

## Sporting Shooters in National Parks



At the end of May 2012, the NSW Premier, the Hon Barry Farrell MP, made the surprising announcement that he had broken a pre-election commitment and had done a deal with the Shooters and Fishers Party to gain their support to pass electricity privatisation legislation through the State's Upper House.

That deal now allows sporting shooters to hunt in some 79 national parks, nature and conservation reserves across the state, something the shooters lobby has been trying to achieve for years.

In fact the Shooters Party attempted to 'extort' support for its Shooters Bill from the Labor Government, in 2010, in exchange for their votes the Upper House.

That earlier Shooters Bill outraged the community and would have allowed the hunting of a range of native and feral animals, using guns, bows and arrows, packs of dogs and black powder, on all public land including national parks. The list of native species identified as 'game' included Black Swans, Kangaroos, Wallabies, and a range of ducks including some that are listed as threatened.

As a result of the groundswell of public opposition the Labor Government, as corrupt as it was, refused to play ball, but were ousted from Government in March 2011. However, with a record majority and 3 years to go before the next election, the O'Farrell Government clearly feels it can now ignore public opinion in order to do whatever it needs to do to proceed with its unpopular sale of the State's electricity assets.

Even before the Shooters Bill was proposed the Invasive Species Council (ISC) had responded to the NSW Game Council's lobbying for hunting to be allowed on public land for conservation purposes, by releasing a series of highly critical reports authored by Carol Booth, including "Is recreational hunting effective for feral animal control?"

In that report Ms Booth identified that recreational hunters remove too few animals, focus hunting efforts on easily accessible areas, target larger animals (trophy hunting), and that the shooting of some species is limited by bag limits that protect the hunting resource. Moreover, she identified that hunters are motivated, not to eliminate populations of feral species, but to expand and increase them to make hunting easier and to increase hunting options claiming: *"Most of the recent substantial increase in the number of feral deer herds in Australia has probably occurred due to hunters illegally translocating deer to new areas"*.

In NSW deer hunting is controlled through bag limits imposed by the pro-hunting Game Council to ensure that the deer populations do not decline. This, despite the serious damage deer cause to native flora and the habitat of a range of native fauna, which has led to deer being declared a Key Threatening Process, in NSW and Victoria.

**So when recreational shooters describe themselves as "Conservation Hunters", it is clear their conservation priority is aimed at protecting their sport, rather than native fauna, and in fact we believe most do not give a damn for native animals unless they are allowed to hunt them.**

The ISC identifies that *"Ground shooting (as a culling method) has been accepted by RSPCA as a humane method of controlling large vertebrate animals under defined circumstances, and according to the Standard Operating Procedure for deer (Sharp & Saunders 2004) ground shooting can be humane "when it is carried out by experienced, skilled shooters; the animal can be clearly seen and is within range; and, the correct firearm, ammunition and shot replacement is used."*

Needless to say recreational hunting cannot provide those conditions. I well recall an Office of Environment and Heritage workshop into pest management, where there was an over-representation of recreational shooters promoting their cause. One was seated next to me, he was at least 80 years old, as deaf as a post (his wife was there to shout everything he'd missed into his ear), and he held a hunting licence. Despite his obvious frailty and poor hearing (probably industrial deafness brought on by gunfire), resulting in his being a clear danger to other forest users, that man is allowed to hunt in State forests and shoot at anything he might think was a feral species.

With hunting licences available by application on the internet, anyone can get a licence which allows them to buy numerous firearms. Lists of licence holders are apparently kept by local shooting groups, so why are we not surprised that there has been a rash of burglaries in recent months targeting homes with gun safes, that are either broken open and weapons stolen, or the entire safe removed?

The justifications put forward to support “conservation hunting” have all come from the the hunter's lobby, with few if any conservationists supporting the move. In short those arguments are:

1. Recreational hunting is effective for feral animal control and highly beneficial for conservation;
2. Recreational hunters offer a “free” or “low cost” service; and
3. Hunters are aligned to conservation, and provide the most effective basis for conservation.

The extensive investigations by the Invasive Species Council of Australia have debunked all three claims, uncovering more than 30 reports and scientific papers (see below) identifying the following:

1. The Game Council's own records show that recreational hunting in State Forests does not effectively control feral animals. For example, of the estimated one million foxes in NSW (there are estimated to be about 7 million Australia wide), recreational hunters in state forests kill an average of only about 650 a year (there are about 600 state forests in NSW). If 25% of foxes are breeding females, there is the potential for close to a million pups to be born annually.

The Game Council has produced similar figures for feral pigs, while in 2 year period between 2006 and 2008, only 279 cats and 106 dogs were shot by recreational hunters in state forests. That cannot be called 'control'.

2. The claim that recreational shooting provides a “low cost” service is extremely questionable. In the 5 years between 2004 and 2009, the NSW taxpayer funded the Game Council to the tune of more than \$9 million. Shooting licences netted less than \$2 million, leaving a net cost to taxpayers of more than \$8 million.
3. Recreational hunters are more concerned with preserving feral animal populations to perpetuate their sport, than they are about conservation.
4. Unscrupulous hunters are actually introducing pest species, particularly pigs and deer, to pest-free areas to provide new hunting opportunities.
5. Many sporting shooters aim for trophies, only selecting the largest animals.
6. Recreational hunters cannot devote more than 1 or 2 days to a job, which normally requires an intensive operation sometimes lasting weeks to achieve effective control.
7. It is impractical to attempt to judge the individual skills and knowledge levels of every prospective hunter applying to hunt under the proposed legislative changes, and it won't happen. This means the claim that only highly skilled operators will be allowed to hunt in national parks is extremely questionable.

8. The hunting with bows and arrows is not humane, and the use of dogs will see native animals, particularly slow-moving species such as Koalas and Wombats, killed or maimed.

Apart from the clear evidence available that so called conservation hunting is not an effective feral animal control mechanism, and is likely to actually increase the number of feral animals in Australia, the Clarence Environment Centre has expressed numerous other concerns.

1. The most serious concern is the threat of personal injury, and even the killing, of park and forest workers and other users of public lands. The New Zealand experience, where three innocent bystanders have been killed in that country in as many years, should have alarm bells ringing, because it is only a matter of time before the same happens here.
2. Immediate neighbours are also placed in danger of being accidentally shot. Bullets from high powered rifles travel for kilometres.
3. The use of dogs to hunt feral animals is an appallingly cruel act. Fox hunting with hounds has been banned in most civilised countries, yet here in NSW we are planning to allow unaccompanied children as young as 12 to hunt with dogs, knives and bows and arrows. This is almost unimaginable! Dogs will not discriminate between feral and native species.
4. International and domestic tourists, attracted by our renowned national parks and wilderness areas, will not want the experience to be marred by a background of gunfire. There is nothing more unsettling, or frightening, than to be in a forest when a gun is discharged nearby, usually by someone that is unaware of your presence.
5. Currently, a permit to hunt can be acquired “on line”, something that is unlikely to change given the expected thousands of applicants. It will be impractical to test the expertise of applicants in the field (shooting on a target range is vastly different to hunting an animal). The hunter has to know precisely where to aim to ensure an instant kill, and the target site differs from animal to animal. How can skill levels, fitness, and psychological profiles, of thousands of shooters be properly assessed?

Not only is the Clarence strongly opposed to recreational hunting being allowed in national parks and other reserves, but we believe continued hunting in State forests cannot be justified, and should therefore be stopped. In any event, in our submission opposing the proposed legislative changes, we have strongly urged the Department of Primary Industries to:

1. Stop the use of dogs and any other weapons, other than guns, for hunting purposes.
2. Remove the clause that permits unsupervised minors to hunt on public land.
3. Remove the discount on licence fees offered to pensioners and minors (clause 17(2)), and remove the Game council's discretion to waive these fees (clause 17(6)).
4. Keep the current requirement that shooters have to have the written permission for their hunt on them at all times (i.e. remove clause 4(2)(ii) in Sch.1 which gives hunters 2 working days in which to present this approval).
5. Require that full details of the firearm/s to be used are included on the permit, to ensure they are suitable (no pistols or revolvers for example).
6. Add a new clause requiring all neighbouring landowners, for their own safety, to receive notification of booked hunts at least 24 hours before the hunt is due to commence.
7. Ensure that warning signs, complete with dates when hunting is to occur, are placed at every access entrance to state forest hunting areas, including walking trails, and removed immediately on completion of the hunt.

8. Ensure that no native animals are allowed to be killed by recreational hunters in state forests, and
9. Introduce some monitoring to determine how many shots these sporting shooters take, that do not result in a kill, but could have wounded an animal which then likely dies a lingering and painful death. The Department could undertake research by randomly selecting, and monitoring some of these hunts from a safe distance. Shots can be heard and counted, and the dead animals presented for inspection at the end of the day for statistical analysis.

However, secure in the knowledge that it has three years before having to face the electorate, it is unlikely that this anti-conservation government is likely to back away from its plans to allow people with high powered weapons to shoot animals for pleasure in national parks.

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**It is worth noting the following impressive list, showing just some of the referenced publications from around the world, used by the Invasive Species Council to counter claims that recreational hunting provides any beneficial outcomes for pest control or conservation.**

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