



# Brumby Bridges

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**Will political decisions based on flawed science make these the last of the Bogong High Plains Brumbies?**

### **The ABA**

The *Australian Brumby Alliance Inc. (ABA)* was established in 2008 to help facilitate the efforts of like-minded wild horse interest groups throughout Australia. We do this by sharing information and expertise as well as providing a collective voice with regard to the humane management, welfare, preservation and promotion of what we consider to be a National Treasure - *The Australian Brumby*.

## President's Chat

I begin, and end, this 'chat' by expressing grave doubts and deep frustration regarding the consultative process that Parks Victoria (PV) has conducted over the past 14 months.

First PV rushed through 6 key stakeholders meeting with consultants who provided a report that all stakeholders said was meaningless and resulted in 18 hours of discussion being lost.

Then PV timed the draft plan release as the Christmas season began and to conclude when the school holidays ended.

PV kept the public in the dark by releasing a scant interim Bogong High Plains (BHP) impact report with the draft plan, leaving feedback for the first 3 weeks to be based on information that PV later replaced by a 'final' version during the feedback period.

The ultimate grievance was having a final BHP Wild Horse impact report released with no chance to question the serious, damning new claims *never* raised during the year's review process, and claims that are biased, misleading and fail the simplest scrutiny ([more page 3](#)).

Both the Hon Lily D'Ambrosio, minister responsible for PV, and PV itself seem intent on destroying Victoria's Brumby living social history, first with BHP Brumbies and decimating half of remaining Alpine Brumby populations.

That the Minister and PV continue to ignore the major flaws in the plan's BHP impact study, despite scientific evidence being presented, shows how prepared they are to ignore real evidenced-based science when it fails to portray Brumbies as Alpine villains. ([more page 5](#))

The campaign to tell Lily & Co, *Don't destroy our Brumby Heritage, legislate to protect it* needs your support now to tell Parks Victoria and their Minister that their horse plan must:

- *Acknowledge* the cultural and social values our iconic Brumbies;
- *Retain* sustainable Brumby populations in their historic homelands;
- *Replace* the flawed, misleading impact study with robust, peer reviewed studies that will not waste public money;
- *Lower* the numbers trapped to within rehoming capabilities otherwise over 90% of trapped Brumbies will be shot at the trap site;
- *Never* ground shoot trap shy BHP Brumbies – we don't want them to die in agony;
- *Accept* this plan cannot reduce impacts; it is possible there are other causes, such as the 320-426 Sambar deer to ONE Brumby across the Victorian Alps.

Visit the [Victorian Brumby Association Website](#) for contact details and options, then call Parks Victoria and Lily D'Ambrosio and leave a firm, polite message.

It is vital that we all join in the chorus to have Australia's living Brumby heritage protected in sustainable number **now**. Until we have legislation to protect heritage Brumby populations, we can never reply on Parks or their Ministers to retain viable Wild Horse populations.

*Jill Pickering*

## Impacts of Feral Horses on the Bogong High Plains in reality

Parks Victoria is sure that their *“Assessing the Impacts of Feral Horses on the Bogong High Plains, Victoria - Final report – January 2018”* provides evidence-based proof that Brumbies are at “critical” levels in the Victorian Alps.

However, Dr David Berman, Research Fellow (Wildlife Ecology) at the University of Southern Queensland, provides a very different view of this report in his submission to Parks Victoria. The extracts below, from Dr Berman’s submission provide new insights into the reasons that Park authorities and others use to convinced themselves there is no place for Brumbies in national parks.

Dr Berman first reaction to this report supports what we have said for years, *“It appears the whole project has been designed in a hurry (with poor experimental design) to ensure the preconceived “correct” result is achieved. This is not science, this is propaganda!”*

And, *“.. this document will promote (to the uninformed) the unsubstantiated belief that feral horses cause damage no matter what their density. “*

The relative activity of feral horses and other potential causes of impact such as deer or domestic horses or people need to be determined. There is no way of telling how much of the trampling/ pugging impact is caused by feral horses and how extensive the impact is from the data reported.

Literature cited appears to have been selected to support the case that horses cause damage while ignoring other documents or parts of cited documents that do not support the preconceived belief.

Damage and impact are assumed wrongly to be the same in this report and is probably because those involved have a strong belief that horses should not be in National Parks because they are introduced, hard hooved animals that

did not evolve in Australia. Any feral horse impact is therefore considered damage.

But what is the true impact on native plants and animals? Is it positive or negative? It would be a shame to remove all feral horses and find that this causes the decline or extinction of some native plant or animal. Grazing animals can have beneficial impact on native plants and animals (Schultz et al. 2011) and protect endangered plants (Gilfedder & Kirkpatrick 1994). Plants and animals currently present in the Alps have survived over 100 years of heavy summer grazing by introduced, hard hooved animals.

**It would be a shame to remove all feral horses and find that this causes the decline or extinction of some native plant or animal.**

By surveying sites where you think horses are, and not looking where you think horses are not, you are biasing the results and

simply confirming that horses are where you thought they were. Where horses are they create pads (tracks), hoof prints and defecate, therefore, you will find pads, hoof prints and dung where horses are. Furthermore, the report states “Priority sites were visited”. Were they? What determined the priority? Is this a biased selection of sites?

There is little obvious evidence of horse hoof prints in the photos of mud and bare ground. In fact, the disturbance is more consistent with cloven hooves of deer rather than horse hooves.

The report states *“Damage to alpine ecosystems by feral horses has been well-demonstrated in the past”*. Dr Berman asked *where and by whom?* Adding *“There has been one detailed Masters Study (Dyring 1990) and some enclosure work (Theile & Prober 1999; Williams et al. 2014), neither of these demonstrate damage. They demonstrate impact. In fact, there are severe experimental design flaws in all the studies I have read making results inconclusive”*.

Dyring 1990 identified 5.8 km of horse tracks per square km. That means if the tracks are 30 cm wide the area in 1 square km (1 million metres squared) with impact is 1740 square metres or 0.174% of the area – **99.826%** of the area is **not subjected to the impact of horses walking along tracks**.

Data in the report are not robust. They are temporal but there is confusion over selection of sites that are revisited and no clear indication of how representative of the total area of interest the sites are. So, you cannot say much about how horse activity has been changing in geographical extent or severity across the Bogong High Plains.

The report talks of damage to stream banks but fails to state what proportion of the banks have this impact? How much soil has been lost? Is this faster than natural erosion? How much faster than natural erosion rates? What is the negative impact on native plants and animals? The impact may in fact be positive with increases in diversity of plant species (Williams et al. 2014).

The report states “*The preference shown by feral horses for wet areas....*” but fails to explain why the authors say this. Horses need to drink so will walk to creeks or waterholes to drink but they generally dislike and will avoid soft muddy areas.

The report states “*Such damage has the potential to create drainage lines that channel water away from the bog and incrementally lower the water table, posing a substantial threat to the long-term hydrological integrity of affected bogs.*” But fails to provide evidence that this has actually occurred. During the 150 years of stock use, when

there were 900 cattle, 30,000 sheep and horses in their thousands, this “potential” would have occurred very often - if there is indeed such potential.

The report states “*Tracks were well-formed in grassland and open heathland areas regularly used*”, but how much of the area is influenced by these tracks? Is this a negative or a positive for native plants and animals? Presumably some small native animals would find these tracks useful

## Deer or Horse? Can you be so sure?

Below is a photo of a deer hoof print (left) and what PV claim is a horse hoof print (right).

See [Hoof Prints](#) for more photos.



for moving around. Native animals also make tracks like these.

If even a small number of horses can cause cumulative damage how come 14 bogs in the southern Bogong High Plains, where the highest number of horses are, were deemed to be in the same state. Two sites had *improved* even with *horses being present* at one of them, and another site with horses being present remained in the same state.

The report states *dung increased from 3 piles to 18 piles along the transect*; but Dr Berman points out that still the area influenced by dung has changed from a very small amount, to a bit larger, *very small amount*.

The case for removing Brumbies is built with “*Despite a relatively small number of horses being present, soil and vegetation condition has measurably declined in many*

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*sites for which previous survey data were available, supporting the concept of cumulative damage. There is unlikely to be a minimum population size for feral horses that would not lead to incremental, ongoing degradation”.*

The only reference to the concept of cumulative damage in the report is from a study on farm animal grazing densities. It is very difficult to separate factors that cause erosion or what looks like degradation and assign a cause. Some of these changes are natural.

A scientific assessment needs to be unbiased. If the damage is truly there and substantial, then it should be easy to measure and demonstrate to those who do not believe. To be scientific there needs to be no fear of finding the “wrong” result.

## PV Plan to 2020

Parks Victoria’s (PV) website states that its vision is to be a world-class park service, by:

- Conserving Victoria’s Special Places, such as natural assets and cultural heritage to be enjoyed now and by future generations.
- Enhancing Organisational Excellence, such as being innovative, undertaking new research, responsive to change, and seeking out technology advances to plan, deliver and perform to a world-class standard.

Yet despite PV’s involvement in the Context 2015 finding, that Alpine Brumbies are an *attribute* to Victorian and NSW Alpine heritage value, PV have so far refused to honour this finding. Instead PV push to destroy the last of BHP’s small, unique Brumby population, and to cull 1,200 Brumbies by 2020, meaning that due to insufficient rehoming options, over 90% will be shot at the trap site using questionable relevant codes of practice.

PV *claim* to perform to a world-class standard, yet persist in relying on non-peer reviewed studies, refuse to acknowledge the major flaws in the BHP impact report, and is determined to ignore other causative factors such

the 175,000 plus Sambar deer populating the Victorian Alps, the equivalent of at least 320 Sambar deer to ONE Brumby, using 2014 figures.

PV *talks of enhancing cultural heritage*, but fails to keep pace with progressive community values. For example, where is the acknowledgement of the fundamental values that Alpine Brumbies provide to our daily lives? In truth the cultural meaning and importance of Wild Horses to present and future generations for enjoyment, learning and inspiration should be reflected in the Alpine Wild Horse plan.

PV claims to enhance *organisational excellence*, such as being “innovative and undertaking new research” but fails to embrace fertility control, nor listen to changing community goals of preserving Australian living heritage Brumby icons.

The unique, irreplaceable cultural heritage population of BHP Brumbies will become extinct, lost forever, to present and future generations under Parks Victoria’s new Wild Horse plan unless we act now to resist this destruction NOW.

*Jill Pickering*

## Member News

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### Kiamaanawa Heritage Horses

#### *Military Musings and Mountain Ponies: The Kaimanawa Horses of New Zealand through the eyes of Range Control.*

The following is a short article about the Kaimanawa Horses of New Zealand. This is from my perspective as a permanent resident of Waiouru for 22 years, having served in the New Zealand Army and through my current work at Range Control Waiouru Military Training Area (WMTA).

I guess the best way to start is to go back to when I served in the New Zealand Army. I remember being out in the WMTA on exercise, and seeing horses here and there. At the time I didn't really know much about them, or why the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) allowed them to stay in the WMTA. Since then I have a new role within NZDF as Range Control Operation Officer, and I can say that I have since learnt a lot about the Kaimanawa Horses. They are not just any horse, they are Kaimanawa, and they define the land which they inhabit, as much as the land defines them. Their history goes back before Defence had any control of the land, before NZDF had any connection with the Kaimanawa Horse breed of today.

During my travels through the WMTA, I can't help but run into the horses or see them. From time I spend running, walking, riding, along with the times I carry out my day-to-day work at Range Control, I have noticed that they aren't a demanding bunch. They are diverse by nature. They seek shelter in adverse weather during the harsh seasons, and on fine days find a prime batch of grass to graze on. Once they've satisfied their needs, they gracefully move on to repeat the cycle in another area and then return to the same spot they started from. No



doubt they can be temperamental depending on what herd you may encounter. One could be challenged by a Stallion, and in

contrast if they don't feel threatened one could get close enough to reach out and touch them. It's not as easy as it may sound though, they don't always give you that pleasure to get so close when you seek it.

If you ever get the chance to explore the WMTA, you may find yourself approaching a herd. Often if they see or hear you approaching, you can expect that they will turn and run in the opposite direction. At other times they may display a more calm manner, as they pause from their grazing, raise their head and give you a glance that says "oh, it's only you". Only to continue grazing as if to say "You're nothing new to me".

From a Range Control and personal perspective, I see the Kaimanawa Horse as a common breed in the WMTA, however not a common breed of horse to New Zealand. That is what makes them unique. They are a part of the scenery here in Waiouru, a part of the furniture as I would put it. I could not imagine the WMTA without them - they are our trademark.

*Eric Theodore*

Range Controls

## Save the Brumbies (STB)

The fertility control trial has concluded and results will be published later this year.



We have a group of beautiful paint mares, quiet and settled available for adoption to approved people

With the end of the fertility control project, we now have a good selection of quality mares available for adoption.

Our weanlings have all been placed and we don't expect any more foals this year. The STB website will have updated photos after Easter.

The season has been extremely hot and unpleasant, rain is needed before winter however the paddocks are in fair shape at present. A working bee at NEBS is scheduled before winter; much is needed to generally tidy up, repair some boundary fences and burn off several felled trees.

Our summer social day at Bellingen Sanctuary was enjoyed by all who attended and we look forward to a successful show season with our Brumbies.

Jan Carter for STB Inc. email: [info@savethebrumbies.org](mailto:info@savethebrumbies.org)

## South East Queensland Brumby Association (SEQBA)

Just a couple of photos of some of our beautiful Toolara brumbies. They are all in paddock condition (big fat grass bellies lol)



The first one is Sultan and Tango with my snowy brumby chip in the background. And then there is Trixie and

Tucker. Trixie and Sultan are up for adoption. Tucker maybe to a highly experienced home only.



## Hoof Prints..... Other items of note

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### Deer versus Horse Hoof Prints

Parks Victoria make much of the trampling of ground by wild horses and have many photos in their report (*Assessing the Impacts of Feral Horses on the Bogong High Plains, Victoria*). Yes, there are what appear to be horse hoof prints in the photos. But are they all? Can you say this with certainty?

It turns out that deer hoof prints can look similar, albeit, with the frog end of the horse hoof print looking like the front cloven hoof end of the deer. You be the judge:



Deer Print



Figure 19 of PV report



Deer Print



Detail of Figure 13 of PV Report





Deer Prints



Detail of Figure 25 of PV report

## Australian Brumby Challenge

It's on again! From the 15th to the 18th of November 2018, the finals of the [Australian Brumby Challenge](#) will be held at [Equitana](#) in Melbourne.

VBA is in the process of selecting trainers who will have 150 days to take their Brumbies from wild to wonderful at the finals at Equitana.

In this time of uncertainty for our Alpine Brumbies, it is great to shine a light on the value of these wonderful horses.

You can follow the trainers and their brumbies on their journey via the [VBA website](#) and [ABC Facebook](#) pages. Then, consider going to Equitana in November and cheer them on!

## The Cultural Meanings of Wild Horses

(from [The Conversation](#) – Essays on Air)

While Australia debates how to reduce our wild horse numbers, other countries are working to re-establish wild

horse herds in Europe and Asia. Could Australia's attempts to "manage" brumbies be an act of hubris?

That's the question asked in the latest episode of Essays On Air, where we read to you the best [essays](#) penned by Australian researchers.

Today's moving and deeply personal essay, titled [The cultural meanings of wild horses](#), is by Michael Adams, a geographer and writer who researches human-nature relationships.

He explores how cultures across the world have represented and related to horses and asks whether attempts to manage wild horse populations mean we need to rethink the concept of "wildness".

*To listen, click on [The cultural meanings of wild horses, above](#)*

## The Editor's Tail

From time to time (such as now with the events surrounding the Alpine Brumbies) I read posts from people lamenting and criticizing the lack of unity and even divisiveness among Brumby supporters in the face of government decisions and the way forward in managing wild horses. It is true that we all do not agree on many things and animosity raises its ugly head now and then. Would it be better if more of us worked together? Likely so. But it is important to realise that we all do our bits, in different ways, to promote, protect and advocate for Australia's Brumbies. If we did not, I would bet good money that things would be a lot worse.

However, even if there was more cohesiveness in our efforts, while we might have more wins, the struggle would be hard and ongoing all the same. *Why is that?*

In a previous life I worked in policy areas of the Commonwealth Government and my experience with the policy development process has shown me that governments and government policy changes often and sometimes the in-roads and progress that has been made can quickly come unstuck. Suddenly there are new players who we have to negotiate with and the focus of government departments can move to other landscapes, leaving us in the dark.

Another issue that we are currently facing is the lack of independent, solid scientific advice to Ministers in charge of making decisions. It is difficult to have an unbiased and robust advice when a particular government is looking to achieve an outcome and is paying for the advice. It happens all the time.

In addition, I often scratch my head these days when I read some of the academic research that goes on in some sectors. From poor methodology to questionable assumptions and conclusions, I fear that

many of our academic institutions are being dumbed down.

For those of you who have read [Impacts of Feral Horses on the Bogong High Plains](#) in this edition of Brumby Bridges, you will know what I am talking about. A substantial part of the advice for a government decision on the Alpine



The facts are coming! The facts are coming!

Brumbies (and Bogong High Plains Brumbies in particular) comes from an appalling document that purports to be a scientific study. There are many things wrong with this "impact" report but one of the spectacular shortfalls is the conclusion that horses have caused

significant habitat damage to alpine species because the authors claim there is a cumulative increase in horse impacts in the Bogong High Plains. They make this claim, not by measuring the health of the species the horses are apparently killing off. No, that is an assumption based on their findings that the area (a small percentage of, it seems) has more dung, erosion and tracks across stream beds.

The recent comparative data is from field work in November and December 2017; it is not taken at different

times of the year when weather, stream flow, plant growth and other factors might change. We are pretty much in the dark about what the older comparative data is and how and what time of year it was obtained. Are we actually talking about apples and apples or apples and oranges here? We



Grand Unification of Sciences

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don't know because the report is so pathetically inadequate.

If this is the stuff that underpins policy decisions, it is likely not to achieve a good outcome while spending lots of taxpayer dollars.

Sometimes it does seem hopeless but I remind you of my earlier remarks. As imperfect as it is, our actions are still making a difference. Authorities are questioning the humaneness of roping, non-lethal options are put ahead of lethal culling, and the number to be removed could be more if our voices were not heard. Take heart in that.

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**ABA Member Groups**

- ☞ Australian Brumby Horse Register
- ☞ Coffin Bay Brumby Preservation Society Inc. (SA)
- ☞ Hunter Valley Brumby Association (NSW)
- ☞ Kaimanawa Heritage Horses (NZ)
- ☞ Save the Brumbies Inc. (NSW)
- ☞ Snowy Mountains Bush Users Group (NSW)
- ☞ South East Queensland Brumby Association
- ☞ Victorian Brumby Association

**Newsletter Contributions**

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