

Hunting in National Parks
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by Ian Brown

I see a lot of bushwalkers, canyoners, climbers and paddlers here. Probably some hunters too. Many of you might wish you could do whatever you liked on public lands, including national parks (NPs). Lets take rock climbers as an example, since their activities are often restricted, or maybe even BASE jumpers, who are completely banned in NPs.

Climbers, just imagine this: you have your own governing body, funded by taxpayers for a couple of million bucks a year. Lets call it the Climbing Council. The Climbing Council oversees all rock climbing in NPs, and elsewhere. The Council is dominated by climbers to make sure other issues don't get in the way, and it never acts against what climbers want to do. They say that rock climbing is all about better protection of cliff faces. It's a public service nobly undertaken.

Climbers, you even have your own party in state parliament, closely aligned to the Climbing Council. The Climbers and Abseilers Party is single-minded and strongly focused on a better deal for rope sports and more power for themselves. They are politically astute and successful in getting what they want, because they hold the balance of power.

The National Parks service has no say in what the Climbing Council allows climbers to do. Its allowed pretty well everywhere. Climbers are unpopular with other park visitors, but that doesn't matter, because you have special legislation to protect you – anyone interfering in your climbing can be charged with an offence.

Does this sound ridiculous? Or “you wish” perhaps? Well you know what I'm going to say next. This is how the Shooters and Fishers Party (SFP) and the NSW Game Council want hunting to operate in NSW NPs. Its how hunting already operates in State Forests, but until recently hunting and firearms were illegal in NSW NPs. Not any more.

In June of this year, the Game and Feral Animal Control Amendment Bill was passed by the NSW Parliament. So, what does this Bill mean? It extends the provisions of the original 2002 Bill (introduced by the former Labor govt) to NPs. It allows the Game Council to license hunters to operate in a list of NPs as approved by the NP minister (note, there is no formal process or appeal rights, just ministerial discretion).

There are about 860 conservation reserves in NSW, covering 7 million ha or almost 9% of the state. The current hunting list of 79 parks takes in nearly 40% of the total reserved area, including such iconic and popular parks as Kosciuszko, Barrington Tops, Warrumbungles and Morton. But very importantly, the Bill only excludes 48 parks – parks near Sydney, World Heritage areas and wilderness areas. So there is the potential, at ministerial whim or next time the govt needs the SFP vote, for hunters to get access to 6 million ha of parks.

AND the legislation makes it an offence to interfere with licensed hunters. It over-rides the NP Act, so even rangers could be guilty of an offence.

Exactly how hunting will work and who will control it is still an open question. The govt insists that hunters will be used only in carefully planned feral control operations, under close NPWS supervision, “just like a hazard reduction burn”, and targeted areas will be closed. NPWS has been charged with sorting out the details by Dec, but it seems to be happening very slowly and behind closed doors. On the other hand, the Game Council says it will be just like in State Forests, with hunters roaming basically at will without any NPWS control. Without doubt this is what they want.

Who do you believe? We don't know exactly what the deal is between the govt and the shooters, but I do know the govt has misled the public about this issue before and that the SFP are tough negotiators. There's no way they would willingly accept NPWS control, so if they don't get open slather this time, they'll keep pushing. It's a case of watch this space. If shooters get what they want, you will never know whether hunters are in an area where YOU are or not. For professional outdoors people, this could have implications for your risk plans and insurance, as well as where you're allowed or are able to safely go.

There's a lot of misinformation out there. Hunters insist its about conservation, about better control of ferals. Some of them probably even believe it. Official Govt media statements make similar claims. This would be equivalent to 'conservation climbers' arguing that what they really want is to eliminate routes and crags. But make no mistake, the conservation claims are a fig-leaf to cover a political deal about recreation. Even the Premier has admitted that he did the deal reluctantly, for purely political reasons to get the sale of electricity assets through parliament. Basically, the Shooters held the state to ransom to get what they wanted.

All the evidence shows that freelance hunting is an ineffective primary control method for feral animals, although professional hunters can be useful to assist other control programs. Even the Qld NP minister (and this is a govt that is not exactly covering itself with glory on the environmental front) has recently rejected hunting in NPs as ineffective.

The Invasive Species Council says that funding recreational hunting for feral animal control is a waste of taxpayers' money. It just doesn't work. This push is all about hunting for fun, for recreation. We can understand that, eh? But therein lies one of the problems. Hunters have long been transporting feral pigs into new areas. There has been an astonishing increase in areas infected by feral deer in the last 10 years, and many new populations are completely isolated from other populations.

The Game Council is set up to protect the interests of hunters. It successfully stopped deer being listed as a Key Threatening Process under the Threatened Species Conservation Act. Deer have been hunted in Victoria for decades; the upshot is that the population has boomed and infested the precious Kosciuszko NP from across the border. Who here has seen deer along the Alpine Way?

The hunting legislation even allows hunters to use antique blunderbusses and bows and arrows. The Game Council's own literature says these weapons are used for more fun, and its harder to kill anything. Hunting has been allowed in NSW State Forests for 10 years now, and yet in spite of the vital issue of effectiveness, there has been no scientific assessment. The Game Council, with all its public funding, has not seen fit to commission a report.

All the science says that to have an impact on feral animals and stop them spreading, you have to remove at least half of the population every year. Now most of you are bush people. It will be obvious that a few hunters wandering around can never achieve this. A few dead pigs or goats here and there might sound useful, but in fact it's a drop in the ocean. Shooting can even be counter-productive, by disturbing and scattering the animals, when effective control by poisoning requires that they be concentrated. On the other hand, shooting from helicopters by trained markspeople, as done by NPWS, can cull hundreds of animals in a few hours, or up to 1000 in a day. According to the Game Council's own data, it takes all the 'conservation hunters' in NSW a whole year to kill 1000 pigs across most of the State Forests in the state.

Opening up parks to shooters is bad enough, for both conservation and public safety. And shooters now have more rights in NPs than ANY other recreation. If I was a climber, bushwalker or paddler (and I am) I'd be offended. But there is a bigger threat.

The new Bill entrenches the Game Council as the dominant 'manager' of feral animals in NSW – not the Ag Dept, not farmers, Forestry and not NPWS. The gun lobby has already shown that it is not averse to interfering in legitimate feral animal control, so there will be more left for them to shoot.

The new Bill classifies deer as a sustainable hunting resource, not a severe threat to our native wildlife and vegetation. The Bill includes a list of feral game birds with the same status – some of them don't even exist in NSW yet. This is clearly a first step to introducing these birds, for more fun. And guess what will happen if these feral pests get 'accidentally' released? The Game Council can stop them being controlled by anyone but 'conservation hunters'.

There is a real risk that because of Game Council dominance, freelance hunting and direct opposition to other control programs, feral animals and their severe impacts on native wildlife will expand dramatically across our conservation reserves and elsewhere. This is the most significant threat to the integrity of our parks system and our native wildlife, to conservation, in many years.

But it could get even worse. If you read the official policies of the SFP you'll see where they want to push NSW.

The SFP want to:

- abolish the Animal Welfare Advisory Council;
- revoke the recent red gum NPs along the Murray River;
- open NPs to multiple use - grazing, logging and perhaps mining – and have them managed not by NPWS but by a resources agency.

With such policies, the SFP claim to be the true conservationists. But at this very time they have a bill before parliament to repeal the Native Vegetation Protection Act – the legislation that controls rural land clearing and is part of our Kyoto undertaking on climate change. They earlier stopped the declaration of new marine parks and are right now running a parliamentary enquiry into NP management in NSW. The SFP also says they're keen on improving access to public lands for all recreationists...so climbers maybe you should join up!

The hunting bill is part of a much wider push against nature conservation, not just in NSW, but across Australia. And as former NSW Environment Minister Bob Debus pointed out in a recent, off-the-cuff address to a rally against NP hunting, there are links to similar groups and ideas in the US, including the National Rifle Assoc.

Finally, I would like to encourage you to look into these issues for yourselves, and maybe join in some action if you feel strongly about it. Here's a list of some places on the web where you can get more info:

- NSW Game Council
- Nature Conservation Council of NSW
- National Parks Association of NSW
- Colong Foundation for Wilderness
- Shooters and Fishers Party
- Invasive Species Council