



Australian Brumby Alliance

(ABA)

Brumby Resource Information-3.1

www.australianbrumbyalliance.org.au

The Brumby, the Environment, and the Management Debate

Snapshot of Brumby Origins

Horses arrived in Australia with the first English fleet in January 1788. The term Brumby is thought to have originated from horses left behind by Sargent James Brumby when he was transferred from Botany Bay to Van Diemen's Land in 1806. Over time, these horses became known as Brumby's horses, a term that was eventually shortened to Brumbies.

Landowners and graziers would catch, tame and use local Brumbies for farm and stock work. After NSW and Victorian's Alpine Mountains were declared National Parks, this practice was banned. Since the ban, the mainly static Alpine Brumby population has started to slowly increase. As Brumby sightings became more evident, many environmental impacts were thought to be caused by Brumbies. Environmentalists began calling for their removal, frequently voicing that any feral or non-indigenous species did not belong in a national park.

No research occurred into which species (pigs, goats, deer, cats, dogs, foxes, horses etc.), or mix of species, may be causing the impacts or to identify other factors that could show why impacts were now increasing in terrain where Brumbies had lived for over 200 years.

Snapshot of Brumby Social Historic Values

The Brumby became a living symbol of post-settlement folklore that acknowledged the early settlers reliance on the horse to survive and progress the fledgling economy. Horses worked stock, provided transport, ploughed farms and served Australia in war. When the motor vehicle arrived, working horses were released into nearby bushland. Some died, but the survivors became the forbears of current day wild horses known as Brumbies.

Examples of the benefits Brumbies bring, in managed numbers, to National Parks

- Increased biodiversity as they attract birds and insects into the park which depend on larger areas of short, cropped grass,
- Their dung fertilises the landscape and increases soil water retention, which in turn benefits biodiversity, and
- Brumbies are an integral part of the Australian 'spirit' and a 'living landscape' for the public, including tourists, to enjoy.

What do Brumby supporters and opposers have *in common*?

Both those who support Brumbies living wild in national parks and those against Brumbies living in national parks *want to protect the environment.*

However, the way supporters and opposers view conservation management in relation to Brumby populations differs greatly.

Brumby Supporters:

- Believe that Brumbies, in managed numbers, will benefit park flora and fauna, and
- That Brumby management programs must use the most humane option available. [Note: *The RSPCA describes a totally humane method as one which does not cause any pain, suffering or distress to target and non-target animals.*]

Brumby Opposers:

- Believe that Brumbies, whether managed or not, must be removed because they view Brumbies as feral, invasive and a pest to park native flora and fauna, and
- That Brumby removal programs should be conducted with priority given to cost effectiveness over humaneness. [Source: 21st Century Town Hall meeting conducted as part of the NPWS review of Kosciuszko's current Wild Horse management plan].

The key focus for 'purist' conservationist seems to be that anything indigenous (existed *before* European settlement) is *good* and should be conserved, while non-indigenous species, such as Brumbies, are *bad*, so must be removed.

The aim of removing anything "introduced", with the exception of humans, is presumably to turn the Australian 'landscape clock' back to pre-Settlement times before 1788, a concept that many in the scientific community would consider neither realistic nor practical to follow. It is also inconsistent with the increasing use of parks by humans for recreational activities such as hiking, four wheel driving, cycling, skiing and the associated infrastructure required.

Terminology

The word *feral* has virtually been replaced with *wild* in national park Brumby literature in NSW and Victoria. However both these states continue to use terms such as, *invasive* and *pest*. The issue for Brumby supporters is that using the terms *invasive*, *pest* or *feral* suggests that the species presence is only negative. Using the least emotive language, when referring to Brumby park management programs, is more likely to maximise constructive dialogue.

All species, especially humans, share the capacity to move into niches occupied by other species. In the case of Australia's Brumbies, the ability to live wild in our national parks is a direct consequence of man changing their environment. The ABA would argue that in this instance, the term *invasive* incorrectly implies the Brumby chose to 'invade'.

Australian Legislation

National Park Government Acts call for exotic/introduced fauna to be removed or controlled to preserve and protect the parks' natural, native (i.e. *pre 1788*) values. ABA believes that recognition and consideration should be made to the fact that Brumbies existed in these areas long before they were declared national parks. That being said, the ABA supports the need to control Brumby populations to a level that enables healthy Brumbies to live in healthy environments alongside healthy flora and fauna.

Many people express concern at the shoot-and-shoot-again methods used by some National Park authorities, then just leave unmanaged populations to rise again. The ABA expects only the most humane method available to be used for lowering overabundant Brumbies numbers. The RSPCA Australia defines humane killing as when an animal is either killed instantly or *instantaneously* rendered insensible to pain until death supervenes.

Humane Brumby Management

A defining moment that eventually led to improved, humane National Park removal methods occurred in the year 2000. The badly handled aerial shooting of 600 Brumbies in Guy Fawkes National Park (GFNP) resulted in a major public and political backlash after locals reported seeing Brumbies alive, but severely wounded several days after the aerial shooting finished. The RSPCA NSW investigated and then laid 12 charges of cruelty, which were eventually plea bargained by NPWS NSW to pleading guilty on only one charge of cruelty for 4 horses who suffered, one still alive 2 weeks after being shot, in return for the other 11 charges being dropped. NPWS NSW was also ordered to pay RSPCA's costs of \$20,000.

Development of Brumby 'rehomeing'

People concerned that Brumbies be protected and valued came together after the 2000 aerial shoot met with GFNP staff to encourage passive trapping using lours and then offer those trapped for rehomeing as a more humane alternative to lower Brumby populations in GFNP.

As a result, the concept of passive trapping evolved and this technique is now considered to be a significantly improved, more humane method to use, because the Brumby voluntarily enters the park trap. Once trapped, GFNP staff then offer the trapped Brumbies to people with the skills to gentle and adjust to domestic life, then be rehomed.

Passive trapping in NPWS and Parks Victoria

The more humane trap method developed with GFNP rangers and local Rehomers after 2000 have become the benchmark for passive trapping by National Park managers in Victoria and NSW. There are insufficient skilled Rehomers to cope with the volume and so around 70% of Brumbies trapped are collected by contractors who then truck the majority to abattoirs.

Passive trapping with lours is now capable of humanely removing up to 670 Brumbies a year from Kosciuszko. This trapping rate is sufficient for passive trapping to be a very effective and humane way to lower proven overabundant Brumby numbers.

However, both NSW and Victoria retain the option to aerial or ground shoot Brumbies in the wild, as a future option – and are not yet willing to accept how effective the trapping rates already achieved can be, and to trial fertility control to stabilise Brumby populations.

RSPCA Australia believes there is a continuing need to improve current control methods or replace them with more humane and effective alternatives. The RSPCA supports research and development of humane alternatives, including the replacement of lethal methods with humane and effective non-lethal methods, such as reproductive control. [RSPCA Australia website]

Those supporting Aerial Shooting, i.e. The National Parks Association (NPA) who consider that aerial culling is the *most effective control measure* for wild horses. [from NPA website], and the Coolong foundation [from website] who say that *aerial culling is essential to contain the numbers of feral horses in the park*, and without aerial culling only ineffective methods can be proposed.

Those opposing Aerial shooting such as the ABA and many Brumby groups and individuals take the view that aerial culling must not be used to lower Brumby numbers. Parks Victoria and NPWS NSW passive trapping skills and rehomeing options have significantly increased. Where there is a solid case to reduce wild horse numbers, we believe the way forward is to build on these trapping and rehomeing skills, adapt them to suit our vast remote regions and focus research on more humane options, such as fertility control.

National Park Management Reviews

NSW and Victoria National Park managements are in the process of reviewing how Brumby populations should be managed. As part of this review park staff are consulting with a range of people both *for* and *against* retaining managed Brumby populations living wild in NSW and Victorian National Parks, including the humanness of the each cull method available.

Current issues are still complex and remain polarised from:

- Those wanting *all* Brumbies, because they consider them a feral pest, removed from national parks by any method. Some also see removal as top priority, irrespective of the method's humanness [Source: 21st Century Town Hall meeting conducted as part of the NPWS review of Kosciuszko's current Wild Horse management plan], *versus*
- Those who want *managed numbers* of healthy Brumbies living in healthy park land, and any overabundant Brumbies removed in the most humane way available.

Concluding thoughts from the ABA

Resistance against national park management plans to remove or kill Brumbies, without first identifying what is an appropriate population size, is growing because communities value their Australian Brumby heritage and see how a viable, sustainable Brumby presence could in fact benefit biodiversity. Environments continually evolve into new norms.

Aboriginals and dingoes arrived thousands of years ago; Europeans and horses arrived over 200 years ago. When does *introduced* become *indigenous*? Considering common definitions of indigenous...

Indigenous:

- Originating or occurring naturally in a certain place; native
- Produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigenous>

...is the transition from introduced and/or invasive *time based* and if so, how long before a species is indigenous or natural in a certain environment? History shows us that through evolution, adaptation, resilience and survival, species become indigenous to their environment.

We rightly value Aboriginal cultural history and heritage. Why should this recognition not be extended to post-settlement culture? Many people see Brumbies living in the wild now as a significant symbol of early European settlement. Is not the Brumby's contribution to the heritage and spirit of Australia also too valuable to lose?

Environments and the species within them are in a constant state of change. Climate changes, landscapes change, populations of flora and fauna move in and out of regions. Species either adapt or in time become extinct. The fact that humans brought horses and other species to Australia is just a variation of this process and actually a relatively benign variation compared to the continuing impacts of ourselves on the land.

Perhaps the notion that we must eradicate non-indigenous species is not the right response. Perhaps it is not necessary to interfere with natural processes at all. But if management is deemed necessary - is it not more sensible to manage *all* overabundant species - including ourselves, in the most humane way possible?

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