



Startled by our approach, a group of horses bolt from where they were feeding beside a shallow water-filled doline.

## **Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan** *aka Kosciuszko National Park Feral Horse Protection Plan*

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Yarrangobilly Caves is located in Kosciuszko National Park. In a modest win for cave and karst protection, representations by the cave and karst community have resulted in an additional 3606 hectares of the Yarrangobilly and Cooleman-Upper Goodradigbee karst areas being added to horse removal areas in the Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan for the Kosciuszko National Park (KNP). The final version of the plan was released by the New South Wales Government on 24 November 2021.

Under the plan, horse numbers in the KNP will be reduced from 14,380 (as per a survey in 2020) to 3000 by 30 June 2027. Horses will be kept out of the 47% of KNP that is currently horse free. In addition, they will be removed from a further 21% of the park, but will be allowed to continue occupying the remaining 32% - covering an area of approximately 220,000 hectares.

The new management plan was a requirement under the *Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act (2018)* that was championed by John Barilaro, until recently the NSW Deputy Premier. The legislation overrides the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* and the KNP Plan of Management and enshrines protection of horse populations within KNP. How a feral animal could be granted heritage status within the boundaries of one of the most environmentally diverse and sensitive national parks in NSW is bewildering - but that is a discussion for another time.

A draft version of the plan that was released for public comment at the beginning of October generated

considerable community debate and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) received more than 4000 submissions, including from ACKMA and several ACKMA members as well as from the Australian Speleological Federation Inc, a number of caving clubs and individual cavers. I have read several of these submissions and they presented well-reasoned and soundly-based arguments for protecting a range of sensitive areas, including the full extent of individual karst areas, as well as their entire catchments. This approach was consistent with the current KNP Plan of Management (2006, as amended) and the previous KNP Wild Horse Management Plan (2008).

That the new plan was finalised and implemented within three weeks of the end of the 30-day public exhibition period is remarkable. In fact, this was almost as fast as a mob of brumbies<sup>1</sup> galloping through a delicate alpine bog. In just a couple of weeks NPWS staff read, summarised and considered all submissions before briefing the NPWS Executive and Environment Minister Matt Kean.

Given that early in the public review period, Deputy Premier Barilaro stated that he thought 3000 horses was "about the right number" for KNP and several weeks later, Minister Kean said the plan "strikes the right balance between protecting the heritage value of the wild horses and maintaining the exceptional conservation values of KNP", the outcome was fairly predictable. Nevertheless it was still extremely disappointing for many of us who made submissions that few amendments were made to

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<sup>1</sup> or feral horses as many ACKMA members prefer to call them.





Trampled creek banks near the western edge of Cooleman Plain.

the proposals contained in the draft. In fact there were only three significant amendments and two of these involved the Yarrangobilly and Cooleman karst areas. The third, an amendment to re-zone river flats beside the Murray River as a horse retention area appears to have been a trade-off for protecting more of the karst areas.

Despite the many disappointing features of the management plan, the cave and karst community should take some comfort from the fact that their efforts have helped to achieve modest additional protections for the Yarrangobilly and Cooleman areas.

At Cooleman, which I regard as including the Upper Goodradigbee karst area, an additional 1044 hectares has been included in the horse removal area. Importantly, this now includes limestone areas from upstream of the Cave Creek waterfall to the Goodradigbee River and then approximately two kilometres down that river. Some additional areas of catchment have also been included.

At Yarrangobilly, an additional 2562 hectares has been added to the horse removal area. The area is east and north of the Snowy Mountains Highway near Yarrangobilly Village and means that all of the Yarrangobilly limestone and some additional catchment is now covered. Unfortunately, a substantial part of the upper catchment of the Yarrangobilly River was not included.

There was no change in the status of any of the other karst areas in KNP. This means that the small Indi, Marble Creek/ Cowombat Flat and Cooinbil karst areas remain wholly in horse retention areas, with the Indi area being the most significant of these in terms of karst hydrology, caves and other karst features. The two remaining karst areas (Jounama Creek and Lobs Hole/ Ravine) are in areas that are currently horse free and will be managed to retain that status.

Now that the plan has been implemented, it remains to be seen how generously the NSW Government will fund the horse removal work, how progress towards achieving the goal of 3000 by mid-2027 will be monitored and how effectively horses can be kept out of the exclusion areas. It is also sobering to note that between 2008/9 and 2016/7, a total of 3003 horses were removed from KNP, an average of just 375 a year. Using numbers provided in the plan, reducing the population from 14,000 to 3000 in five years, will require the removal of 2,200 horses each year. However, this does not take into account the growth in numbers since 2020 or the net birth rate over the five year life of the plan. Taking those factors into account, around 3000 horses a year will need to be removed. A very substantial number indeed.

As an indication of the current horse situation at Cooleman, the attached images were taken during a mid-November 2021 trip by the Canberra Speleological Society Inc. Some people had claimed that no horses remain on Cooleman Plain after horse trapping and removal operations by NPWS over the last couple of years. Clearly, that is not so. During an 8 kilometre walk around the northern part of the plain (an area of about 500 hectares), we saw more than 100 horses in total, including one large group of about 50 that were clearly very unhappy with our presence on a part of the Cooleman area that is not commonly visited by humans.

On announcing the final plan, Minister Kean was quoted as saying "Kosciusko (sic) National Park is a very special place that needs to be protected for future generations". One can only hope that that this proves to be true. How the NSW Government manages both the removal of feral horses and the restoration of horse-damaged areas in KNP over the next five years will provide some good indicators of how well the park is being protected for future generations.





Horses galloping across a delicate spring area near CP26, one of the largest caves on the northern part of the plain.



Another startled group. Note the number of foals.