

AWMS media release and letter on Game Bill are misleading and contradict its own members' views

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A recent Letter of the Week in *The Land* newspaper and a media release by the Australasian Wildlife Management Society (AWMS) has attacked the Game and Feral Animal Control Amendment Bill 2009 (the "Bill") and questions the ability of Conservation Hunting to reduce the long-term impact of pest or game animals on the environment and agriculture. Both the letter and media release were prepared by the AWMS President and former long-term National Parks and Wildlife Service Director, Western, Mr Terry Korn. This move by Mr Korn and AWMS has left a number of wildlife management scientists, many of them AWMS members, perplexed at some of the claims in the letter and media release.

Of particular concern are the assertions that the Bill has the potential to set wildlife management in NSW back 150 years and that it will create more rather than fewer problems. The two documents also fail to consider scientific evidence on the effectiveness of Conservation Hunters in NSW and other States.

The claims by Mr Korn about the Bill's impact of wildlife management and its potential to create more game and feral animal problems are generalisations and fail to focus on any positives of the Bill. For example, the Bill outlines increased powers of inspectors to regulate hunting, like vehicle search powers as well as new offences like not complying with an Inspector's directive. Similarly the listing of four kangaroo species as game animals will be seen by most wildlife scientists as a positive and necessary change to current policy. The utilisation of kangaroo species for non-commercial purposes has been actively debated in NSW and other States for decades. The Bill provides a common sense solution to this issue in NSW and when ratified will set a positive example for other States to follow. Is Mr Korn genuinely suggesting that these new provisions have the potential to set wildlife management back 150 years and create more rather than fewer wildlife management problems and costs in the future?

The first spurious claim by Mr Korn in the AWMS letter and media release is that "there is no scientific evidence that recreational hunting reduces the long-term impact of pest or game animals on agriculture or the environment". A quick search of the literature shows that there are many overseas examples of this situation (Dickson *et. al* 2009) and at least one project involving Conservation Hunters reducing long-term impacts of game or feral animals in Australia (Norris *et. al* 2005; Anon. 2009). Many smaller, short-term programs have also been completed or are ongoing both in NSW and interstate. The most prolific example of Conservation Hunters helping to reduce the impacts of feral animals in the long term is Operation Bounceback in South Australia's Flinders Ranges. This program has successfully seen the restoration of many of the degraded ecosystems of the Flinders Ranges through an integrated approach, based on community and government partnerships, including Conservation Hunters. One of the program's most important achievements has seen populations of the endangered Yellow-footed Rock Wallaby stabilise after the removal of foxes, feral cats, and feral goats (Norris *et. al* 2005). In addition, this cooperative community-based approach to conservation, involving Conservation Hunters is recognised in Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-2020 (Anon. 2009).

In NSW, Conservation Hunters have been at the fore-front of efforts to reduce the impacts of game and feral animals. For example, in 2006, a Game Council-organised Conservation Hunting

Group successfully removed a new incursion of four Canada geese, a bird which has serious implications for agriculture and public safety in Australia. In a similar example, Conservation Hunting Groups in NSW removed 49 out of a population of 50 deer impacting semi-urban areas around Cowra in western NSW and have also removed a total of 1053 rusa deer from areas on the NSW South Coast around Wollongong. These activities are in addition to the now 25,000 game and feral animals removed from public land throughout NSW and the estimated 626,000 game and feral animals removed on private land by Game Council licensed hunters in NSW (Game Council 2009).

The second spurious claim by Mr Korn in the AWMS media release is that: "Wildlife management science clearly shows that large scale coordinated, persistent and strategic approaches are necessary to reduce impact of feral or pest animals in the long term. This cannot be achieved with recreational shooting". The truth is that wildlife management science does not have any evidence that recreational shooting and hunting cannot be a major contributor to a large-scale coordinated, persistent and strategic approach to reduce the impact of feral or pest animals in the long-term. In fact, the above example of Operation Bounceback is one example that clearly contradicts Mr Korn's assertion. In addition, wildlife management science clearly shows that large-scale coordinated, persistent and strategic approaches to feral animal management rarely happen in Australia. For example, in a review of how feral animal control operations were conducted in Australia, it was shown that of 1306 pest control operations undertaken by Government agencies in Australia between 1990 and 2003 the majority (67.5%) consisted of a single treatment without any monitoring of the pest or biodiversity (Reddiex *et. al* 2006).

The Letter of the Week in the 2 July 2009 edition of *The Land* by Mr Korn titled "Park cull bill witless, pointless" also has several contradictions with both the views of AWMS members as well as AWMS position statements. For example, the letter objects to the culling of common bronze-wing pigeons, purple swamp hens, white ibis, straw-necked ibis, black swans and the top-knot pigeon on national parks and on private land. However, why would Mr Korn and AWMS view these species any differently to other native species like kangaroos and waterfowl which are harvested under an accepted sustainable use and adaptive management system? This objection is also in direct conflict to the AWMS position statement on Sustainable Commercial Use of Wildlife which:

"SUPPORTS the concept of achieving habitat and species conservation goals through the sustainable use of wildlife, whether consumptive or non-consumptive, as spelled out in the resolution adopted at the December 1990 General Assembly of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which recognised, *inter alia*, that '... ethical, wise and sustainable use of some wildlife can provide an alternative or supplementary means of productive land use, and can be consistent with and encourage conservation, where such use is in accordance with adequate safeguards...';"

In the same position statement, AWMS outlines that;

"The Society must place particular emphasis upon the application of scientific information and methodology but, in doing so, should not ignore values, and should strive to find a consensus view reflecting the values held by a majority of its members;"

It would appear that the AWMS committee have not served the interests of wildlife management or AWMS members, by generalising about the Bill and by publishing information that might mislead members and the general public about hunting and its effectiveness. In a recent planning workshop, two of the membership issues raised by the AWMS Committee included "Poor retention of members, outside of its core members" and "AWMS is seen by some as a 'clique' and not responsive to new ideas". These issues and others are likely to continue to impact AWMS if media releases like that addressing the Bill continue. A more consensus-driven

approach to the representation of AWMS members and their views and the embracing of wildlife management for all its complexities will be required for AWMS to further develop into a credible and professional wildlife management society.

References

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