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Phillip Island Conservation Society Submission
Re: Parliament of Victoria Select Committee Inquiry into
Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

Introduction

Phillip Island Conservation Society (PICS) was formed in 1968—one of the first grassroots conservation societies in the nation—with the mantra “save wildlife today for tomorrow”. Since then, Phillip Island conservationists have devoted countless volunteer hours to defend, preserve, and protect the terrestrial and aquatic environments of Phillip Island and beyond.

Our work includes advocacy and on-ground efforts to protect the birds of the Western Port Ramsar Site. While Western Port is not a hunting site, it is home to populations of bird species targeted for recreational hunting and non-game species that are impacted by hunting.

We call for an immediate ban on all recreational native bird hunting for environmental and animal welfare reasons, and we argue that this will have significant social and economic benefits for Victoria.

Duck hunting

Overwhelming public support for a ban

We join the Australian Veterinary Association¹, RSPCA Victoria², Wildlife Victoria³, BirdLife Australia⁴, and many other organisations⁵ in calling for a ban on recreational duck hunting in Victoria. Victoria is decades behind WA, NSW, Qld, and ACT in banning the recreational hunting of native waterbirds.

Public opinion surveys provide clear support for outlawing the practice in Victoria, demonstrating that most Victorians consider it is no longer acceptable to shoot native birds for sport or recreation. In 2012, the Australia Institute reported that 87 percent of Victorians surveyed supported a ban on duck hunting.⁶ More recently, the RSPCA engaged market research firm Kantar to assess the attitudes of Victorians towards duck hunting, gathering data over the three years to November 2022 and concluding that two thirds of Victorians (66 percent) are opposed to duck hunting.⁷

The RSPCA also used 2022 Victorian Game Management Authority (GMA) figures to demonstrate that only 0.17 percent of Victorians are active participants in duck hunting.⁸ No doubt, many individuals among this 0.17 percent will be vocal in submissions to this inquiry. We urge the committee to look beyond the simple number of pro-hunting submissions and outdated arguments about rights to continue hunting traditions or supplement food supplies in this way. They do not reflect the sentiments of most Victorians.

¹ Media release: Peak vet body joins calls for duck hunting ban in Victoria, Australian Veterinary Association, 13 February 2023. https://www.ava.com.au/globalassets/authors/ava_peak-vet-body-joins-calls-for-duck-hunting-ban-in-victoria_media-release2023.pdf

² Submission: Duck hunting season 2023, RSPCA Victoria, 5 January 2023. <https://rspcavic.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/RSPCA-Victoria-Duck-Hunting-Submission-2023.pdf>

³ Submission: Considerations for the 2023 duck season, Wildlife Victoria, January 2023. https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/911129/Wildlife-Victoria-Submission-for-2023-Duck-Season.pdf

⁴ Media release: Victorian Government allows duck shooting to go ahead this year, BirdLife Australia, 24 February 2023. <https://birdlife.org.au/news/victorian-government-allows-duck-shooting-to-go-ahead-in-victoria-this-year/>

⁵ Open letter to the Victorian Premier and Ministers: It's time Victoria banned duck shooting like other states have—91 First Nations clans, business, union, animal welfare and environment groups unite, Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting, 2022. <https://www.regionalvictoriansotds.com/2022-alliance>

⁶ Campbell R, Denniss R, & Baker D. Out for a duck: An analysis of the economics of duck hunting in Victoria, policy brief no. 44, December 2012, ISSN 1836-9014. https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PB-44-Out-for-a-duck_0.pdf

⁷ Submission: Duck hunting season 2023, RSPCA Victoria, 5 January 2023. <https://rspcavic.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/RSPCA-Victoria-Duck-Hunting-Submission-2023.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.

Cruelty

Recreational duck hunting is clearly inhumane. In 2022, the GMA reported a death toll of 265,567 ducks and estimated up to an additional 105,000 ducks were wounded. Wounding causes horrific injuries, unacceptable suffering, and slow death over days or weeks for the birds that are not rescued and euthanised.⁹

The trauma also takes a heavy toll on volunteers and veterinary teams who rescue, treat, and euthanise the injured and abandoned birds. We urge the committee to read [this account](#) from Wildlife Victoria Lead Veterinarian Dr. Natasha Bassett to ensure that it fully comprehends the extent of the cruelty and trauma caused by duck hunting.¹⁰

Dr Brownyn Orr, a former GMA board director, understands the full extent of this animal welfare crisis. As the current Australian Veterinary Association President, Dr Orr has written that duck hunting is inhumane and results in many animals being critically injured and left to die in the wild:

“Hunting ducks with shotguns often results in non-fatal injuries, where the birds are hit with the outer cluster of pellets, but not retrieved. This results in an ethical animal-welfare problem, as the bird may live for a number of weeks with a crippling injury, receiving no veterinary treatment. We are calling on the Government to take swift action and follow the suite of other states and territories that have banned duck hunting altogether.”¹¹

Most Victorians abhor this cruelty. The RSPCA found that two-thirds of Victorians (67%) are either “very” or “extremely concerned” about the long-term injuries to ducks who survive being shot.¹²

⁹ Media release: Why is duck hunting still happening in 2022?, Wildlife Victoria, 2 March 2022. https://www.wildlifevictoria.org.au/images/Publications/Media_Releases/Media_Release_-_Why_is_Duck_hunting_still_happening_in_2022.pdf

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Media release: Peak vet body joins calls for duck hunting ban in Victoria, Australian Veterinary Association, 13 February 2023. https://www.ava.com.au/globalassets/authors/ava_peak-vet-body-joins-calls-for-duck-hunting-ban-in-victoria_media-release2023.pdf

¹² Submission: Duck hunting season 2023, RSPCA Victoria, 5 January 2023. <https://rspcavic.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/RSPCA-Victoria-Duck-Hunting-Submission-2023.pdf>

Impacts on threatened and non-game species

Each season, non-compliance by duck hunters leads to the loss of non-game species, including threatened species. On the very first day of the 2023 duck hunting season, Wildlife Victoria reported retrieval of eight non-game birds, including five individuals listed as threatened under the FFG Act—four Blue-winged (Australasian) Shovelers (one semi-butchered) and one Hardhead. It also reported that it considers prosecution unlikely, since there were no GMA officers on site to supervise shooter compliance.¹³ It documented similar losses of threatened and non-game species on the second day of the 2022 season. These figures are from one wetland where Wildlife Victoria was providing its in-field veterinary triage service, so they do not capture hunter non-compliance elsewhere across Victoria.¹⁴

Most Victorians are distressed by this loss of non-game species. The RSPCA found that 62 percent of Victorians are “very” or “extremely concerned” about other non-game species being shot by duck hunters.¹⁵

Long-term ecological impacts

Despite recent improved rainfall, declining populations of ducks and other waterbirds have not yet recovered after years of drought, with abundance remaining well below the long-term average.¹⁶ Duck hunting is unjustifiable given this decline—both in terms of its direct impacts on birds targeted and indirect impacts on other waterbirds. Hunting disturbance causes substantial behavioural modifications that detrimentally affect waterbird ability to

¹³ Media release: Five protected ducks and three non-game species killed on day one, Wildlife Victoria, April 2023.

https://www.wildlifevictoria.org.au/images/Publications/Media_Releases/Wildlife_Victoria_shares_findings_from_Day_1_of_2023_duck_hunting_season.pdf

¹⁴ Media release: Day two of duck shooting reveals the brutal truth, Wildlife Victoria, 17 March 2022.

https://www.wildlifevictoria.org.au/images/Publications/Media_Releases/Media_Release_-_Day_two_of_duck_shooting_reveals_brutal_truth.pdf

¹⁵ Submission: Duck hunting season 2023, RSPCA Victoria, 5 January 2023. <https://rspcavic.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/RSPCA-Victoria-Duck-Hunting-Submission-2023.pdf>

¹⁶ Porter J, Kingsford R, Francis R, Brandis K, & Ahern A. (2023). Eastern Australian Waterbird Aerial Survey - October 2022 Annual Summary Report. 10.13140/RG.2.2.21141.81125.

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/John-Porter-35/publication/367180582_Eastern_Australian_Waterbird_Aerial_Survey_-_October_2022_Annual_Summary_Report/links/63c5dd1bd9fb5967c2e03e4e/Eastern-Australian-Waterbird-Aerial-Survey-October-2022-Annual-Summary-Report.pdf

forage and breed successfully. Wildlife Victoria has observed swans abandoning eggs due to gunshot disturbance.¹⁷ RSPCA considers such disturbance to have welfare impacts.¹⁸

Risks of lead contamination and ingestion

Recreational duck hunting creates environmental, ecological, and human health risks. Lead shot has been banned for waterfowl hunting since 2001. However, it is still used illegally by hunters, with six infringements occurring in the 2022 duck hunting season.¹⁹ There are also concerns over long-term contamination in Victoria's wetland ecosystems due to past use of lead shot, which is a hazard for both wildlife and people who consume duck flesh.²⁰

Social and economic impacts

Duck hunting places an unacceptable social and economic burden on voluntary and non-profit organisations that provide rescue, veterinary care, and euthanasia for wounded birds. This comes at the expense of much needed wildlife care across the state. For example, a ban on duck hunting would allow non-profit Wildlife Victoria to focus on delivering its 24-hour, 7-day-a-week Emergency Response Service and Travelling Vet Service to assist with wildlife emergencies across Victoria. We have seen this valuable service in action recently on Phillip Island.

The Australia Institute analysis, "Out for a Duck", dismisses as false claims that duck hunting—or any recreational hunting—contributes significantly to the economy of Victoria:

"They assume that without hunting any related expenditure would be lost to Victoria. On the contrary, our survey shows that if duck hunters were prevented from hunting ducks they would go fishing, hunt other species, or go camping. There would be no impact on expenditure in Victoria from a duck hunting ban. Revenue from non-hunting tourism is far more important to Victoria's economy. In fact, more than half of survey respondents would be less likely to holiday in an area with duck hunting."²¹

¹⁷ Submission: Considerations for the 2023 duck season, Wildlife Victoria, January 2023.

https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/911129/Wildlife-Victoria-Submission-for-2023-Duck-Season.pdf

¹⁸ Submission: Duck hunting season 2023, RSPCA Victoria, 5 January 2023. <https://rpscavic.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/RSPCA-Victoria-Duck-Hunting-Submission-2023.pdf>

¹⁹ [Environmental watchdog investigating 'elevated' lead levels in ducks from Victorian wetlands - ABC News](#)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Campbell R, Denniss R, & Baker D. Out for a duck: An analysis of the economics of duck hunting in Victoria, policy brief no. 44, December 2012, ISSN 1836-9014. https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PB-44-Out-for-a-duck_0.pdf

Based on our experience on Phillip Island—the second-most tourism dependent economy in Australia, much of which is nature-based—we concur with this Australia Institute policy analysis.

Quail hunting

Questionable ecological impacts

The GMA estimates that there were approximately 6,000 quail hunters in 2021, and that hunters kill in the order of 175,000 quail a year. The ecological sustainability of this practice is highly questionable given that little is known about the ecology and population biology of the Stubble Quail. The first abundance and distribution surveys were trialled in 2022 by Arthur Rylah Institute, with refinements to the survey and modelling methodology required before robust and accurate estimates of species abundance can be made.²²

Questionable environmental and health impacts

Shockingly, lead shot is still allowed to be used for hunting quail. Recent research into the degree of lead contamination in the carcasses of hunted Stubble Quail has found that eating the harvested meat has the potential to negatively impact human and wildlife health.²³ Lead shot may also cause contamination of farmland used for food production.

Difficult to control

The GMA estimates that most quail hunting occurs on private properties, out of the public eye. In 2022, pre-recorded quail callers were banned, since they attract 30 times the normal number of quails to an area. However, if hunting is mostly on private land, how can this—or any other restriction on quail hunting practices—be enforced?

²² Scroggie, MP & Ramsey, DSL. (2022). Abundance estimates for Stubble Quail in Victoria: results from the 2022 survey. Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research Technical Report Series No. 342. Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Heidelberg, Victoria.
https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/893110/Abundance-estimates-for-Stubble-Quail-in-Victoria-2022.pdf

²³ Hampton JO, Dunstan H, Toop SD, Flesch JS, Andreotti A, & Pain DJ. (2022) Lead ammunition residues in a hunted Australian grassland bird, the stubble quail (*Coturnix pectoralis*): Implications for human and wildlife health. PLoS ONE 17(4): e0267401. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0267401>

Alternatives to recreational native bird hunting

There are alternatives for recreational shooting that do not involve destroying native wildlife and spreading lead shot across farmland. There are also alternative sources for those who wish to eat game birds. Duck and quail are readily available for purchase in stores, having been raised on farms and slaughtered in accordance with health and animal welfare regulations.

Conclusion

There is absolutely no justification for the barbaric, anachronistic practice of recreational native bird hunting and the environmental, ecological, economic, social, and human health risks and costs that it entails. The seasonal hunting constraints implemented over recent years have failed to acceptably manage animal welfare, environmental risks, and other costs associated with native bird hunting. Considerable public resources have been required to regulate and monitor hunting, without being able to prevent non-compliance. Valuable voluntary and non-profit resources have been consumed for rescue, veterinary triage, and reporting on hunter non-compliance. For these reasons, we call for an immediate ban on all recreational native bird hunting in Victoria. We consider that the state's nature-based tourism economy would benefit, and significant resources could be redirected for the environmental and social benefit of the majority of Victorians.