowl Identification Test before being able to purchase a waterfowl hunting licence.
- There are national restrictions on the use of self-loading and pump-action shotguns.
- There is a national ban on the use of lead shot and an introduction of non-toxic shot for waterfowl hunting.
- The common use of decoys and duck callers bring birds into close range in accordance with the Animal Welfare Code of Practice.
- There is a reduction in hunting pressure in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

There is no justification for banning the hunting of waterfowl with shotguns under the current modern and responsible hunting practices in Australia. Previous scientific reviews into waterfowl hunting in Victoria (Loyn 1989) and South Australia (Stokes 1990) have factored in wounding and crippling rates and both reviews have supported the continuance of hunting. Hunting as a method of obtaining wild food produces no greater risk to the mortality and conservation status of wild ducks than the farming methods used in all forms of animal (poultry, livestock and fish) production systems.

The constructive way forward

Animal welfare groups in Australia continue to call for a complete ban on duck hunting. They have shown no desire to include the hunting community in any constructive discussion about duck hunting. This is short-sighted and counterproductive to improved

A collaborative, scientific and adaptive approach to hunting will help improve animal welfare outcomes.



animal welfare outcomes, which is the concern of animal welfare groups and hunting organisations.

The development of further education materials in hunting would be constructive in advancing the interests of both groups. This strategy has been successful overseas in conclusively reducing wounding rates and is being implemented in Victoria and New South Wales.

Hunting organisations should continue to advocate an adaptive and scientific approach to minimise crippling and wounding rates in waterfowl. Such a professional approach is in the interests of animal welfare groups and the hunting community. Collaboration between stakeholder groups and government departments will help develop and promote hunter education in Australia.

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