NSW Government’s Heritage Horse Act is causing suffering

JOHN BARILARO: “I ask the House to picture this image: a beautiful stallion running wild and free, his muscles bulging with strength. When he stands up on his back hooves one is overcome by his grace and power. There is nothing quite like seeing a brumby in the wild. It is an absolute thrill.” (Legislative Assembly Hansard 2 June, 2018)

Dying feral horse by the Snowy River. Photo: Richard Swain

WILSON HARRIS, NATURAL AREAS CAMPAIGNER

AS A COUNTRY with one of the largest populations of feral horses in the world, the NSW government’s decision to provide protection for this invasive species is absurd. It achieves no desirable outcomes for a broad-coalition of concerned parties, only acting to appease the minority interest, pro-brumby lobby.

The Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018, better known as the Heritage Horse Act, was passed in June this year following pressure after the Draft Plan of Management for Wild Horses was released in 2016, prompting outcries over its planned use of aerial culling as a population control measure to bring numbers down from 6,000 to 600 in Kosciuszko National Park. The Heritage Horse Act limits effective management options for feral horses, such as aerial and ground shooting.

As a result, this Act is increasingly, as predicted, a key cause of the very suffering it sought to prevent, with overpopulation and drought conditions leading to slow, painful equine death from starvation in many parts of the park. Whilst it seems senseless to promote the protection of an invasive species over numerous threatened, endangered and critically endangered native species, negative outcomes for the very horses the legislation attempts to protect were not foreseen by its proponents.

Habitat loss and degradation caused by feral horses throughout the alpine Kosciuszko National Park has recently been listed as a key threatening process by the NSW Threatened Species Scientific Committee. Specific species threatened by wild horse impacts include the Broad-toothed Mouse, Mountain Pygmy Possum, Monaro golden daisy and iconic Corroboree Frog.

Pro-brumby lobby claims over inherent, inhumane aerial culling have been a cornerstone of their campaign, providing support for their ‘cultural heritage’ arguments. The spread of misinformation on a number of issues, but particularly regarding the Guy Fawkes cull of 2000, has been critical to their success. These groups and affiliated politicians, have exaggerated by a degree of magnitude the suffering that this cull resulted in, claiming that many horses suffered extensively in this aerial shooting campaign, and that numerous horses were left alive for days after being shot. As such, shooting (particularly aerial shooting) is frequently painted as inhumane and cruel. However, these concerns were almost immediately disproven. A report conducted by Dr English of the University of Sydney Veterinary School following the cull in Guy Fawkes found it was effective, efficient and humane.

“One horse was found alive on 1 November, despite having 2 bullet wounds in the killing zone. The projectiles had behaved in a quite bizarre way, failing to penetrate the chest cavity.” The RSPCA itself has also backed shooting and aerial culling as a humane method of effective population control.

Pro-brumby advocates place strong emphasis on the ‘viability’ of other options for managing feral horse populations. However, there are no viable alternatives to culling for the effective population control needed. Fertility control is extremely expensive, time consuming and ineffective for reducing populations, particularly over such a large area. Trapping and...
Flooding World Heritage for floodplain development just plain dumb

THE SOUTHERN BLUE Mountains is one of the largest, most rugged and scenic wilderness areas in NSW. It is home to the Kowmung River, legally a wild river that flows through this wilderness. Its magic has played a key part in the development of our bushwalking and nature conservation culture, being a source of inspiration for Myles Dunphy who brought the vision of large national parks to Australia.

The Kowmung, a musical stream, passes between banks of stately river oaks, and looking up bold quartzite bluffs lead the eye to the forested spurs and ridges beyond.

The Blue Mountains is significant to modern Australia because it is where a handful of astute Australians chose to stand up for nature. Their concerns led to the establishment of the early bushwalking clubs who explored the area, saw its natural beauty and fought to protect it. After decades of effort, communities of conservation minded people brought about the listing of its national parks as World Heritage. Through this process the Blue Mountains, once seen as useless, became appreciated for its intrinsic worth as precious bushland suitable for preservation in its own right. It now has six layers of protection, but remains at risk.

The proposal to raise Warragamba Dam wall is supported by the conservative political parties in NSW. It would flood the Lower Kowmung Gorge and a considerable section of the Coxs River above its junction with the Kowmung. Rare Camden White Gums and breeding habitat of the critically endangered Regent Honeyeater would be inundated, along with many other threatened species.

The Kanangra-Boyd Wilderness was nominated for protection in 1988 but deferred due to an earlier proposal to raise the Warragamba Dam Wall, which triggered a major campaign to stop it. In 1995 Labor agreed to protect this wilderness and it was eventually declared in 1997, after alternative flood management arrangements were put in place. In 2001 the national park boundaries were extended to Warragamba Dam's full supply level to rule out further development. However, current NSW Government has recently passed legislation to permit the flooding of national parks.

The NSW Government proposes to raise Warragamba Dam's wall for flood mitigation to allow development of downstream flood plains in Sydney's north-west. Raising the dam wall would lead to inundation of 4,700 hectares of World Heritage listed Blue Mountains National Parks and 65 kilometres of wilderness streams, upstream of the raised dam wall. This proposal would submerge delicate cave art, eucalypt scar trees and Gundangara dreaming stories, depicting the titanic battle between Gurangatch and Mirragan, mythical creatures who formed the big waterholes along the Coxs and Wollondilly Rivers. Allowing residential development in flood-prone areas downstream of Warragamba Dam will endanger lives. The dam proposal is only a half measure at best – an enlarged dam will have no effect on more extreme floods. Recent flooding associated with the upper Nepean which inundated Picton, and floods coming down the Grose, Colo and Macdonald rivers, as well as South Creek, are not mitigated by the proposed dam wall raising.

The NSW Government’s 2017 flood risk strategy plans to allow an additional 134,000 people to reside on the Nepean flood plain in the next 30 years. Simply put, raising the dam wall will trigger development on the flood plain and put more people in harm’s way.

Sydney is renowned and envied as a large city surrounded by a belt of wilderness-quality national parks. These national parks, however, remain at risk from the tyrannies of self-interest, short-sightedness and the damaging effects of incremental urban expansion into sensitive areas. The NSW Government desires to turn the Nepean floodplain into real estate, and their development plans require Warragamba Dam wall to be raised, inundating wilderness and smothering it in sediment.

If southern Blue Mountains wilderness is to survive long into the 21st Century we will need to maintain its status as a world-class centre of achievement in nature conservation. Surely the purpose of World Heritage listing is to ensure effective management, and greater recognition of the area's many values. Uncritical support for urban development at all costs is challenged by these plans to consolidate such urban growth on flood-prone land, putting both the proposed new communities and World Heritage national parks in danger.
Honouring wilderness

BY KEITH MUIR

WHAT ARE THE real values of national parks and wilderness areas? Can it be that in 2018 we still don’t know what national parks are for? It appears we do not. Access to vast knowledge, GIS data, science and respect for first nations has not ensured our leaders and social commentators give credible answers to these questions.

The intrinsic value of national parks and especially wilderness, does not equate to opportunities for adventure or outdoor exercise, although these can be provided. Our national parks are a mirror enabling us to focus on our history and culture in the context of deep time of the natural sciences, although these things are also not the primary purpose of wilderness.

Intact wilderness is vastly more valuable than its parts; but as we have seen from special laws for Warragamba Dam, Snowy 2.0 and ‘horse heritage’ it’s not valued, even in a monetary sense.

The wilderness we know today is a product of biota interacting with climate and the earth’s natural systems for hundreds of millions of years. On the way coal deposits have formed, marsupials and flowering plants have evolved to become our fiery Australian bush with which we have such a complex relationship. And we have evolved from it too.

The rationale for national parks and wilderness is to leave something for wildlife, for nature, unimpaired for future generations. We are not talking about an aspirational goal, but society’s duty to provide effective natural area management to ensure wilderness thrives.

The NSW National Parks and Wilderness Service (NPWS), our conservation flag bearer, must have the wherewithal to conserve and restore large intact natural areas and permit natural processes to proceed, reasonably unimpaired. It is not hands-off management but a finely-tuned art based on generations of accumulated corporate knowledge. We must assist the NPWS to do its best to manage fire for nature, to eliminate pest species, and manage the biggest problems in any park, often ourselves. In a way, the NPWS practises bush care, and bush regeneration at the landscape scale to ensure the wild remains intact or is restored to that condition, using the best science to do it. When they do that, we hardly notice anything that has been done, that is the beauty of good management, it is usually a light touch, or seems that way.

Now (not for the first time) the NPWS is under siege and needs our help. Managing feral horses for nature’s sake is being attacked with some really crazy notions, the most recent sortie being the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018, an example of National Party interference in the management of our largest national park. It overlooks the fact that horses are now so numerous that they are dying of starvation.

For decades a battle has raged over the effective management of feral horses. The feral horse has been used to attack the NPWS and national parks. The new law requires an entirely foreign form of management, to manage this pest species as if it has heritage value. Management based on romantic Man from Snowy River notions will see more horses suffer cruel deaths and the severe degradation of protected natural grasslands through heavy overgrazing.

It is time to claim back from the exploiters wilderness and national parks that are for nature. The heritage horse law must be repealed and science-based feral horse management reinstated. The ‘Reclaim Kosci’ campaign is leading this fight – more information is available at www.reclaimkosci.org.au

We humans evolved mere millions of years ago, a blink in geological time. If we do not want to become extinct alongside so many species before us, we must learn to live within the natural limits of our earth – there is no planet B. Kosciuszko National Park is as good a place to start as anywhere.

NSW Government’s Heritage Horse Act is causing suffering

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removal from the park is expensive and only able to remove a small number each year, being far outpaced by the 20% annual population increase wild horses until maximum carrying capacity is reached and starvation cuts the growth rate. Rehoming brumbies only has an 18% success rate, condemning the remaining 82% to be sent on stressful journeys to the knackery. Brumby running (currently illegal but known to be practised) is traumatic for the horse as well as damaging to the landscape.

It is the limited population management within this Act, which is inhumane. We now have such ineffectual pest control methods that we are seeing an ever-increasing numbers of feral horses dying horrible deaths from starvation, as a result of reaching of ecological limits within the park and environs. Reports from Dr Andrea Harvey, Vet and University of Technology Sydney PhD candidate, suggested that these horses are in poor condition all year round regardless of climatic conditions. While the drought currently gripping NSW has been blamed for much of the horses suffering, it is clear that it has more to do with overpopulation in certain areas of the park. Dr Harvey, for example, claims that ‘numbers need to be reduced in some regions [purely] from an animal welfare perspective’.

Starving and dying feral horses have been caught on camera by various groups in the Snowy Mountains, as well as increasingly in Guy Fawkes National Park. The population of wild horses in Kosciuszko has reached crisis point, and is leading to widespread suffering amongst them, as well as exponential growth in the degradation they are causing to native species and fragile Alpine ecosystems. If pro-horse groups or the NSW government were remotely concerned about welfare outcomes for feral horses, they would never have passed this ridiculous legislation.

Footage released which depicts the suffering these animals have and will continue to experience, compounded by the predictions of an extended hot and dry summer, should be ringing alarm bells for anyone concerned with welfare outcomes. Isn’t the limiting of suffering the most humane option for managing wild horse populations? Is the government and pro-horse lobby culpable for this animal cruelty? Smaller populations would also result in better welfare outcomes for the remaining number of horses, while also mitigating the destruction caused in Kosciuszko National Park.

Regardless of the massive damage that the horses cause within the alpine region, the government and pro-horse groups are failing by their lobbying claims, people are coming to the Snowies to see the wild, strong and ‘inspiring’ brumby, then they will be shocked at what they will encounter.

Letting this suffering continue is not only completely inhumane, it underlines the emotion and lack of science which led to this ineffectual Heritage Horse legislation.

It’s a national park, not a paddock!
Goodradigbee – Featured Wilderness

**BY KEITH MUIR**

**LOCATED IN THE northern third of Kosciuszko, our largest national park, the Goodradigbee wilderness is drained by the Murrumbidgee.**

Goodradigbee; Goobarragandra and Cotter Rivers, the latter the main source of Canberra’s drinking water. The region’s central spine, the Fiery Range, is comprised of sedimentary and volcanic rocks intruded by bands of granodiorite. The Bogong Mountains, defining its western ramparts and the Brindabella Range rising to the east and both are predominantly granite. In the southern part of the wilderness, abutting these mountain ranges, limestone outcrops are associated with the Yarrangobilly Caves and Cooleman Plains. The wilderness has many places suitable for extended walks and good vehicle access.

Within the wilderness the general level of the terrain drops away steeply into the Goobarragandra and Goodradigbee River valleys with spectacular gorges found in their headwaters, while the Murrumbidgee headwaters in the south-east quarter are more accessible and less steep. The 1974 Kosciusko National Park Plan of Management zoned a Goodradigbee Wilderness encompassing approximately 104,000 ha in three segments, separated by public roads. The area was then identified by the 1976 Helman wilderness report, firmly establishing its wilderness credentials.

The northern end of Kosciusko has sub-alpine vegetation in the highest parts, ranging to wet sclerophyll forest at lower altitudes. In sub-alpine areas, small areas of bog, fen, heath and sod tussock grassland dissect eucalypt woodlands. Above 1,600 metres, a Eucalyptus niphophila woodland predominates, a fire sensitive eucalypt. Most individual trees in this part of the high country are less than fifteen years old, reflecting destructive burning practices associated with historic stock grazing. The woodland community typically has a shrubby understorey, with Oxyelmium ellipticum and Podocarpus species dominant. On poorly drained sites, a low heath of Kunzea mulleri/Epacris serpilifa is replaced with woodland. Where there is an elevated water table, fens and Sphagnum bogs develop in frost hollows. At this altitude, treeless sod tussock grasslands on valley bottoms are a response to cold air drainage. A characteristic E. pauciflora/E. stellulata association surrounds these frost hollows that make for attractive camping.

Extensive montane forests occur between 1,100 and 1,600 metres. These forests are dominated by a wet sclerophyll forest community, with principal species Eucalyptus delegatensis (alpine ash), E. dalyrympleana (mountain gum), E. viminalis (manna gum), and E. radiata (narrow-leaved peppermint). Its exposed dry parts have a dry sclerophyll woodland of E. macrocarphyna/E. rosii related to other tableland woodland communities to the north of the park. On the dry and very exposed lower slopes in westerly facing locations, a tall woodland of E. albens/Cali-litris spp. association is found. This rain shadow community compliments the montane forest and sub-alpine ecosystem diversity of this wilderness.

A survey of Brindabella Range National Park, an area of similar habitat to the north-east, has recorded fauna that should be expected to occur within Goodradigbee. The survey found 298 species of fauna comprising 47 mammals, 181 birds, 26 reptiles, 12 amphibians, 9 fish and 23 invertebrates. Rare fauna of the area include the Broad-toothed Rat (Mastacomys fuscus); the rare northern form of the Corroboree Frog (Pseudophryne corroboree) threatened by feral horses, and a butterfly (Orixenica kershawiphyrhe) which is endemic to the Brindabella Range. The rocky peaks of the Brindabella and Scabby Ranges in the east section of the wilderness are habitat for the summer aestivation of the Bogong Moth (Agrotis infusa).

The key management issues and threats to this wilderness are feral horses, horse riding, expansion of hydro-electricity infrastructure and logging of state forests.

The Snowy 2.0 pump-storage proposal includes Tantangara dam on the Murrumbidgee River abutting this wilderness to the south. If approved, this dam would be subject to major engineering works and subsequently to large fluctuations in water level that will cause visual blight. Associated with hydro power are power lines and roads that already scar broad areas of this national park. The pump-storage hydro proposal has not been considered as an opportunity to relocate offensive high tension power lines that fragment this wilderness. Two power line easements break this wilderness-quality forest to State Forests in 1967 and a few remaining wilderness scraps have been clawed back. The remaining wilderness is, however, in a horse riding area and separated from the Bimberi wilderness by the Bicentennial bridle trail just north of the Mount Morgan. It is possible to relocate the Trail to a nearby alternative route that offers broadly similar riding environments beside quiet country roads through the Yaouk Valley.

One agenda of the local pro-horse lobby is to re-establish grass in this national park. In 1994 a stock company purchased bi-annual catties and drives through the wilderness as a tourism venture under the name Reynella Rides. While promoted as compatible with park use due to its recreational component, the activity sacrifices a diverse community of wildlife and vegetation – the Bogong Peaks, Goobarragandra and Bimberi that were declared separately under the Wilderness Act.

The Fiery Range section of this wilderness suffers a sub-alpine incursion where the Brindabella and Bogong Ranges meet at Reedy Hill where formerly magnificent alpine ash forests are now in the Bondo and Micalong State Forests, that were once part of the Kosciuszko State Park, reserved in 1944. Tom Lewis ceded 34,000 ha of wilderness-quality forest to State Forests in 1967 and a few remaining wilderness scraps have since been clawed back. The remaining state forests should be returned and if possible the wilderness extended. Only a minor reduction in timber resources would be involved.

Over 20,000 hectares of potential wilderness lie between the Nungar Plain and Mount Morgan on the eastern side of the Kosciuszko National Park and this nominated area links with wilderness in Bimberi and Scabby Range Nature Reserves in NSW, and Namadgi National Park in the ACT. The area was mapped as high wilderness quality by Environment Australia in the 1990s. Reservation would not interfere with vehicle access to the popular Blue Waterholes via Long Plain or the Pocket Road, indicating that the addition is compatible with most existing recreation uses.

The proposed wilderness addition is, however, in a horse riding area and separated from the Bimberi wilderness by the Bicentennial bridle trail just north of the Mount Morgan. It is possible to relocate the Trail to a nearby alternative route that offers broadly similar riding environments beside quiet country roads through the Yaouk Valley.

The protection of this wilderness has been a long and slow process. In December 1993 the Fahey Government announced a 350,000 ha wilderness Christmas present that included most of the Goodradigbee, but a back bench revolt followed the announcement and after an unusual review by the NSW Surveyor General, only 113,000 ha was declared in 1994. The Government was then censured in the Lower House for its failure to deliver its present.

In 1995 the wilderness was publicly re-exhibited and in continued on p. 5
Lithgow can be the new Katoomba

KEITH MUIR,
COLOGNE FOUNDATION

THE LONG-AWAITED RESERVATION of large, unprotected areas of the Gardens of Stone region will bring great benefits to Lithgow, including more jobs, and hopefully help overturn community concerns about the value of preserving the region’s spectacular natural heritage.

Support for a big new reserve has come from a surprising quarter. Over the last few years the mining industry has pushed through changes to ‘environmental offsets’ that permit mining to destroy nationally significant and endangered upland swamps. These changes enabled financial payments for conservation outcomes, and subsequently Centennial Coal has identified its preferred swamp management program as being reservation of the Gardens of Stone region.

Reservation of the Gardens of Stone as a State Conservation Area can protect its pagodas and swamps, and permit appropriate underground coal mining at the same time. The NSW Government, however, is in no hurry – legislation by the NSW Greens to establish such a reserve was recently voted down in Parliament.

The numbers stack up, Lithgow will be a winner

Based on visitation to existing NPWS reserves, around 200,000 visits per year is a realistic aim for the proposed Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area and these visits would generate $27 million per year. These numbers can easily be secured as they only require a small portion of the five million visitors a year to Blue Mountains National Park to choose to visit the Gardens of Stone.

The reason that Gardens of Stone can attract a good proportion of visitors coming to the Blue Mountains is that it can offer unique opportunities for family-friendly experiences in nature.

More than a name change and signage

Lithgow’s beautiful and internationally unique pagoda landforms are the key to attracting tourists. They are Lithgow’s key point of difference for tourism marketing that should be packaged around Lithgow as the gateway to the Gardens of Stone.

Lithgow-focused signage and a good vehicle access loop from Lithgow through the Gardens of Stone and back is also essential, otherwise the community won’t benefit from the new reserve. Visitors will just drift away to facilities in the Blue Mountains as they do now.

The unprotected part of the Gardens of Stone region has dIRT roads, gentle terrain and distinctive pagoda rock formations with potential for easy short walks to complement and buffer the rugged wilderness of the adjacent Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. The gentle terrain of the Gardens’ ridgetops enables easy access to awe-inspiring views of deep gorges and long continuous escarpments, and walks to nationally endangered swamps, remarkable montane heathlands, forested sand dunes formed during the last ice age, abundant wildflowers, grassy forests, rainforest glades, creeks, waterfalls and Aboriginal rock art in dramatic cave overhangs. All offer enormous potential for families to discover and connect with nature.

Family-friendly, nature-based experiences can be established, accessed by an upgraded, Lithgow-focused road network with sites for visitor facilities, such as lookouts, picnic areas and accessible (wheelchair) tracks, day walks, mountain bike touring tracks, scenic drives, 4WD trail routes, camping and nature watching. These facilities should be clustered towards Lithgow, with the more remote, less disturbed areas, of necessity, requiring less development.

As tourism becomes better established, Lithgow will provide a greater range of tours, accommodation, restaurants and cafes, entertainment, transport, as well as supplies, such as groceries and fuel, for the independent visitors. Lithgow’s younger generations will benefit from new jobs.

Reserve planning

Unified, resourced and professional conservation, rehabilitation and recreation management by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) needs to be applied across the whole reserve proposal.

The level of government investment required may be in the order of $20 million for reserve establishment and $2 million per annum ongoing. These resources can be sourced from the NSW Environment and Tourism Fund, Centennial’s multi-million swamp offset payments, and national assistance to cushion communities like Lithgow from changes in the energy market. Management costs can be reduced by mining company access road maintenance, and by transferring existing state forest expenditure to the NPWS.

Reserve establishment would inject funds into the local economy over a period of 5 to 10 years for employment, contracting, materials and services. The development of facilities, tourism promotion, economic benefits and conservation outcomes can only be achieved by the establishment of a State Conservation Area providing effective management for the entire region.

The only practical ‘offset’ for damaged Endangered Ecological Community swamps is catchment protection of as many intact swamps as possible, including Long Swamp, coupled with conservation management to ensure offset expenditure is not wasted.

Some of the accessible parts of the Gardens of Stone are no longer pristine, and visitor facilities can be located in these areas and this will avoid mistakes like building lookouts on top of pagodas. Restoration of damaged areas will also provide local jobs and, given political will, be a part of mine rehabilitation programs.

Lithgow can be the new Katoomba. A 39,000 hectare Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area would be a world-class conservation and eco-tourism reserve, a ‘win-win’ for Lithgow’s working, community and environment. It is not a political risk, but a wonderful opportunity.

1996 eventually declared, minus the Coolamine Plain. Of the 34,000 ha taken from the park, 2,280 ha of state forests were returned as an addition to the Goobarragandra Wilderness. Further additions were made in 2003, following a fourth public review producing a wilderness extending over 94,876 hectares in NSW and a further 31,800 hectares in the ACT.

Effective management of this wilderness is an on-going battle. Only in the Bimberi section of the wilderness in the ACT is plant and animal diversity thriving as feral pests have been excluded.

Image: NSW Government
Grasslands in peril

**NATIVE GRASSLANDS STRETCH from the exposed parts of our coastline to the hot, arid interior of western NSW, but naturally enough its rarest types grow in the temperate coast and tableland regions where most of us live.**

Grasses in semi-arid regions are ephemeral and spend most of their lifecycle as soil-stored seeds that germinate, grow and set new seed in a short period after rain. Natural temperate grassland on the other hand is dominated by perennial grass species and a broad range of herbaceous flowering plants, including daisies, peas, lilies, orchids and species from many other families, all collectively known as forbs, or ‘wildflowers’ in the case of showy species.

Natural temperate grassland of the Southern Tablelands is a nationally endangered ecosystem due to severe fragmentation and an alarming decline in its extent. This loss has been brought about by clearing for agriculture, plantation forestry and urbanisation. The grassland’s remaining sites continue to be modified through neglect and inappropriate grazing, causing further species loss, including threatened flora and fauna.

Only 1.5% of the pre-European distribution of this community in NSW (just 991 ha) remains scattered across public and private land. These remnants are climatically and geographically isolated from natural temperate grassland elsewhere.

Natural temperate grassland of the Southern Tablelands intermingles with grassy woodlands that are also often endangered. Secondary grasslands are similar to natural grasslands but derived from grassy woodlands or forests that have been extensively cleared. They generally contain different forb species and shrubs characteristic of those communities.

While natural temperate grassland has nearly all been destroyed, a broad scattering of small remnants gives an indication of the character and range of this ecosystem prior to European settlement. These tiny remnants are commonly in cemeteries, churchyards, on roadsides or in travelling stock reserves – places not subject to continual grazing, intensive pasture improvement or cropping. Characteristically in all, rich forb diversity and grass species intolerant of continuous grazing pressure are present.

**Impacts of grazing**

Grazing affects grasslands through the removal of biomass, trampling, increased soil nutrients, increased weediness (through creation of bare ground, dispersal of seeds and introduction of weeds through fodder), destruction and modification of faunal habitat, soil erosion, and loss of soil moisture. Plant species sensitive to grazing become less common and the grassland becomes ‘simplified’. Less palatable perennial grasses such as Red Grass, wallaby grasses and speargrasses become more prominent as grazing intensity increases.

Weeds in natural temperate grassland include: annual grasses (e.g. Rat’s Tail Fescue and Squirrel Tail Fescue Vulpia spp., barley grasses Hordeum spp.); annual and biennial forbs (e.g. Viper’s Bugloss Echium vulgare, Great Mullein or Aaron’s Rod Verbascum thapsus); perennial grasses (Sweet Vernal Grass Anthoxanthum odoratum, Yorkshire Fog Holcus lanatus), Chilean Needlegrass Nassella neesiana, Serrated Tussock N. trichotoma, Phalaris or Canary Grass Phalaris aquatica, Bulbous Bluegrass Poa bulbosa); perennial forbs (e.g. St John’s Wort Hypericum perforatum) and shrubs or woody weeds (e.g. Hawthorn Crataegus monogyna, African Boxthorn Lycium ferocissimum, Sweetbrier Rosa rubiginosa). Much of the biodiversity of native grassland is made up of species other than grasses. As well as being trampled, lilies, orchids and forbs are less likely to survive under grazing due to their palatability and failure to set seed (especially upright forbs where grazing removes the reproductive parts). These effects are a key destructive impact of grazing by feral horses occurring in Kosciusko and Guy Fawkes National Parks.

Given the small amount remaining, all temperate grasslands meeting the definition of the community should be considered to be habitat critical to survival. In the Southern Highlands of NSW a mere 350 hectares is protected in nature reserves and crown reserves dedicated to conservation. A number of sites on various tenures are under negotiation for Conservation Management Agreements. Whatever level of protection is provided for individual sites, the key factor for their long-term conservation is the implementation of management practices that will maintain and, ideally, enhance conservation values. Research and monitoring are required to implement ‘best practice’ management and to keep it effective as circumstances change. Government botanists are essential to provide independent advice for conservation management, otherwise offset and tax funding for grassland conservation may well be wasted.

**Reference:**


**NSW Government’s record on the environment**

“We have seen a world-class catchment management system dismantled. We have seen the subversion of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. We have seen the degradation of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which was once regarded as one of the five outstanding such services in the world. We have seen the arrangements for the protection of native vegetation undermined. Now we see a proposal in which the Government is proceeding in apparent ignorance of the national and international significance of the World Heritage status of the Blue Mountains National Park. This exercise reminds me somewhat of the recent decisions around the Kosciuszko National Park in which, on the basis of no coherent evidence whatsoever, arrangements are being made to turn the Kosciuszko National Park into a horse farm.”

Bob Debus, Former Environment Minister, addressing the Upper House Inquiry into proposed legislation to enable the raising of Warragamba Dam wall which will impact the World Heritage Blue Mountains National Park, October 4, 2018.
Re-imagining wilderness

On September 2nd, Andy Macqueen presented the biannual Alex Colley memorial lecture, Re-imagining wilderness: finding soul in a dystopian world, now published on the Colong Foundation website.

Andy is known to bushwalkers and Blue Mountains residents for his bushwalking skills and bush regeneration efforts, but since the 1990s he has also been an accomplished historian. He concluded his remarkable essay with these words: ‘When too many people lose the ability to connect simply and in depth with wilderness, to find meaning and humility, to see themselves in perspective, there’ll be no-one left to defend it. At the cultural level there’ll be no wilderness. In NSW, the Wilderness Act might be repealed overnight. More unlikely things are happening in this world, let’s face it. Then the resorts and the roads will invade and there’ll be no wilderness in actuality.

Let’s not imagine wilderness as a place to be played in, conquered, understood and measured using every piece of technology available. Imagine it as a place to be visited on its own terms, that cannot and should not be fully quantified and understood. A place to be cared for and nurtured. A place not of threats and monsters, but of mystery and story and soul—derived from 65 thousand years of cultural heritage—and still counting forwards. A place that can be valued, in their own way, by all Australians.

So that, in a hundred years, in a thousand years, people may still have large natural areas and value them deeply—although parts of humanity may well be living in an unrecognisable, dystopian world, ever more reliant on technology and robotics.’

Falls-Hotham Alpine Crossing approved

By Stephen Lake

Colong Bulletin 166 reported on the proposed 2015 Falls-Hotham Alpine Crossing, a walking track upgrade in Victoria’s Alpine National Park ascending Diamantina Spur. The Parks Victoria Master Plan has now been adopted and allows for hut development on Mt. Feathertop.

The master plan was guided to approval by a pre-development advisory group that had no conservation representatives and replaced the park management role usually played by the Park’s Alpine Advisory Committee.

The Master Plan claims current annual use of this walk is 4,400 to 7,300 visitors/year and will increase to 6,400 to 10,700 visitors/year by 2027. Recent analysis of existing hut log books recorded just 34 walkers a year, and few of these walked up Diamantina Spur. Obviously the Master Plan numbers were “cooked” to make the economics of the iconic walk attractive.

There was no detailed economic case and the return on the $34 million capital investment in the new track and three huts will be minimal. Parks Victoria will incur a loss as recurrent costs will increase.

Mt Feathertop. Alpine National Park – the Victorian Government has approved development of a hut for paying tourists on top of it

Huts along it.

Few people will walk up Diamantina Spur, so the proposed lodge on Mt. Feathertop will be a waste of money. Development of this remote mountain top will destroy the values that they intend to promote, repeating the mistakes made throughout the Alps of Europe where almost every mountain has been developed.

Bushwalkers also believe that the proposed track will be constructed to a uniform standard. This is fine for Botanic Gardens, but not for an adventurous walk to Mt. Feathertop. The mountain’s charm will be changed by a track.

‘The Language of Fire’, Did Aboriginal Australians Burn As We Are Told?

Fuel Reduction is often said to be based on the assumption that all Aboriginal people undertook fire-stick farming. Joel Wright, a traditional owner in south-west Victoria and an indigenous language, culture and history researcher, questions this assumption. He finds no evidence of wide-scale burning in Aboriginal language and culture, but does find other explanations for the history of aboriginal fires observed by Europeans.

There were no fire-stick farming practices in Victoria. There were no smoke-signals exchanged between clans, for general communication and warning of approaching Europeans. There was also defensive burning to hinder explorers by burning feed for their stock. Other fires were to ‘cover their tracks’ when they were being pursued. Many of these fires were mistaken for landscape burning. Joel also found one record of burning small portions of dry grass around marshes to expose an area to attract birds to scratch for food there, making the birds potential meals for the indigenous hunters.

Nowhere did he find anything to justify the destructive and dangerous annual incineration of the landscapes of the Gunditjimara by the Victorian Government. He was concerned that burning the bush as we do now kills the birds and animals so important to vegetation stories, removes scar and burial trees and burns micro particles from axes and spears that hold the clues as to what they were used for.

Joel Wright’s presentation at the Australian Wildlife Protection Council Fire and Wildlife Conference, Pause and Review Victoria’s Fire Management, November 2014
A Conservationist's Tale. Geoff Mosley's memoir by Andy Macqueen (352pp)

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MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

The Colong Foundation is Australia’s longest-serving community advocate for wilderness. Its proposal for a Greater Blue Mountains National Park, which the Foundation not only played a leading role in realising Myles Dunphy's plan for a Greater Blue Mountains National Park, it has initiated successful campaigns for the protection of over a million hectares of wilderness in NSW.

The Law Society of NSW recommends the following wording… “I bequeath the sum of $… to the Colong Foundation in 1968 until 1975 it was the fighting force that prevented limestone mining and the destruction of native forest for pine plantations in the southern Blue Mountains. The Foundation, in its early years, concentrated its efforts on the Tabletop and Main Range in the Snowy Mountains. The Wilderness Act was accepted in 1987. To supplement this legislation, our Red Bulletin back page, 11/18 Areas Council, is Australia's longest-serving community advocate for wilderness.

If you wish to become a member of the Colong Foundation... I accept the liability provided in the Colong Foundation’s Articles of Association to guarantee $20 should it be needed in the event of the winding up of the Foundation. Signed…

The Colong Foundation for Wilderness Ltd.

Level 2, 332 Pitt Street, Sydney NSW 2000

Support The Colong Foundation!