

Fact Sheet

Why does Parks Victoria want feral horses out of the Alpine National Park?

The *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021* outlines Parks Victoria's approach to stopping the environmental damage caused by feral horses and removing them humanely from the Alpine National Park.

This fact sheet describes the main reasons why feral horses need to be removed from the park.

What damage do feral horses cause?

Damage to the environment

Australia's ecosystems have evolved over millions of years without the recent grazing pressures of heavy hard-hoofed animals introduced over the past two centuries.

Through their grazing, trampling, pugging and walking around in Victoria's alpine environment, feral horses degrade pristine waterways and foul water quality, remove native and sensitive vegetation, compact soil, collapse stream-banks, open tracks and distribute weeds.

Their everyday behaviour and actions result in damage to precious habitat for native species and plant communities, many of which exist nowhere else in the world.



Damage to water catchments

The Victorian Alps is home to unique native species and plant communities, some of which are threatened at both state and national levels. Healthy native alpine vegetation is critical for maintaining the quality and gradual release of water supply into the Murray River, one of Australia's most important sources of fresh water.

The annual water flow from Victoria's Alpine National Parks catchment is worth an estimated \$110 million.

Studies show that the quality and volume of water from this catchment is being degraded by the effects of weeds, invasive species, soil erosion and climate change (higher temperatures, lower rainfall and more extreme weather events).

Intact native vegetation is critically important to filter and slowly release water, and stabilise soil and slopes. Damage from hard hooves kills native vegetation leading to erosion and unstable streambanks, which leads to poor water quality.

Protection of Traditional Owner values

Aboriginal people have lived in the high country of Victoria for tens of thousands of years. Physical sites and artefacts along with stories, language and memories continue to link Aboriginal people to the alpine parks and lands.

Over 600 places and associated objects are recorded from the Victorian alps in Aboriginal Victoria's site registry. Disturbance from feral horses and other feral animals threatens the preservation of many of these places and objects.

Why is Parks Victoria responsible?

Legislative requirements

Parks Victoria is under legal obligations to control feral horses as with any other feral animal.

There are clear legal obligations for Parks Victoria to protect and manage Victoria's natural environment, specifically the parks estate. These are set out in a range of legislation including the *Parks Victoria Act 2018*, the *National Parks Act 1975* (Vic), the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (Vic), the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth).

Under the National Parks Act 1975, section 17(2)(a), Parks Victoria is obliged to act "for the protection and preservation of indigenous flora and fauna", and to "exterminate or control exotic fauna" in the parks estate.

Parks Victoria also complies with a range of Government policies and decisions to protect Victoria's parks and reserves.

Moral obligations

Parks Victoria is obliged to protect and prevent the extinction of native species, some found nowhere else on the planet, which are being harmed by the impacts of feral horses.

Integrated park management

Feral horse management is part of an integrated approach to protect and conserve the Alpine National Park, by reducing the impacts of a range of introduced animals including deer, pigs, foxes and goats.

Why is Parks Victoria acting now?

The feral horse population continues to grow

A comprehensive survey in 2019 found that feral horse numbers in the eastern Victorian Alps had doubled in the five-year period from 2014-2019, to approximately 5,000. Read more about the survey by the Australian Alps National Parks Co-operative Management Program on their website - theaustralionalps.wordpress.com/2019/12/16/2019-australian-alps-feral-horse-aerial-survey-results-released/.

Compounding bushfire impacts



The Victorian bushfires of 2019-20 have wiped out very large areas of habitat for species that exist nowhere else in the world. Many native alpine species are unable to flee from bushfires.

The areas less affected by fire now provide the only habitat for threatened native species such as alpine plants, alpine tree frogs, alpine spiny crayfish and the native mammal, the Toorranas.

Feral pests such as deer, horses, goats and pigs are causing more damage to native plants, animals and ecosystems than before the fires.

Each day that passes increases the risk that the little remaining vegetation will be lost, these habitats will become muddied trampled pits, the water filtering mechanism of the peatlands will be destroyed, and native animals and plants will become locally extinct.

In the context of multiple pressures from a warming and drying climate and increased fire frequency, the risk of species extinctions is very real, and would be an irreparable loss to both these ecosystems and the natural and national heritage of Australia.

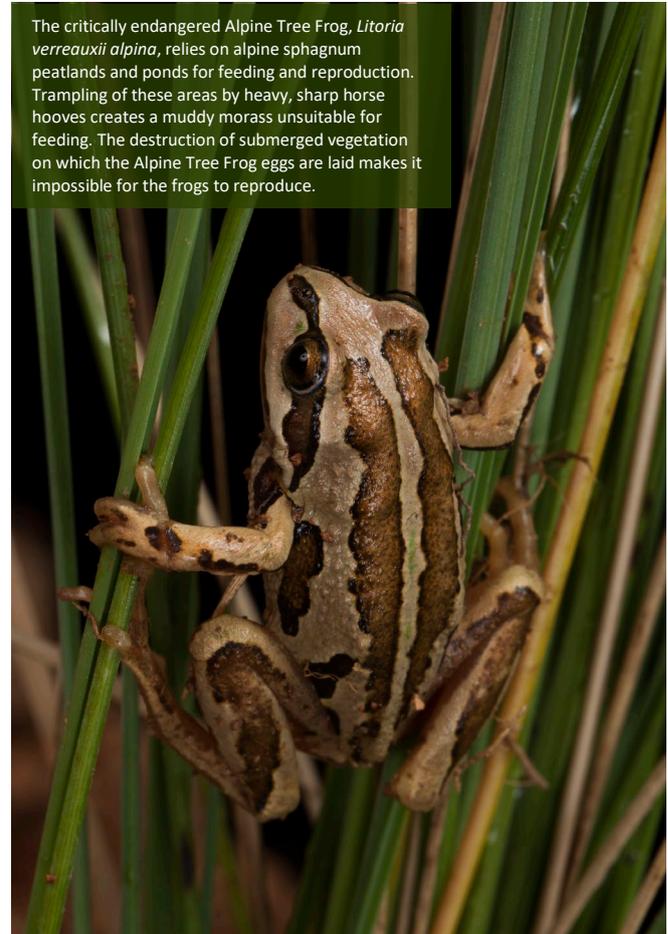
As burnt areas recover, the survival and recovery of native animal and plant species requires active pest and weed interventions. Unburnt areas become important as refuges that can make this landscape more resilient to other climate-related threats.

Feral horse management is one component of an integrated approach to reducing the impacts of introduced animals in the Alpine National Park.

Conditions have changed so management must adapt

Parks Victoria's existing program of capture and rehoming has not been enough on its own to reduce either feral horse numbers nor the environmental damage they cause in the Alpine National Park.

Parks Victoria has a *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021* to guide how we will manage feral horses and their impacts in the coming years.



The critically endangered Alpine Tree Frog, *Litoria verreauxii alpina*, relies on alpine sphagnum peatlands and ponds for feeding and reproduction. Trampling of these areas by heavy, sharp horse hooves creates a muddy morass unsuitable for feeding. The destruction of submerged vegetation on which the Alpine Tree Frog eggs are laid makes it impossible for the frogs to reproduce.

Tell us what you think

The *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021* is open for feedback on *Engage Victoria* until 23 April 2021.

Anyone is welcome to review the plan and supporting material and provide feedback – <https://engage.vic.gov.au/alpine-feral-horse-action-plan>.

More questions?

For the answers to many Frequently Asked Questions on this issue, go to the Parks Victoria website - www.parks.vic.gov.au/get-into-nature/conservation-and-science/conserving-our-parks/feral-animals/feral-horses/feral-horse-faqs.