



# PEST CONTROL & SHOOTING IN VICTORIAN PARKS

**Pest animals such as deer, pigs, rabbits and goats do enormous damage to the state's natural areas: they create wallows in wetlands, damage waterways, chomp threatened plants and trample valuable habitat. They are increasing in numbers and spreading far and wide.**

Opening up national parks to volunteer shooters has done nothing to stem the flow; rather it appears to entrench a potentially dangerous sport which creates a further hazard to wildlife, campers and walkers seeking to enjoy areas set aside for conservation: our magnificent system of national parks and conservation reserves.

Successful pest control in parks and reserves is a very difficult exercise, and has to be undertaken by experienced operators, in a strategic manner, acting under the best advice.

Recent moves to open up NSW national parks for hunting on the basis that it would improve pest management are misguided, and Victoria's experience demonstrates that.

There are two quite distinct ways in which amateur or recreational hunters already have access to areas within a small number of national parks and conservation reserves in Victoria.

1. Recreational hunting.
2. Targeted hunting for strategic pest control.

## Program 1: Recreational hunting

A recreational approach to managing feral animals doesn't work, and the way feral deer are managed in Victoria is the most striking example of this.

While Sambar Deer numbers in Victoria are very difficult to estimate, there are two indicators of growing numbers:

- Sambar are normally secretive, largely solitary animals, but are increasingly seen in groups and found on roadsides etc.
- Their range is expanding, and now occupies most of the forested eastern area of Victoria to the Croajingolong coast.

Estimates of numbers in Victoria vary from 200,000 to possibly 1,000,000 and growing. It would also appear that their density is increasing, despite an annual seasonal harvest in Victoria in excess of 8,500 animals.

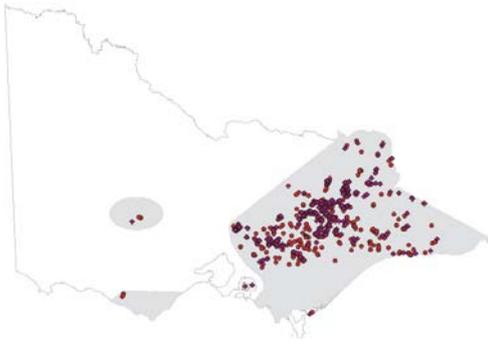
According to the FFG draft Action Statement, Sambar "now occupy a wide range of habitats in Victoria, including tall open-forest, sub-alpine vegetation, wetlands, rainforest gullies and lowland river flats (Downes 1983, Peel et al. 2005)."

The Draft Action Statement points out that the "key objective of recreational hunters has not been to reduce Sambar populations and their impact upon biodiversity".



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Shaded zones depict the possible area in Victoria in which Sambar (Cervus unicolor) may be distributed. Points represent confirmed records of Sambar (pink points from Parks Victoria Environmental Information System [2008]; red circles from DSE Atlas of Victorian Wildlife [2008]). (Draft FFG Action Statement)

In fact recreational hunting for Sambar Deer has shown no capacity at all to reduce the numbers of this animal, even though there is now no bag limit on Sambar:

- Recreational hunters are primarily motivated to 'farm' Sambar, making sure there remains a sustainable, or preferably increasing, population.
- The frequent and random disturbance of Sambar (or other target species) results in more wary animals that are more difficult to control in the future.
- Hunters tend to avoid areas where the probability of finding their target is low, thus leaving a population able to expand again.

According to the DPI website, as of June 2006 "there were 32,832 hunters licensed to hunt game in Victoria, consisting of 22,800 duck hunters, 24,922 potential quail hunters (although only over 8,900 were active) and 14,553 deer hunters. Some hunters are licensed to hunt in more than one category."

The hunting of feral deer (Red, Hog, Fallow, Chital, Rusa and Sambar Deer) in Victoria is open to hunters with current firearms and gaming licences, and other certificates as appropriate.

The legal status of Sambar Deer in Victoria is confused. Deer are listed under the Wildlife Act as a protected game species, and management has primarily focussed on maintaining numbers in the wild. This continues even though Sambar Deer (by the far the most numerous and widespread species) are now also listed as a Potentially Threatening Process (the highest possible threat listing) under Victoria's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act.

**There are 123 parks and reserves listed under Victoria's National Parks Act, including 45 National Parks, 25 State Parks, 3 Wilderness Parks and 5 Coastal Parks, and hunting is excluded from most of them.**

**Recreational hunting, mainly for Sambar Deer, is allowed in sections of the following 10 parks (4 National, 1 Wilderness, 3 Coastal and 2 Regional parks) in Victoria.**

**Alpine National Park and Avon Wilderness Park:** Sambar Deer may be hunted by stalking only in parts of the Alpine National Park and in the whole of the Avon Wilderness Park from 15 February to 15 December. The use of dogs to hunt Sambar Deer is not permitted in these parks. Pest animals and other species must not be hunted in these parks.

**Baw Baw National Park:** Sambar Deer may be hunted by stalking only in the area east of Thomson Valley Road from 1 May to 25 October each year. The use of dogs to hunt Sambar Deer is not permitted in this park. Pest animals and other species must not be hunted in this park.

**Cape Conran Coastal Park:** On Sydenham Inlet in the park, game duck may be hunted during the open season. Dogs are allowed for the flushing or retrieval of ducks during the open season.



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**Gippsland Lakes Coastal Park:** In certain sections, game duck, Stubble Quail and Hog Deer may be hunted in season. Dogs are allowed for the flushing or retrieval of game ducks during the duck season. Check with Parks Victoria for details. Pest animals and other species must not be hunted in this park. Hunters must have a permit from Parks Victoria to erect a hide or to cut vegetation or a hide in the Gippsland Lakes Coastal Park.

**Lake Albacutya Park:** The hunting of pest animals (rabbits, foxes or cats) is allowed, as is the hunting of game duck during the open season. Dogs are allowed for retrieval of game ducks during the duck open season. Hunting is not permitted in part of the park at the Western Beach visitor facilities, including near the boat ramp.

**Lake Eildon National Park:** In certain sections in the south-east of the park, Sambar Deer may be hunted from the first Saturday after Easter, being 14 April, until 30 November 2012. The use of dogs to hunt deer is not permitted in this park. Pest animals and other species must not be hunted in this park.

**Mitchell River National Park:** Sambar Deer hunting by stalking is permitted east of the Mitchell River and south of Hortons and Calvi Tracks from 15 February to 15 December. The use of dogs to hunt deer is not permitted in this park. Pest animals and other species must not be hunted in this park.

**Tara Range Park Deer:** Hunting (not in the close season) by stalking is permitted in this park from 15 February to 15 December. The use of dogs to hunt deer is not permitted in this park. Pest animals and other species must not be hunted in this park.

**Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Park:** Hunting for Hog Deer and game duck is permitted in certain sections in season. Pest animals and other species must not be hunted in this park.

There is, however, extensive access to other public land for recreational hunting, such as State Forest areas.

Note: Dogs are not permitted in national parks and many other conservation reserves because of the disturbance that they cause to native wildlife. History shows that hunting dogs may become lost or abandoned by their owners and thus contribute to the feral dog population.

## Program 2: Targeted hunting for strategic pest control

Pest animals in national parks and other conservation reserves are (in a limited number of programs) dealt with in a targeted, systematic way. Threats are assessed, achievable programs planned and implemented, and appropriate follow-up processes implemented.

A number of strategies are implemented, from targeted baiting (eg for foxes), ripping and fumigating of burrows (rabbits), and shooting.

Generally, professional hunters are used strategically to shoot feral goats, pigs, dogs and other animals in many national parks and reserves. For example, skilled hunters were recently brought in from New Zealand, where they were employed to target goats in a remote region of Snowy River National Park. Notably, they were specially licensed for that program to employ guns equipped with silencers, which enabled them to kill animals without dispersing the herd.

In 2003, as an extension to such management programs, Parks Victoria negotiated a 'Memorandum of Co-operation' with the Sporting Shooters Association.



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This was to allow Parks Victoria to set up programs where a limited number of 'professional standard' sporting shooters could be licensed to assist with specific, strategically planned, pest control programs in a number of national parks and reserves.

Some important points from that 'Memorandum of Co-operation' (which is currently under review) are:

- Control of pest animals through a planned and coordinated effort based on a variety of eradication methods has proven to be the most effective method.
- Control programs will be subject to all normal Parks Victoria policy, procedure and guidelines.
- Pest animal control programs implemented under the Memorandum are well planned, conducted safely and comply with Parks Victoria's environmental policy and procedure.
- Programs will be for a specific period of time, at specific locations, and for a specific maximum number of people.
- permits will include operations plans, communications plans, tactical plans, safety plans and emergency response plans ("Relevant Plans") prepared by Parks Victoria.
- Parks Victoria will ensure that the public is advised of the programs and necessary warning signs and traffic controls are in place.
- Control of pest animals will comply with the Australian model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals.
- All participants in the specific pest control program will have their authorisation cancelled upon completion of that program.
- Volunteer shooters in the program will be covered by Parks Victoria's Public Liability Insurance policy.

In short, Parks Victoria effectively contracts 'professional' skilled volunteers for a specific job, in much the same way as they contract professional hunters. The programs take considerable staff management time, and therefore have to be budgeted for.

The original program has proved effective in a goat control program in Murray-Sunset National Park, that has been going now since 2003, but it has involved only about 10-20 accredited volunteers at any given time.

Since that time, about 20-30 similar programs have been in operation across the state, and while some have worked well, some have been less successful, and others ineffective. They have involved considerably less than 1% of licensed game hunters in Victoria.

In summary, pest control programs using accredited volunteer hunters in parks in Victoria:

- Operate as specific strategic programs, with specific objectives aligned with the park management plan.
- Are under the control of Parks Victoria staff.
- Involve considerable staff time in planning and supervision, and therefore require considerable budget allocations.
- Operate with a very small number of volunteers, less than 1% of licensed game hunters in Victoria.
- Have achieved varying levels of success.

