

FERAL HORSES IN BARMAH NATIONAL PARK

Fact Sheet

1. Myth: Horses aren't the cause of significant damage to the natural environment.

Fact: Moira grass forms a critical component of the ecological character of the internationally significant Barmah Forest Ramsar Site. It is a keystone species of the grassy floodplain marshes, providing food and habitat for turtles, waterfowl and other aquatic organisms.

Moira Grass has declined by 96 per cent over the last 80 years in the Barmah Forest and is predicted to be locally extinct by 2026 without management intervention. The decline in Moira grass extent has been exacerbated by the presence of introduced herbivores that preferentially graze the Moira grass. Of all the introduced herbivores, horses are considered the most



destructive. Other introduced grazing species being actively managed include: pigs, goats, sheep and deer. Cattle grazing ceased in 2007.

Grazing by feral horses is a key threat to the Moira Grass plains in Barmah National Park and the Barmah Forest Ramsar site.

Failure to control and remove feral horses and other threats would:

- Contravene Parks Victoria's obligations under the *National Parks Act 1975*.
- Fail to meet threatened species protection obligations under the Commonwealth *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999* and the state *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*.
- Fail to meet obligations under the Ramsar Convention to maintain the wetland's ecological character.
- Fail to meet bilateral agreements and EPBC Act requirements for protection of listed migratory bird species.
- Threaten release of environmental water flows to Barmah Forest under the Murray Darling Basin Plan, as managed by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder.

2. Myth: Barmah's horses are descended from horses that went to war with Australian soldiers in WWI.

Fact: The horses that can be found in the Barmah National Park are not descendants of horses used in WWI.

Feral horses found within the Barmah National Park are descended from horses that escaped local farms or were deliberately released during the mid 20th century.

Research undertaken by Context heritage consultants found that the majority of the current population of wild horses within the national park can be traced to those left in the forest by the trotting breeder and trainer Horace Adams who was not able to round up all of his horses after the last muster took place in 1952.



FACT:
THE HORSES THAT CAN BE FOUND IN THE BARMAH NATIONAL PARK ARE NOT DESCENDANTS OF HORSES USED IN WWI.

1. Victorian National Park and other associated legislation does not allow for the presence of the horse, considered 'exotic' in an uncontrolled situation (*National Parks Act 1975*) and declared a threatening process under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*. Final recommendation on a nomination for listing 'Degradation and loss of habitats caused by feral horses'. (Nomination No. 813). Scientific Advisory Committee. Flora and Fauna Guarantee. Department of Sustainability and Environment: Melbourne.

2. *History of wild horses in the Barmah National Park* was commissioned by Parks Victoria in 2014.

3. Myth: Parks Victoria deliberately flooded the Barmah National Park to reduce the amount of feed available for feral horses.

Fact: Flooding of the park is a natural and regular occurrence in the park, benefitting its floodplain and wetland ecosystems and native species.

The water that flooded Barmah National Park from September 2018 to January 2019 was primarily due to an operational transfer to Lake Victoria, near the New

South Wales-South Australia border, to provide for lower Murray River consumption during summer.

The water released in the Murray River was allowed to overflow into the Barmah Forest. At its peak in November 2018, floodwater covered approximately 27% of the park. This receded to 12% in January 2019.

During these floods, most of the feral horses observed within the park were present in the flood affected areas, feeding on submerged and emergent Moira grass, and were in good condition.

27%-12%

Change in the area of the park flooded between November 2018 and January 2019

4. Myth: People are allowed to establish feeding stations for horses in the park.

Fact: Under national park regulations the public is not permitted to feed either native or introduced animals, nor bring vegetation into parks.

Feeding animals can assist populations to reach or maintain unsustainable levels,



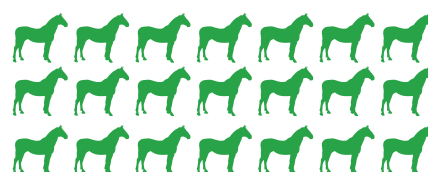
adding pressure to the environment, and can create a dependence on non-natural foods. If familiarised with people, animals can stop foraging on their own and become aggressive if food is not offered. Regular feeding of animals can also attract predators. Domestic animal feed can also introduce invasive weeds or pathogens to a national park.

5. Myth: There are not as many horses in the park as Parks Victoria claim.

Fact: Aerial thermal imaging surveys conducted in June 2018 estimates feral horse numbers in Barmah National Park are far more than 500. This matches results of the 2017 aerial survey.

Estimates of feral horse population abundance were built using two different analytical methods and provided results of 807 and 823.

This indicates that there is a much larger feral horse population than previously thought. Annual thermal imaging surveys will update these estimates.



500+
Feral horses estimated

6. Myth: Feral horses are a drawcard for visitors to the Barmah National Park.

Fact: The majority of visitors to Barmah National Park come to enjoy the natural setting and the native wildlife of the Murray River and surrounding red gum forests. Bush camping with family and friends, fishing and boating are the most popular activities.

7. Myth: The horses are a natural part of the landscape.

Fact: Horses are not native to Australia and are not a natural part of Barmah National Park.

The impacts of feral horses on the Moira Grass plains in Barmah National Park and the Barmah Forest Ramsar site are considered large scale, and long-lasting.

Horses degrade the ecosystem through grazing, trampling vegetation, dispersing weed seeds, disturbing the soil and creating openings for weed invasion, enriching nutrient levels, and impacting feeding or breeding habitat for fish, water birds and other native species.

They also damage key Aboriginal cultural places on sandy rises throughout the floodplains.

3. River Murray weekly report – For the week ended Wednesday 7 November 2018. Murray-Darling Basin Authority.
4. National Parks Regulations PART 3—PROTECTION OF ANIMALS AND FISH 26 Offering food etc. to animals prohibited Penalty: 10 penalty units. 51 Introduction of vegetation prohibited (1) Subject to subregulation (2), a person must not knowingly bring vegetation into a park. Penalty: 20 penalty units.
5. Interim estimation of feral horse abundance Barmah National Park, Parks Victoria 2018
6. Valuing recreation in the Murray, CSIRO 2007
7. Feral horse (*Equus caballus*) and feral donkey (*Equus asinus*), invasive species fact sheet, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, 2011.