

COALITION AGAINST DUCK SHOOTING

SUBMISSION FOR THE REVIEW OF THE

ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION ACT 1999

To comprehensively deal with matters of National Environmental Significance, the EPBC Act must be broad enough to allow the Federal Government to intervene when States and/or Territories act negligently.

In order to save the Murray/Darling Basin, the Federal government had to step in and take control from the states. Waterbirds require the same intervention.

Native waterbirds are nomadic and fly across state borders in search of water. The problem that presently exists is that different states have different policies. So whilst the recreational shooting of native waterbirds was banned in WA in 1990, NSW in 1995, Queensland in 2005 and in the ACT the activity has never been allowed, birds flying into Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia or the Northern Territory risk being shot by recreational hunters. (*Encl. media statements WA 3.9.1990, Q'd 10.8.2005*)

Climate change, global warming and prolonged drought raises new issues in the 21st Century, which must now be addressed. With waterbird numbers declining across eastern Australia by 82% over the past 25 years, as shown by Professor Richard Kingsford's annual aerial surveys since 1983, (http://www.wetrivers.unsw.edu.au/docs/rp_eaas_home.htm) the recreational shooting of native waterbirds is now unsustainable. (*Encl. Oct. 2007 Kingsford survey, The Age 10.12.2007*)

The recreational shooting of native waterbirds is now unsustainable. Urgent Federal intervention is required to help protect Australian native waterbirds to survive into the future. Shooting, purely for recreational purposes, is unnecessary, wasteful and cruel and with climate change and global warming, can no longer be considered wise use of wetland 'resources'.

In Victoria shooters claim they have no impact on bird numbers. This is misleading, untrue and dangerous for waterbird populations. For example, a Field and Game Australia telephone survey of hunters after the 2006 Victorian duck season (from March 18 to mid June) showed that approximately 350,000 game species were shot. Yet the summer waterfowl count conducted before the duck shooting season (between 25 Feb. and 5 March 2006) by the Department of Sustainability and Environment and Field and Game Australia, counted only 182,487 game species of native waterbirds. This highlights that more birds were shot than were actually counted in Victoria. The shooter's claim that they have no impact on bird numbers is untrue. The Victorian government's decision to call a duck shooting season was not based on environmental conditions and bird numbers, but rather a political decision to appease the shooters.

Community attitudes have changed since 1986, when the Coalition Against Duck Shooting commenced activities. The numbers of licensed duck shooters in Victoria have dropped from about 95,000 in 1986 to around 20,000 today, but of these only a few thousand are still active on the wetlands. Most shooters retain their licences in order to justify owning a firearm.

A change in public opinion has caused this drop in shooter numbers. Most Victorians oppose the recreational shooting of our native birds.

An October 2007 Morgan Research Poll shows that 75% of Victorians want the recreational shooting of native waterbirds permanently banned. However, once respondents were informed that waterbird numbers have dropped by 82% across eastern Australia since 1983, that one in four birds are wounded and that WA, NSW and Queensland have already banned the activity, the numbers wanting a permanent ban increased to an overwhelming 87%. (*Encl.*)

The Age newspaper has published four editorials between 1993 and 2006 calling for the recreational shooting of native waterbirds to be banned in Victoria. In the first editorial of 21 March 1993 the headline was 'DUCK SHOOTING SHOULD BE OUTLAWED' and the first line stated: "*Duck shooting is not a sport, it is an obscenity.*" (Encl. *The Age* 24.3.1993, 12.1.2003, 19.3.2005, 17.3.2006)

The Victorian government's own Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC) has repeatedly recommended a ban on the recreational shooting of native waterbirds on cruelty grounds. (The NSW and Queensland governments banned duck shooting on advice from their AWACs, due to cruelty.) (Encl. *The Age* 20.12.02 *Ban urged on 'cruel' duck hunts.*)

The Department of Sustainability and Environment now recognises research by leading US ballistics expert and duck shooter, Tom Roster, who has shown that shotguns wound up to 30% of birds. Acknowledging that wounding rates are far too high, the Victorian government has finally recognised that the problem must be addressed. But instead of following the examples set by Labor governments in WA, NSW and Queensland and banning the activity, it allocated \$200,000 of taxpayers' money in an attempt to teach Victorian duck hunters how to shoot. Wounding, however, is inevitable and impossible to eliminate.

Shotguns are scatterguns so, of the 200 pellets fired from a cartridge, often only a couple of pellets will hit the intended victim, resulting in high wounding rates. The range of a shotgun is roughly 50 metres and in the excitement of the moment shooters often fire at birds out of range. In the split-second decision-making process required, it is difficult for hunters to judge distance, often hitting birds but not bringing them down. Shooters also fire at birds in flocks, causing serious wounding and can legally shoot in poor light, fog, mist, wind, etc. as well as half an hour before sunrise and half an hour after sunset (when quite dark).

Protected and threatened species are always illegally shot during duck seasons. For example, in 1993 DSE wildlife officers counted 300 rare and threatened Freckled Ducks on Lake Buloke in central Victoria. In an attempt to protect these rare birds, the northern end of the lake was declared a sanctuary, yet hunters illegally shot 272. Whenever a duck season is called, this species, which is unique to Australia, continues to be illegally shot together with other protected waterbirds, including migratory species. (Encl. *The Age* 20 March, 2006.)

Duck shooters have never been environmentally responsible. From the middle 1980s the Coalition Against Duck Shooting fought for a ban on lead shot throughout Australia. According to Victorian DSE figures, in the mid-1980s approximately 350 tonnes of lead was fired into Victorian wetlands every duck season by shooters. Dead waterbirds recovered by the Coalition Against Duck Shooting revealed high quantities of lead in the birds' gizzards. A study by DSE in 1990 showed that ingested lead shot posed a serious poisoning risk for waterbirds and recommended a phase-out by 1993. However, it took another 10 years before this was achieved as Field and Game Australia campaigned vigorously to prevent lead shot from being banned. Despite the ban on lead finally going through, waterbirds in Victoria will continue to die, possibly for the next 100 years, due to the large quantities of lead shot deposited by duck shooters in the wetlands over many years.

Since the 1970s duck shooters have continually lobbied consecutive state governments for wetlands to be artificially flooded in order to attract waterbirds to shoot. This constant artificial flooding has caused the drowning of thousands of River Red gums and Black Box trees as well as an elevation of salt levels.

Litter has also been a huge on-going problem with shooters leaving behind non-biodegradable rubbish such as spent cartridge shells, beer bottles and cans, plastic bottles and bags, synthetic hide-construction material, unburied toilet waste, etc.

In 2005 the Coalition Against Duck Shooting wrote to the Bracks Government asking that all wetlands in Victoria be handed back to their original indigenous owners. From the 1950s, consecutive state governments in Victoria have shown absolutely no concern for Australia's native water birds and certainly no sensitivity for the indigenous heritage of these very important wetlands. The historical significance of these indigenous cultural heritage areas, including bark trees, middens and most importantly, the burial sites, has been ignored.

Hunters have never respected the valuable historical assets or the cultural sensitivities of wetlands. Duck shooters have smashed through fenced-off areas to drive over burial sites and at Lake Murphy, in northwest Victoria shooters were prosecuted by DSE officers for camping on a burial site on the opening morning of the 2006 duck season.

Tourism from the Victorian Phillip Island penguins generates over \$150 million each year for the state's economy and whales visiting Warrnambool between June and October contributes about \$20 million to the local economy annually. In the same way, Australian country towns should be reaping the economic, social and environmental benefits from internationally important RAMSAR wetlands, which have the potential to attract large numbers of overseas tourists to Australia. These wetlands are also rich in Koori culture and heritage. As the indigenous people are familiar with their own wetland heritage, the tourism industry should be a partnership between the Koori population and Parks Victoria.

Shooters pose no political threat to state governments.

- a) After Bob Carr banned the recreational shooting of native water birds in 1995 the shooting organisations threatened to have the NSW Labor government thrown out of office. But the threats lasted no more than a couple of weeks. Premier Bob Carr remained in office for the next 10 years before retiring undefeated and Labor is still in government in NSW, twelve years later.
- b) Following the Port Arthur tragedy in 1996, Prime Minister John Howard confronted the anger of the gun lobby when he banned semi-automatic weapons. The shooting organisations staged marches in metropolitan and country cities and threatened to have the Prime Minister thrown out of office at the next election. They even established their own political parties to win Senate seats in the 1998 federal election. However, the shooters' parties not only failed to win a single seat, but couldn't even muster two percent of the vote. Again, the shooting organisations failed to win public support or sympathy for their activities and John Howard continued as Prime Minister until 2007.
- c) In the Queensland Parliament in 2005 Peter Beattie said: "*It's time to ban the recreational shooting of ducks and quail. This is not an appropriate activity in contemporary life in the smart state.*" In the lead up to the next state election in 2006, the shooters threatened to throw the Beattie Government out of office. Yet even with bigger problems facing the Queensland Government (such as hospital deaths) Peter Beattie was again returned to office, despite the shooters' threats against him.

Due to low waterbird numbers and drought, moratoriums were called in Victoria and South Australia in 2007 and 2008. Tasmania and Northern Territory continued with recreational duck shooting seasons regardless of the environmental concerns and low waterbird numbers. This is why it is imperative that the Federal government steps in to take control of native waterbirds across Australia.

National call for a Federal ban on duck shooting

140 conservation, animal welfare and political groups from across Australia (*Encl.*) are urging the Federal Government to:

- (a) Adopt and implement a national policy to permanently ban the recreational shooting of native waterbirds.
- (b) Amend the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Subdivision B – Wetlands of international importance) to provide for a specific ban on recreational hunting of native ducks on RAMSAR Sites* throughout Australia.
- (c) Work in co-operation with States and the Northern Territory to reach an intergovernmental agreement for all governments to legislate for a permanent ban on the recreational shooting of native waterbirds.

The endorsing organisations recognise that:

- The recreational shooting of native waterbirds is unsustainable. Aerial surveys conducted by Professor Richard Kingsford (University of NSW) since 1983 show waterbird numbers across eastern Australia have decreased by 82% due to climate change, extended droughts and more frequent El Ninos.
- Duck shooting is cruel because of high wounding rates caused by the spray of shot gun pellets. One in four waterbirds fly away wounded. The Victorian government's Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC) has repeatedly recommended that the recreational shooting of native waterbirds be banned on cruelty grounds.
- The public overwhelmingly opposes the activity. Duck shooting has been banned in Queensland, NSW and WA. A statewide Morgan Research poll conducted in Victoria in 2007 showed that 75% want the recreational shooting of native waterbirds permanently banned.
- The Victorian, Tasmanian, South Australian and Northern Territory governments are ignoring environmental and ethical issues in maintaining legislation that authorises the shooting of native waterbirds for recreational purposes. As waterbirds are nomadic and cross over state boundaries, the duck shooting policies of these governments undermine the protection afforded to native waterbirds by other States.
- Given community concern over the ethics of duck shooting, combined with declining bird numbers, diminishing wetlands and the effects of drought and climate change, as well as inconsistent policies of the states/territory governments on duck shooting, there is an urgent need for the Federal government to:
 - (a) develop a national approach to the issue by permanently banning recreational duck shooting on all RAMSAR* wetlands throughout Australia; and
 - (b) seek the co-operation of all States/Territory governments for an agreement nationwide to permanently ban the activity.

*** RAMSAR Treaty (*The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat.*)**

The Commonwealth is a signatory to the international RAMSAR Treaty giving it direct management and responsibility for significant areas of Australia's wetlands known as RAMSAR Sites, being 'Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat'. Under the RAMSAR Treaty the Commonwealth is obligated to work in partnership with State/Territory and local governments to:

- conserve Australia's wetlands through the promotion of their ecological, cultural, economic and social values; and
- ensure a sound scientific basis for the conservation and ecologically sustainable development of wetlands.

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18 December 2008