

June 30th, 2021
Chair- Dr. Deborah Peterson
Wildlife Act 1975 Review Panel
Department Environment Land Water Planning

Wildlife Act 1975 Review Submission

Dear Dr. Peterson:

Since 1975 many factors have emerged which demonstrate that the Wildlife Act needs to be strengthened in order to effectively protect wildlife. The background issues paper comprehensively covers a range of aspects that need examining but I would like to focus on a few issues which would better protect wildlife.

1. Feral Deer should no longer be protected under the Wildlife Act and should be declared as a pest species.
2. Better strategies to protect wildlife habitat under the act should be developed.

Reasons for removing deer as a protected species

Currently with deer being proclaimed as wildlife under the Wildlife Act, the goal of protecting indigenous wildlife is completely undermined. Deer populations have escalated in number in Victoria over the last. There are over 1 million feral deer in Victoria and the populations have a very fast reproduction rate. The negative impacts of deer on wildlife habitat, agriculture, home gardens and public safety have extensively been documented.

Habitat Impacts I own a property in the Yarra Ranges where we have made extensive efforts to revegetate and restore habitat on abandoned farm land, planting several hundred seedlings annually over the past decade. About 6 years ago we noticed that seedlings weren't growing above the seed screens and were heavily browsed. Up to that time planting efforts had some impact from wallaby or kangaroo browsing but were able to outgrow the impact of that browsing. In the covenanted bushland area of the property, we noticed that there was a decline in the diversity of plant species particularly small plants like orchid, heath and stylidium and few young trees regenerating. We saw extensive browse on various plants and obvious signs and sighting of deer. To combat this, we built over 2 metre high fences around our regenerated areas. The rapid growth of the plants in response to this protective measure was impressive. Now we are protecting parts of our bushland with exclusion fencing. We also have had deer culls on our property and there seems to be less damage of plants. The evidence is that protection from deer means habitat for animals can be restored.

However, the cost and effort of implementing fencing and culling is expensive and time consuming. There have been estimates that preventing deer damage adds 30-40% to revegetation costs. Why should landowners and councils have to incur such costs when declaring deer a pest species will enable more removal of deer numbers and impacts?

Other examples of negative deer impacts on habitat are:

- In the Dandenongs lyrebird habitat is being extensively trampled and destroyed.
- Deer are browsing in the forests on Leadbeaters Possum food like acacia.
- Deer are wallowing in headwaters of creeks like Chum Creek increasing sediment loads.
- In East Gippsland a number of significant ecosystems have been extensively damaged by deer.

By removing the current protection for deer under the Wildlife Act and declaring them a pest species will better ensure habitat and ecosystem protection in Victoria. Their current status creates confusion and often deters landowners from controlling deer. It was argued in the state inquiry into pest animals, that declaring deer a pest animal would require landowners to control the deer and would be costly for them. At the moment property owners like us and vineyards are incurring all the costs!

Feral deer are an increasing national problem and there needs to be consistency in control strategies. Most of the other states declare deer as a pest species.

Need to have Stronger Habitat Protection under the Wildlife Act.

Many important riparian areas are constantly being degraded by vegetation removal and grazing. Poor management of animal wastes near streams results in water pollution and degrades habitat for aquatic life like the platypus. In spite of reports to management authorities, little effective action often occurs. The state inquiry in Native Vegetation Regulations revealed that government agencies such as Vic Roads and Vic Forests were major habitat removers. The Wildlife Act should be strengthened to curb the extent of this destruction.

Other aspects of the Wildlife Act that need strengthening are to:

- Fully protect water birds and stop duck hunting
- Develop adequate management plans for wildlife species.
- Improving incentives for wildlife protection and having stiffer penalties for offenders.

Your panel has a challenging but an important task ahead of you to ensure better protection of our wildlife and their habitat in the context of climate change as well.