



Conservationists say no to hunting in National Parks

by Keith Muir

The Shooters and Fishers Party (SFP) has introduced legislation that allows hunting of feral animals in national parks. Its passage through the NSW Parliament was assured in exchange for SFP support for the sale of state-owned power plants. The deal reverses Premier Barry O'Farrell's repeatedly-made no hunting in national parks promise.

Let's be clear, Premier O'Farrell didn't want this deal with the SFP, or any deal, but believes he must so that Government legislation can proceed through the NSW Parliament. The previous Labor administration also found itself having to negotiate with the SFP to get those aspects of its legislative program through the Parliament that the NSW Greens would not support, like its notorious Part 3A planning laws. Such negotiations led to the passage of the *Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002* (G&FAC Act) and the creation of a pro-hunting statutory authority, the Game Council. The new legislation applies this law to national parks.

The first pest species to be defined as a game animal under the G&FAC Act was deer. They are a serious pest animal in natural areas, including in World Heritage listed rainforest areas, and deer have been listed as a 'key threatening process' under environmental laws. 'Bag limits' set for the sustainable management of deer prevent farmers from eradicating 'game' animals on their land, and deer numbers are growing rapidly across NSW, sometimes helped by maverick hunters, who are also known to release feral pigs. The new law allows the Minister for the Environment to make goat and other feral animals a game animal under the G&FAC Act at a stroke of a pen.

Similarly pest birds, not currently present in NSW, are also defined as game under the G&FAC Act, including Californian quail and Guinea fowl. When these birds are released into the wild, as they one day will be, this Act requires these highly invasive pest birds to be sustainably managed as game by hunters through licences issued by the Game Council.

The new law that extends game management to national parks:

- fosters the spread of feral animals, including the facilitation of new pest species;
- threatens the safety of park workers and visitors;
- compromises animal welfare; and
- erodes nature-based national park management and wildlife conservation.

Only 48 of the 779 reserves in NSW are excluded from being opened to hunting under the new law, so the 2.9 million hectares of parks now opened to hunting is just a start. The Environment Minister, Robyn Parker, can subsequently agree to hunting even in the excluded parks.

Under the G&FAC Act there is no public consultation on proposed park closures for particular hunting efforts. Once National parks are declared 'hunting public land' hunters are exempt from interference. Walkers who stray into such park land could be guilty of interference while at the same time at risk of being shot. Those park visitors in a national park also could be required to leave if hunters believe they might suffer interference. Meanwhile hunters are now exempt from pollution offences, meaning they cannot be held responsible for messes they make in our national parks from preparing their trophies, skins and meat.

The new law entrenches the Game Council's vision of sustainable management of vertebrate pests by bringing so-called conservation hunting into national parks.

There are very serious vertebrate pest problems across the entire continent. It's not a problem restricted to national parks. A rational response to this environmental threat requires well-planned and coordinated programs with specific goals of environmental impact reduction, using effective and humane methods, and with monitoring to assess whether goals are being met.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service employs highly qualified pest control officers that can kill hundreds of vertebrate pests a day. For example, through the use of helicopters they can eradicate hundreds of goats in a few hours. Amateur hunters in a ground based operation can only cover a few hectares, provided they have sufficient fitness to safely traverse rugged park terrain.

These sorts of activities actually prevent effective control of pest species by diverting limited staff resources. Even if feral animals are located during these hunting forays, unfit amateur hunters may find it difficult to get a clear shot in forested parks. Animals will be maimed and suffer horrible lingering deaths as a result.

In 2010-11 the Game Council issued 15,080 hunting licences and reported 14,161 animals killed on public land or 0.9 pests per hunting trip. Some 46% of the animals shot were rabbits, about 20% were goats and about 16% were pigs. Wild dogs, which are one of the biggest problems for landholders made up just 0.5% of all animals taken (Game Council Ann. Rpt., pgs 13 & 15). The annual budget for the Game Council is \$2.5 million, so each pest animal killed last year on public land cost \$176.50. Shooters and Fishers MLC Robert Brown claimed in Parliament that "game hunting licence holders will spend more than \$100 million of their own money in pursuit of their volunteer hunting efforts" (Hansard, 14/6/2012). If even a quarter or a third of this money was spent on public land then the cost of killing a rabbit is truly astronomical.

These figures demonstrate ground based recreational hunting is an ineffective means of feral animal control. Removing the occasional rabbit, goat or pig is a waste of money and time.

The Shooters and Fishers Party allege that the impact by recreational hunters on feral animal populations has been proven as every pest animal killed counts. They also say that shooting ducks is appropriate because there are millions of ducks and the ones hunters shoot would die anyway. Unlike native ducks, whose long-term population levels are in decline, feral animal populations are on the increase and require effective control. To control feral animals, the techniques used must remove half of a population annually, or more. Hunting just doesn't have any positive impact on pest populations.

Premier Barry O'Farrell's claim that allowing recreational hunters into our national parks is a logical extension of an existing policy of having professional hunters cull feral animals is incorrect. The Game Council is replacing pest control with game management. The motivation of the amateur shooters as enshrined by the recent legislation is to hunt game for trophy heads, skins and meat. Amateurs don't have the skills to eradicate pests and their motivation is to see pest numbers increase, so that there is game to hunt.

The very idea of game management works to defeat pest control. In the Australian Shooters' Journal, hunters admit to a proud history of maintaining sustainable populations of game species to shoot, which is completely the wrong motivation for feral animal control. Hunters' proud conservation record historically includes introducing foxes and rabbits, and perhaps very soon exotic pest birds as well.

Our national parks are extremely popular. Millions of visitors and amateur hunting are a deadly mix. The risk of injury or death to park visitors and staff from accidental shooting is very real. Poorly trained amateur hunters can get 'venison happy', and then shoot at whatever moves. There are too many ways a person can enter any national park to ensure that hunting activities are safe. In New Zealand there's an injury or death due to a hunting accident every nine months.

The decision to allow recreational hunting in national parks program may well haunt the Premier for the rest of his political career. Encouraged by their success, the Shooters and Fishers Party will increase their demands for more hunting opportunities and deregulation of gun ownership, including removal of licences for what they call 'long arms', meaning rifles and the reintroduction of automatic, high-powered weapons.

Meanwhile, conservationists have joined with park rangers to stop hunting in national parks. Park rangers have vowed not to implement the new law. Attempts to introduce hunting in national parks will no doubt lead to arrest situations, and the risk of heavy fines. Even octogenarian conservationists are prepared to be arrested than see this law put into effect. Stopping this abuse of national parks will be a very bitter fight that could well drag the NSW Government into disgrace.