

Comment on the April 2021 Independent Review of the Wildlife Act 1975

One lasting result of the revision of the Wildlife Act of 1975 was that Lake Linlithgow/Lake Bulrush wetlands near Hamilton lost their sanctuary status that had been held since 1928. The reason for the loss is not clear – some said it was an oversight but others maintained that duck hunters in the department saw an opportunity to exploit. Hunters became acquainted with the news and the lakes have been shot over since about 1984. What that did was to prevent any close encounter with any waterbirds on those lakes. The birds now fly off when anyone approaches within 200 m. The experience of the past was lost. Despite many requests of government to restore sanctuary status, that has been denied. The problem state-wide is that there are very few public water bodies where duck hunting is not allowed. There are no sanctuaries outside town areas where birdwatchers and tourists can enjoy the birdlife and, in the open season, be clear of shooting. To allow less than 5% of Victorians to affect the rest of the population in that way is unconscionable. The GMA and Government are not prepared to provide any areas where duck hunting cannot proceed.

The Act does not reflect contemporary attitudes towards wildlife. Nor does it have provision for community consultation. Almost 90% of the Victorian adults are reputed to disfavour duck hunting, yet that voice is not listened to.

One issue that arises is that it appears that the Panel was not asked to consider if the current range of activities permitted by the Act should be changed. The Act is supposed to protect and preserve wildlife and it is obvious that some activities, including duck hunting, do not do that. Apart from the negative impact of duck hunting on regional tourism, there is the impact on migratory waders. These birds need to accumulate massive body reserves in autumn in order to survive their long flights north to Siberia and other destinations. This requirement is not seriously considered by GMA or DELWP as the wetlands they frequent are those that the shooters frequent. Where are the wetlands dedicated to the waders? The Wildlife Act ought to consider the plight of migratory waders which are under increasing pressure as global warming continues and feeding grounds along the flyways are lost to development.

The Act lacks principles about how to manage wildlife. Thus it does not specify habitat requirements that must be maintained/restored for the conservation of a particular species or suite of species.

The roles and responsibilities of government agencies under the Wildlife Act highlight a concern about what is desirable for an agency to do. Thus the Game Management Authority undertakes and publishes its own studies and comment on economic and social impacts of duck hunting in Victoria. Clearly, a management body should not be doing that. That is a task for an independent organisation that will consider all of the costs and benefits in a clinical fashion. In the GMA economic study – widely publicised by GMA and State Government ministers and politicians – there was no accounting for major costs associated with duck hunting and the claimed benefits were grossly overstated. Costs such as compliance, monitoring, supervision were ignored. Nor was there any accounting for the adverse impact on tourism, keeping away visitors who spend much more money in the regions. Benefits from hunters purchasing goods and spending in the region were inflated, with claims that include purchase of items of food, equipment or fuel that could/would have occurred whether or not the hunters went to the country. Clearly the GMA had a strong incentive to support duck hunting and the continued existence of their organisation.

Secretary
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