FACT SHEET: FERAL HORSES IN KOSCIUSZKO NATIONAL PARK

The NSW government’s decision to ignore scientific evidence and years of public consultation to protect feral horses in Kosciuszko National Park under a so-called ‘Brumbies Bill’ sets a dangerous precedent for Australia’s threatened species and our protected areas.

Species
Horse / Equus ferus caballus.

Background
In June 2018, a bill was passed in the NSW parliament to protect feral horses in Kosciuszko National Park.

The Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018 prioritises a harmful invasive species over the fragile ecosystems of a national park and world biosphere reserve.

Please support our campaign to repeal this law, and to implement humane and effective control of feral horses in Kosciuszko National Park.

Go to ReclaimKosci.org.au to sign the petition, donate or volunteer.

MYTHS VS FACTS

**MYTH:** Kosciuszko’s horses have a unique heritage and have always been protected by high country cattlemen.

Many Kosciuszko species are unique, but the feral horses there are just like any other horse. Australia has more than 300,000 feral horses and there are no genetic traits to distinguish the Kosciuszko horses from them or domestic horses.

**MYTH:** Kosciuszko’s horses are descended from horses that went to war with Australian soldiers.

Kosciuszko’s horses are not descendants of horses used in World War 1 (these horses were not returned to Australia). The Kosciuszko population has descended from horses that escaped from local farms or were deliberately released. Nor is there clear evidence that horses were even taken from the Kosciuszko population for the war effort. Such horses came from many places in Australia.

**MYTH:** There aren’t many horses in Kosciuszko.

The latest detailed aerial survey in 2016 found 6000 feral horses in Kosciuszko National Park. This is far too many horses from horses that escaped from local farms or were deliberately released. Nor is there clear evidence that horses were even taken from the Kosciuszko population for the war effort. Such horses came from many places in Australia.

In the 1860s and 1870s, wild horses in NSW were regarded as a nuisance and a pest, and were regularly killed to control numbers.

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Feral horse habitat destruction could impact on listed threatened species, including:

- Southern corroboree frog – Critically Endangered
- Northern corroboree frog – Critically Endangered
- Smoky mouse – Critically Endangered
- Clover glycine – Critically Endangered
- Alpine she-oak skink – Endangered
- Guthega skink – Endangered
- Alpine spiny crayfish – Endangered
- Mountain pygmy-possum – Endangered
- Archer’s carex – Endangered
- Raleigh sedge – Endangered
- Broad-toothed rat – Vulnerable
- Shining cudweed – Vulnerable
- Mauve burr-daisy – Vulnerable
- Anemone buttercup – Vulnerable
- Monaro golden daisy – Vulnerable

Mountain pygmy-possum – *Burramys parvus*. Photo: Australian Alps collection – Parks Australia CC BY-NC-ND 2.0
for sensitive alpine ecosystems, and experts say the number will continue to grow by 6 to 17% a year. There is overwhelming scientific evidence that current numbers are causing severe damage. A recent study of horses on the Bogong Plains found that ‘with even a small number of animals, the rate of damage is greater than the rate of natural repair’. The NSW government’s 2016 draft strategy for controlling feral horses in Kosciuszko said their population should be reduced by 90% over 20 years.

**MYTH:** Horses in Kosciuszko don’t cause much damage.

Australia’s alpine plants and animals did not evolve with heavy, hard-hoofed animals and many rely on habitats that are now being severely damaged by horses. In both NSW and Victoria, the scientific committees advising the governments on threatened species have concluded that feral horses are a major threat to alpine habitats. The NSW committee found that ‘habitat damage in streams, wetlands and adjacent riparian systems occurs through selective grazing, trampling, track creation, pugging (soil compaction), wallowing, dust bathing leading to stream bank slumping and destruction, stream course disturbance and incision and sphagnum bog and wetland destruction.’

**MYTH:** Horses do not go into the sensitive areas of Kosciuszko.

All of Kosciuszko is sensitive to damage by feral horses. The greatest horse impacts have been focused in the most sensitive areas, especially wetlands, waterways, alpine and sub-alpine areas. Horse herds move annually into Main Range during spring and summer and they have also been seen on the alpine plateaus.

**MYTH:** Horse grazing prevents fires in Kosciuszko.

The popular claim that ‘grazing prevents blazing’ is not supported by science. Horses do not feed on the shrubs and unpalatable tussocky grasses that carry fire in extreme conditions, such as occurred in the catastrophic fires of 1939 and 2003. There is, however, some evidence of the converse – that grazing by feral horses and cattle can increase the intensity of bushfires by removing ground cover, resulting in denser scrub. The damage caused by severe fires is intensified by horses after fires due to the erosion and degradation they cause.

**MYTH:** Pigs, deer and foxes are the real problems in Kosciuszko, not horses.

Introduced pigs, deer, goats, rabbits and foxes also threaten Kosciuszko’s natural values and are controlled by park managers through trapping, baiting, and aerial and ground shooting. Feral horses are an even bigger threat and should be managed just like other harmful feral animals.

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**CORROBOREE FROG**

The corroboree frog is listed as critically endangered, one step away from extinct in the wild.

Threats include the amphibian chytrid fungus, habitat degradation, feral animals and weeds. Feral horses, pigs and deer have been observed damaging corroboree frog habitat.

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**Photo:** Andrew C | CC BY-SA 3.0
MYTH: Kosciuszko horses are a major tourist attraction.
Several surveys show the main activities of visitors to Kosciuszko are snow sports, walking, car touring, sightseeing and nature appreciation. Many visitors like seeing horses in the distance, but closer up are appalled by degraded and dung fouled picnic and camping areas, polluted and damaged streams and wetlands caused by the horses. Some visitors find the horses intimidating. Feral horses are undermining the major tourism assets of the park – the natural beauty and diverse wildlife.

MYTH: Aerial shooting is inhumane.
The RSPCA supports professionally managed aerial culling of feral horses in Kosciuszko. An expert committee appointed by the NSW government to advise on feral horse control concluded that aerial culling is the most humane and effective method of control in Kosciuszko. There are strict protocols to maximise welfare outcomes. Trapping and transporting horses for slaughter causes much more suffering than shooting.

MYTH: Rehoming and fertility control are solutions.
Fertility control in an area the size of Kosciuszko is not feasible. Trapping, the current main control method, is also ineffective because it cannot keep up with the rate of increase. Where regular trapping has occurred horse numbers have increased.
Over the past decade an average of less than 100 trapped horses a year have been rehomed, despite extensive advertising and liaison with brumby groups.

ABOUT RECLAIM KOSCI
In June 2018 the NSW government turned Australia into a global laughing stock when it passed legislation protecting destructive feral horses in Kosciuszko National Park, locking in ongoing degradation of sensitive wetlands and alpine areas.

Overturning the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act – which should be called the Kosciuszko Destruction Act – is essential for protecting our fragile alpine region.

Reclaim Kosci is led by the Invasive Species Council and supported by the National Parks Association of the ACT, National Parks Association of NSW, Colong Foundation for Wilderness and the Nature Conservation Council of NSW.