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A decade of Anti-Brumby rhetoric has been challenged by new research showing over 99% of Bogong High Plains and 82% of the Eastern Victorian Alps had NO impact from horses.

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The recent study [*Use of density-impact functions to inform and improve environmental out-comes of feral horse management* \(Berman et al. 2023\)](#), published by Wildlife Biology, has upturned negative claims about the environmental impacts of Alpine horses and how best to help native species.

Central to the new research is the premise that to better manage wild horses in the environment it is important to understand the relationship between horse density and the percentage of environmental impact attributed to horses.

A key finding from the density-impact work is that, in the areas studied, below a density of 200-250 faecal piles per hectare, or 9 horses per square kilometre, minimal impacts (<2%) are observed, however, above this threshold, impacts increase exponentially.

Therefore, in areas that are below the threshold number of horses, culling horses will **do nothing** to change environmental outcomes. Essentially all of the Bogong High Plains is below this threshold.

“We found minimal sign of feral horse impact on Bogong High Plain (BHP) with **no impact** of feral horses observed along 99% of the length of transects, and while horse impacts were significantly higher in the Eastern Victorian Alps (EVA), over 83% of walked transects were still *undisturbed* by horses in the EVA. This is opposite to views projected from existing horse studies” said Dr. Berman.

In contrast to most Alpine horse studies to date, Berman’s peer-reviewed study recorded “on-ground” vegetation and soil disturbance as well as signs of potential causes (deer, pig, native animals, humans) in 2021 on the BHP and in the EVA.

These data were then correlated to faecal density to develop a density-impact function to more fully understand the relationship of horse density to environmental impact.

Identifying threshold numbers in this way allows targeting of management programs so that efforts can be focused in areas above the threshold. Furthermore, culling programs need only to manage horse populations to the threshold limit in order to have environmentally positive outcomes. This will significantly save time and taxpayer’s money.

Jill Pickering of the Australian Brumby Alliance said “By assuming horses were the main risk for native Alpine species, any effort to help native Alpine species have been a waste of time considering humans, feral pigs, deer and fire combined have a much greater impact.

However, by managing horses to this threshold, as well as dealing with non-horse impacts and then measuring whether this helps or hinders native species using on-ground results of manipulative experiments, we can better protect native species from any adverse impacts”.

“All species, including humans, need to be managed to ecologically sustainable levels. This study has, for the first time, calculated Alpine density-impact functions to assist managers to determine feral horse density targets for control programmes that actually help native species” said Dr Berman.

“Previous scientific work has pushed pro and anti-horse advocates to become increasingly aggressive to each other, unnecessarily causing conflict and mistrust, because such studies have over-estimated horse impact compared to the impact of other animals” Pickering said.

The ABA calls on Park and Government authorities to halt the horse kill strategy and bring both sides together for well-chaired stakeholder meetings that can identify common goals and retain horse densities at safe levels for the environment so future generations can still enjoy the social, ethical, cultural and historical values of Australia’s wild horses.

This is not easy, but it is possible once all parties commit to working together.

Authorised by Jill Pickering for the Australian Brumby Alliance

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East Alpine Brumbies – photo credit Donna Crebbin