

Submission – Review of the Victorian Wildlife Act 1975

Submitted by – June Frost

The concept of reviewing the Victorian Wildlife Act is a wonderful opportunity to change some archaic legislation that no longer represents the views of many Victorians. Naturally, this means that neither does it offer adequate protection or benefit to Victorian Wildlife, who have been under increasing threat through habitat loss, road trauma and climate change. At the same time, the concept of writing a submission is overwhelming because one wonders where to begin and end. So many animals and issues need urgent addressing. For this brief submission I have decided to concentrate on the continued legal **Duck shooting** season that continues in Victoria to this day. Not even a pandemic could stop it. The continuance of recreational duck shooting represents almost all of what is wrong with our current laws, which act under the auspice of protecting wildlife. Duck shooting by its very nature results in acts of cruelty, it decreases biodiversity and adds to the extinction threat of already threatened species, it counteracts the growth and benefits of wildlife tourism opportunities, and it prohibits active participation from indigenous and other community groups from meaningful wetland research and protection efforts.

Firstly, to discuss the cruelty and harm aspect of ‘so called’ recreational duck shooting. You do not have to research very deeply, to come across acts of cruelty from people who go out to shoot ducks for sport. Ducks must be one of the most innocuous creatures; they offer no threat to humans or any other animal, they are beautiful to look at and wild ducks have very little in terms of ‘meat’ on them, despite duck shooters claims that they eat the majority. Animals Australia (2021), provided some in-depth research regarding the cruelty aspect of duck shooting earlier this year, and have campaigned tirelessly for it’s banning, along with many other groups and organisations. But do we even need research? Inexperience, short sightedness or just plain carelessness, cannot help but result in a cruel and inhumane demise of a small, frightened creature being peppered by shotgun pellets. That is right, they use shotguns because obviously they do not have the skill to kill a moving target with one clean shot from a rifle. Not that this would make it any better, in fact they would be more likely to kill a duck rescuer, who risk their lives every year to try and save as many ducks as they can. Yet a rescuers penalty can be more severe than a duck shooter doing the wrong thing, for example being caught on camera bashing the head in of a duck against a tree. You cannot ever, in any way, try to form an argument that duck shooting is not cruel and barbaric. Therefore, our current Wildlife Act does not protect them and must be updated to reflect community values.

To address biodiversity, reduction in water bird numbers and threats to extinction. We know there are environmental threats to waterbirds and ducks across the country, not just in Victoria. A recent study commissioned by the Victorian Government (Wetmap, 2018/19), was designed to monitor and assess ecological responses of vegetation, birds, frogs and fish in Victorian Wetlands. These types of studies and surveys are carried out regularly because we know that many wetland species are under threat. Much of this is to do with the use of wetlands for agricultural purposes, meaning the water is drained so the land can be used for animals raised for consumption (e.g., cows and sheep), or for cropping. Climate change and our drier climate is compounding the problems of course. Ducks and waterbirds are part of the overall picture of biodiversity in our wetlands. We know this and their importance to the environment for a whole range of reasons is well documented. Yet, a very real threat that we could easily mitigate, is allowed to continue – recreational duck shooting. Take this away and you are removing one big threat to breeding ducks and their ability to survive in an ever-changing climate.

Andy Meddick from the Animal Justice Party, was recently represented in an article in The Age (Towell, 2021), discussing the exaggeration of the benefits of duck shooting to small rural towns. The duck shooting lobby like to profess that millions of dollars is pumped into rural towns as swarms

of shooters stay in motels, eat at pubs and buy slabs of beer. The evidence for this is just not there and in fact there is a lot more anecdotal and reported evidence to suggest that duck shooters keep tourists away. Take a retired farmer from near Boort. He conducts tours on the wetlands around the large lake and wetlands that are synonymous with the town. According to Mr. Haw, while duck shooting is on, “you can’t take school groups to wetlands, it’s too risky, it’s just unethical,” (May 26, 2021). He goes on to say, “They might come into town for a cup of coffee, a bit of petrol, another slab but that’s about it, they don’t stay in the parks or anything like that”. The shorter the season becomes, the less likely that there will be any flow on benefits to anyone in rural Victoria, except maybe the few firearms businesses that are scattered across the country.

One example from a recent international study, related the benefit of a wild goose population to a small island in Scotland, “Goose-related tourism has been shown to play a vital role in the local economy of the Scottish island of Islay” (Edgell & Williams, 1992). If we capitalised on environmental tourism (I don’t mean water sports or fishing), and invested more money into eco-tours with sustainable camping options or utilising the many accommodation outlets that exist in rural towns, the benefits would be massive. Take the town of Forrest in the Otway’s for instance. They have developed their town into a beacon for cyclists who want to take on mountain tracks. The town is booming as a result. Yes, it does bring some challenges on the roads and to the wildlife. But at least people are not going out of their way to kill and maim innocent creatures. Let us boost eco- tourism and ensure the new Wildlife Act protects our waterbirds from further duck shooting seasons.

I was going to complete my submission talking about the intrinsic value of water birds and waterways to the people of Australia, not just Victoria. Doing some research, I came across this Commonwealth report entitled, Celebrating Australia’s Migratory Waterbirds and their habitats (Australian Government, 2017). It states,

“The Australian Government recognises that habitat loss and degradation is a significant threat to many of our migratory waterbirds, and the conservation of important sites both within Australia and along their migration routes is essential to their survival. Many pressures are contributing to this degradation, of which population growth and associated coastal development are of particular concern. As some migratory waterbird populations decrease, there is a growing need to minimise threats to the remaining habitats that are critical for their ongoing survival.”

This term, *minimising threats*, is critical to wildlife protection in general. Water birds and ducks hold a unique place in the lives of many people. Getting up early, going for a drive and seeing a flock of swans, ibis, broilgas, pelicans, wood ducks or any ducks for that matter, flying across the glowing sky as the sun rises or sets, is good for the soul. That is because like all wildlife, they are part of who we are, part of Australia and it is our job to protect and conserve what we have left. Australia already has one of the highest extinction rates in the world. Let us stop this now. There are many aspects of the Act I would like to address, but have chosen to concentrate on recreational duck shooting because it is a real and tangible threat, and so easily rectified. Please do not let Victoria to be the last state in Australia to ban it for good. It has been legislated so that it can never be reinstated. Once it is gone, we will think, “how could we have let it go on so long?”. Let us get rid of the macho behaviour or a few men (never heard of a female duck shooter, but they could exist), running around in battle fatigues. Further reports and studies into the intrinsic importance that waterbirds have to all Australian’s but particularly indigenous Australians, can be found in numerous research repositories, take the Nature Conservancy Australia (2021) as an example. We know our wildlife is under threat, we know we can help ducks and waterbirds by banning a brutal and unnecessary duck

shooting season. Please amend the Wildlife Act to reflect community sentiment, protect our waterbirds from future killing and ensure their safety for future generations.

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