

All the pretty horses and all the damage done

Victoria and NSW are now sharply divided about what should be done to control wild horse numbers in alpine regions.

By [Tony Wright](#)

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A brumby by the Snowy Mountains Highway near Kiandra, NSW, earlier this month. Credit: Alex Ellinghausen

When the Federal Court last week dismissed an attempt to stop Parks Victoria from culling feral horses in the Alpine National Park, it put the spotlight back on a long and bitter fight in the high country between brumby lovers and environmental scientists.

The fight is far from over. The biggest herds of wild horses are across the border in NSW's Kosciuszko National Park. And thanks to NSW Nationals leader John Barilaro, wild horses enjoy heritage protection in the state.

But the horses in the Australian Alps - an astonishing 25,000 of them at last count - respect no border and continually drift into Victoria.

Shortly before bushfires swept the mountain country over summer, photographer Joe Armao and I visited the high border country to try to understand the dispute.



Helicopter pilot Col de Pagter (right) and Acacia Rose before takeoff to inspect Kosciuszko National Park in November. Credit: Joe Armao

We went in search of the source of Australia's only great river, the Murray, at the best of times no more than a soak on a plain in the wilderness of the Australian Alps.

This day, however, at the intersection of spring and summer, it was elusive.

"I've been flying here for 17 years and this is the first time I've seen the source to be dry," announced our helicopter pilot, Col de Pagter, chief pilot and director of HeliSurveys, who'd spent the previous day water-bombing bushfires.

The ruined roof of Australia

We land upon a wide green plain, Cowombat Flat - called by indigenous people Quambat, thought to mean camping place by water - a few hundred metres downstream of the dry soak.

The grass is clipped to the texture of baize on a billiard table. We walk onto dried piles of horse dung and it is clear what had been doing the mowing.

We are 50 metres into Victoria. I go in search of the stream that denotes the NSW-Victorian border, the genesis of the Murray River. It is trashed.

There is a little water to be found in a depression in the shade of trees, but it is not even trickling. It lies in a muddied bog.



'We're in a horse paddock': Acacia Rose at the source of the Murray River. Credit: Joe Armao

Our guide, Acacia Rose, who has lived much of her life in the mountains, surveys the remnants of moss trampled and pugged by horses' hooves, the edges fouled by manure.

"This is how we celebrate the very start of Australia's greatest river," she says. "We're in a horse paddock."

Within a few weeks of our visit, the results of an aerial survey by the Australian Alps National Parks Co-operative Management Program, peer-reviewed by world-leading experts, puts the number of feral horses roaming the national parks at 25,000.



Horse dung near the source of the Murray River. Credit: Joe Armao

The local state MP, outspoken NSW Nationals leader John Barilaro, who has championed brumbies in the mountains to the point of giving them legislative protection, declared in an interview only a few weeks before that he thought 3000 was the correct figure.

Days later, still opposed to any form of shooting program but clearly taken aback by the dramatic growth in horse numbers - doubling in five years - he suggested sterilising the herds. Such a task, snorted critics, would make the Man From Snowy River's pursuit of a runaway colt look like a pony club picnic.

A fight with water at its heart

A battle is raging in the fastness of the roof of Australia. It is a fierce argument between scientists concerned about ecological destruction by herds of hard-hoofed ferals and those, like Barilaro, who invest brumbies with heritage value.

It is also an argument about the way Australia's national parks should be run. On this driest of continents, water lies at the heart of the debate.

Around 30 per cent of all the water in the Murray River system comes from the Australian Alps, which cover only 1 per cent of the system's catchment. In a dry year, the proportion is greater.



Riverbanks show the damage done by hooves trampling the soil. Credit: Joe Armao

The mountains have evolved over many millions of years as giant sponges, slowly and reliably filtering their water catchments right through the year.

The peatlands, bogs and fens absorb the meltwaters of winter snow and the bounty of rainstorms, sleet and hail.

Sphagnum moss plants growing within these systems each hold water amounting to around 20 times their dry weight.

Their sponge-like quality allows reliable trickles of water to become slow-moving streams until eventually they form rivers.

But scientists have spent decades proving that hard-hoofed animals like horses can destroy the moss' ability to hold water, and thus deny dependable, high-quality supplies to the Murray and the lowlands it serves.



Snowgrass and other native plants in the Alps have to be fenced off to survive the trampling of thousands of feral horses. Credit: Joe Armao

The Murray - up here called the Indi - springs from the south-west of the mountains; the Murrumbidgee from the north. Eventually, way out in the Riverina, the Murrumbidgee flows into the Murray.

The soak at the source of the Indi/Murray ought to be healthy, even in last year's drought. The mountains through the winter and spring of 2019 had their longest snow season anyone can remember.

"Soil is a living organism," says Acacia Rose. She learned this at the feet of her father, acclaimed soil conservationist Dr Alec Costin. Costin's scientific work in the Australian Alps in the 1940s and '50s led to the decision to remove cattle that had been grazed on the Snowy Mountains for generations.

The cattle, he discovered, were degrading the high country and, among other things, disturbing the amount and quality of water flowing to the lowlands. Snowy Hydro engineers - who needed high-quality, unsilted water for their turbines - listened to him, as did those in favour of pristine national parks.

Now, says Costin's daughter, the population explosion of wild horses is once again squeezing the life out of the mountain soils.

A creature unlike all others

The horses down on the border are shy and skinny, hiding in the forest.

But away to the north of the Snowy Mountains, on a wide stretch of open snowgrass known as the Long Plain, the brumbies rule the landscape.



Brumbies also known as feral horses or wild horses, are consuming native flora struggling to recover from the summer's bushfires. Credit: Alex Ellinghausen

After a summer of bushfires they are still there, and last week, when our photographer Alex Ellinghausen visited the country outside Kiandra in New South Wales, they could be seen scraping away early snow cover to get at the snowgrass that has already rebounded from the summer's fires. No more than a handful of the wily horses are believed to have died or been injured in the fires. Every few hundred metres there is a stallion and his harem of perhaps a dozen, led by a wise old mare.

The herds are undeniably beautiful. Here, however, is a paradox.

The visual beauty of the horses grazing free in the mountains has won them a legal status in NSW denied to all other feral creatures of the high country. Deer and pigs are shot. Wild dogs are trapped. Foxes are poisoned and rabbits have their warrens dug out.



Wild horses roam in the Kosciuszko National Park. Credit: Joe Armao

But feral horses are protected not just by Barilaro's "Brumbies Bill", but by sentiment. It was what fired the unsuccessful legal challenge to culling in the federal court in Victoria. To many people of the high country, brumbies represent the last visible reminder of a lifestyle taken from them.

Sheep and cattle grazing leases have long gone, cattle stations and homesteads have been resumed, even old towns like Adaminaby and Jindabyne were drowned by the Snowy Hydro scheme and rebuilt elsewhere.

One of the largest developments at the "new" Jindabyne is Nugget's Crossing, named for a famed local horseman, William "Nugget" Pendergast. His stock whip and leggings remain on public display alongside pictures of him with horse and dogs.

The late Elyne Mitchell's "Silver Brumby" books, written in the shadow of the Alps near Corryong, Victoria, are still favourites, and above the ski village of Thredbo is Dead Horse Gap, where horses have perished, trapped by snow storms.

The Snowy Mountains without brumbies are unthinkable to many.



A sign on the Snowy Mountains Highway. For many, the absence of horses from this landscape is unthinkable. Credit: Joe Armao

But scientists, ecologists and water and soil conservationists contend the horses have been allowed to breed until they have become a pestilence on the land.

Ironically, the scientists who want large-scale culling might have had an ally in Banjo Paterson, author of the stirring "Man From Snowy River". In a speech in 1930, Paterson spoke of how "in the early days, the wild horses got to be as big a plague as the wallabies and rabbits were in later times".

"It seems a terrible thing to us nowadays to think of shooting horses wholesale ... but it had to be done," said Paterson.

Destruction and repair

Geoffrey Hope, an environmental historian, expert on peatlands and Emeritus Professor of Archaeology and Natural History at the Australian National University, leads us past the numerous brumby herds in the northern Snowies to the far reaches of the Long Plain, where the Murrumbidgee takes its spring.

He shows us where the snowgrass along the banks of the young river has been reduced to nearly bare earth. The banks have collapsed in places, pawed to black mud.



Professor Geoffrey Hope of the Australian National University examines the pH of the water near Yarrangobilly in Kosciuszko National Park.
Credit: Joe Armao

The soil is compacted and when Hope tests the water, its pH level indicates large amounts of erosive material.

Horse dung is everywhere, and here and there the shell of a squashed alpine yabby lies on a horse trail between tussocks. Unseen, saw-toothed native rats have had their burrows caved in.

For comparison, Hope leads us to Rocky Valley Creek, where horses have not yet invaded.

Since cattle were removed in the 1950s, the valley has begun to repair itself.

It is becoming a peat bog again, oozing water. Snowgrass tussocks grow thick, ensuring that when snow falls there remains space below for native creatures to scurry and thrive.

“Eventually, this will become a boggy plain again,” says the professor. “It will slow the movement of water and prevent erosion.”

Then, looking up at the hill, he says: “Unless something is done to reduce the number of horses, they will come over that hill at some stage, and then all this repair will be reversed.”

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