

2017/04: Should duck hunting be banned in Victoria?

What they said...

'The recreational hunting of ducks... [causes] inherent and inevitable pain and suffering'

2017 Duck season advice to the Victorian Government's Game Management Authority from the RSPCA

'The opening weekend is a great time for families, and we get a massive influx in Sale'

Geoff Abrahall of H&S Firearms in Sale commenting on the recreational and economic advantages of duck hunting for regional Victoria

The issue at a glance

On March 18, 2017, the Victorian duck hunting season opened. The season has begun with calls from a range of conservation groups for duck hunting in the state to be banned. These calls had a particular urgency this year because of the unusually low number of ducks, which opponents of duck hunting had hoped might see the 2017 season suspended.

The Victorian government has claimed that high recent breeding numbers and the new harvesting model being adopted will ensure species conservation.

Hunting groups such as Field and Game Australia have welcomed the decision, while bodies such as the Coalition Against Duck Shooting, Animals Australia and Birdlife Australia have condemned it as showing disregard for species survival and for the infliction of needless suffering on sentient creatures.

The issue became more acute after the opening weekend with the subsequent discovery of significant numbers of protected duck species shot and their carcasses dumped.

On March 24, 2017 the Victorian Game Management Authority issued a media release stating 'Koorangie State Game Reserve west of Kerang will be closed to duck hunting from Saturday 25 March 2017.'

The media release continued, 'Given that at least 75 Freckled Duck and 22 Blue-billed Duck were illegally destroyed at this wetland complex over the opening weekend, the loss of any of these threatened birds would be unacceptable.' Field and Game Australia, which usually opposes the closure of wetlands for hunting, has supported this action and condemned those hunters who have killed threatened species.

On March 29, 2017, it was reported that the bodies of a further 200 dead birds had been found dumped in pits at the Koorangie State Game Reserve.

Background

Recreational duck hunting is permitted in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory. In Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania hunters are required to pass a Waterfowl Identification Test (WIT) before being permitted to hunt ducks. This test is intended to ensure that all licensed duck hunters can adequately identify game and non-game waterbirds while in the field.

To remain sustainable, game harvest levels must not exceed the annual rate of production. There are a number of mechanisms that can be used to regulate harvest levels, including season length, bag limits, number of hunters and the times and places where hunting can occur. In Victoria, the most commonly applied harvest regulators are season length and bag limits, but in certain instances, tighter controls are used to achieve particular management objectives. Hunting is timed to be outside the breeding and moulting seasons. Most ducks in south-eastern Australia breed in spring and then become flightless, moulting and renewing their feathers.

Despite the management measures habitually applied, conservationists argue that duck numbers

in south-eastern Australia are in long-term decline. A major factor contributing to reduced numbers, as with all species in all areas of the world, is habitat loss. Many of the rivers of the Murray-Darling no longer flood as frequently or extensively as they used to. This limits feeding and breeding habitats for ducks: less wetland means fewer ducks.

Each year, the Victorian government decides whether to declare the duck season open on conservation grounds. They use long-term aerial surveys, rainfall, flooding indicators and surveys of wetlands. They also collect data after the event, surveying the numbers and species shot each year - the 'bag' surveys.

In 2010, the Victorian government developed an adaptive scientific modelling approach to duck shooting. This relied on answers to key questions to build understanding of the underlying drivers of duck conservation. However, disputes around the sustainability of duck shooting remain.

In December, 2016, the Victorian government released its Sustainable Hunting Action Plan. As of December, 2016, the stated objectives of the Victorian Government regarding duck hunting are:

- * to promote responsible hunting,
- * to improve hunting opportunities,
- * to maximise the economic, environmental and social benefits of the sport.

The primary emphasis here on promoting hunting is a major source of contention within the Andrews Labor government where there are a large number of members of Parliament who are more concerned with species conservation.

Internet information

On March 29, 2017, the ABC published a news report titled 'Discovery of nearly 200 dead ducks dumped in pit reignites debate over hunting' The report details the discovery of the carcasses of some 200 shot ducks which conservationists believe may have been taken over bag limits and dumped.

The full text of this article can be accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-29/illegal-duck-shooting-prompts-hunting-licence-arrangements/8396430>

On March 29, 2017, The Courier Cobram published an article titled 'Duck season starts with war of words'

The report details the arrest of a number of protesters against duck shooting at the start of the Victorian duck season and the closure of the Koorangie Game Reserve, west of Kerang, , following the illegal shooting of two threatened species - at least 75 freckled ducks and 22 blue-billed ducks.

The full text can be accessed at http://www.cobramcourier.com.au/rural/index?year=2017&month=03&day=29&post_id=81264&slug=hunt-protests-staged

On March 18, 2017, ABC News published a report titled 'Duck hunting opponents attempt image shake-up as Victorian season begins'

The report deals with the formation of a new lobby group titled Regional Victorians opposed to Duck Shooting. It considers their arguments and some of those put against the group's claims. The full text can be accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-18/duck-hunting-opponents-image-shake-up-as-season-begins/8363064>

On March 15, 2017, The Bendigo Advertiser published a news report titled 'Regional Victorian duck hunt opponents form new group to lobby for ban'

The article details the formation of a lobby group titled Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck

Shooting in the lead up to the 2017 duck hunting season in Victoria. The group suggests there is substantial opposition to duck hunting among country Victorians and that the economic advantages have been exaggerated.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au/story/4531472/not-in-our-backyard-regional-duck-hunt-opposition-grows/>

In March, 2017, prior to the opening of the Victorian duck hunting season, the Greens updated their Internet page calling for the end of duck hunting.

The page details the risk duck hunting poses to species survival, the cruelty involved and also questions the economic advantages that attach to duck hunting.

The full page can be accessed at <http://greens.org.au/initiatives/vic/end-duck-shooting>

On February 23, 2017, Field and Game Australia published a report titled 'State Game Reserve Audit'

The report includes an overview of the important historical role that duck hunters and the licence fees they pay have played in the establishment of State Game Reserves.

The full text can be accessed at <http://news.fieldandgame.com.au/2017/02/23/1755/state-game-reserve-audit>

On February 22, 2017, the Coalition Against Duck Hunting issued a media release titled 'The link between animal abuse and human violence'

The comment is written by the Campaign Director, Laurie Levy, and involves a further explanation of claims Levy has earlier made that there is a connection between violence directed at animals and violence directed at other human beings.

The full text can be accessed <http://www.duck.org.au/>

On February 2, 2017, the Coalition Against Duck Hunting issued a media release titled 'World Wetlands Day - a missed opportunity to hunt tourism, not ducks'

The comment argues that developing regional wetlands as tourist attractions would bring large numbers of visitors to country Victoria and be of greater economic advantage than duck hunting.

The full text can be accessed <http://www.duck.org.au/>

On January 10, 2017, The Shepparton News published a report titled 'Duck hunting season listed' The report gives a range of views on the opening of the season including those who welcome and those who oppose the sport.

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.sheppnews.com.au/rural/2017/01/10/68759/duck-hunting-season-listed>

On January 9, 2017, The Gippsland Times and Maffra Spectator carried a news item titled 'Duck hunting season announced'

The article presents a range of views on the benefits and disadvantages that duck hunting brings for regional Victoria.

The full text of the article can be accessed at <http://www.gippslandtimes.com.au/story/4392062/duck-hunting-season-announced/>

On January 4, 2017, Animals Australia released an In the News comment and analysis titled 'Victoria authorises duck hunting season despite lowest numbers in 34 years'

The report details the Victorian Government's decision to go ahead with the 2017 duck hunting season and not to restrict bag limits despite historically low levels of birdlife abundance.

The full text can be accessed at http://www.animalsaustralia.org/media/in_the_news.php?article=5942

Animals Australia's fact sheet outlining the reasons why the group oppose duck shooting can be

accessed at http://www.animalsaustralia.org/factsheets/duck_shooting.php

The recently formed lobby group Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting has an Internet site which stresses the scientific and economic arguments against duck hunting.

The site can be accessed at <https://www.regionalvictoriansotds.com/>

On January 3, 2017, The Adelaide Advertiser published a news report titled 'Minister announces full-length 12-week duck hunting season for Victoria and Geelong'

The report includes the differing views of a range of stakeholders commenting on the opening of the 2017 duck season.

The report can be accessed at <http://www.geelongadvertiser.com.au/news/geelong/minister-announces-fulllength-12week-duck-hunting-season-for-victoria-and-geelong/news-story/f14c1254f6a44fe866c456c38e6edf7b>

On December 15, 2016, the RSPCA issued its '2017 Duck season advice'. The advice details the risk duck hunting poses to duck species survival and the inherent cruelty involved. The RSPCA makes a number of recommendations to the Victorian Government's Game Management Authority, including banning the 2017 duck season or (if this is not politically possible) placing severe restrictions on the number of ducks that can be hunted.

The text of this advice can be accessed at <http://www.rspcavic.org/documents/Campaigns/duck/RSPCA%20Victoria%20submission%20to%20the%20GMA.pdf>

On January 31, 2016, The Age published a report titled 'Premier Daniel Andrews faces internal Labor dissent over duck hunting'

The report details the dissent within the Victorian Labor Party over the government's decision to allow another duck hunting season, despite the Party's environmental policy committee calling for a permanent ban.

The full text of the report can be accessed at <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/premier-daniel-andrews-faces-internal-labor-dissent-over-duck-hunting-20160130-gmhly7.html>

Field & Game Australia gives an overview and some details of duck hunters' habitat conservation work on a section of their Internet site. The full details can be accessed at

<http://www.fieldandgame.com.au/page/conservation>

Sporting Clays Australia has a section of its Internet site given over to an explanation of the appeal of hunting.

The full text of this justification can be accessed at <http://sportingclaysaustralia.com.au/about-us/>

The Victorian Government's Game Management Authority oversees the regulations surrounding all forms of hunting. Those governing the acquisition of a hunting licence can be read at

<http://www.gma.vic.gov.au/licensing/apply-for-a-game-licence>

Details of the Waterfowl Identification test can be accessed at <http://www.gma.vic.gov.au/licensing/apply-for-a-game-licence/waterfowl-identification-test>

Information regarding hunting seasons and bag limits can be accessed at

<http://www.gma.vic.gov.au/hunting/hunting-seasons>

The principles of ethical hunting are explained at <http://www.gma.vic.gov.au/hunting/duck/ethical-hunting>

Overall regulations regarding duck hunting can be accessed at <http://www.gma.vic.gov.au/hunting/duck>

On January 9, 2016, The Combined Firearms Council of Victoria published a comment by Neil Jenkins titled 'Federal MP misfires on duck hunting'

The opinion piece criticises a federal Member of Parliament for calling for the banning of duck

shooting. Mr Jenkins emphasises the economic importance of the duck season to rural areas. The full text of this article can be accessed at <http://www.firearmscouncil.org.au/index.php/2016/01/09/federal-mp-misfires-on-duck-hunting/>

On March 24, 2014, The Guardian published a comment by Rohan Anderson titled 'Eating off the land in March: duck hunting'.

The opinion piece describes the pleasure to be derived from duck hunting, including that of savouring the meat of the birds that have been shot.

The full text of this article can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/australia-food-blog/2014/mar/24/food-in-season-duck-hunting-march>

On February 20, 2013, BBC News published a report titled 'Just quackers: Hunting decline lands ducks in the soup'

The report demonstrated that with a decline in the number of duck hunters in the United States, the loss of their fees has caused a serious shortfall in the funds needed to conserve National Wildlife Refuges.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-21365324>

In 2013, the Game Management Authority (GMA) commissioned a study estimating the economic benefits to Victoria from hunting. The study is titled 'Hunting economic study: Estimating the economic impact of hunting in Victoria in 2013'. It suggests that hunting makes a significant contribution to the Victorian economy and supplies data regarding the contribution that is made. The study can be accessed at <http://www.gma.vic.gov.au/research/hunting/hunting-economic-study>

On June 15, 2011, Victorian Greens MLC, Sue Pennicuik, moved a motion in the Legislative Council calling for the abolition of duck hunting in Victoria. The motion details the cruelty involved and supplies data indicating that the sport is opposed by a large majority of Australians.

The arguments Ms Pennicuik put can be accessed at <http://greens.org.au/greens-motion-duck-shooting-season>

On March 30, 2011, The Conversation published a comment and analysis by Professor Richard Kingsford of the School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of New South Wales.

The article is titled 'Ducking and weaving: should we be hunting in Australia's wetlands?' and traces the problematic management of Australia's waterfowl over many decades.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/ducking-and-weaving-should-we-be-hunting-in-australias-wetlands-148>

Arguments in favour of duck hunting

1. Duck hunting is regulated to ensure species survival

Bag limits are set to regulate the maximum number of ducks which can be taken during each day of the duck hunting season. In 2017 this number was 10 per day. This is the largest number ever available. In some seasons the number has been cut back to as low as four or five because it was judged that depleted birdlife populations would not withstand the higher bag numbers.

If duck numbers are low in some regions then they will not be opened for hunting. In numbers are low overall, the decision may be taken to cancel the duck hunting season in a particular year.

In December 2016, the Victorian Government introduced the Waterfowl Conservation Harvest Model. The Waterfowl Conservation Harvest Model is intended to use the best scientific methods to predict the impact of environmental factors and hunting on game duck populations.

The Government has also indicated that it will undertake research, monitoring and evaluation by developing a game species research strategy to better understand the distribution, abundance and recruitment of game species and the impact of hunting activity. It will research land and habitat management techniques to benefit native game species. It will ensure the tagging,

banding and monitoring game to better understand movements and breeding cycles and assess relationships between hunting seasons and local ecosystems around hunting reserves.

The Government aims to provide better access to information through a single, comprehensive hunting website, an improved distribution network for a new hunting manual, and the upgrading of the game licensing system to allow for more targeted messaging to hunters.

The Government also intends to improve seasonal announcements by effectively communicating information to stakeholders when seasonal variations are required or areas are temporarily closed to hunting. Early advice will be provided through the Victorian Game Hunting App, Twitter and Facebook.

2. Duck hunters have to be licensed before they can hunt

Anyone wishing to hunt game in Victoria, including juniors (12-17 years) and international visitors, must hold a current Game Licence. The Game Licence must be endorsed for the appropriate type of game to be hunted and only permits hunting game in Victoria. Persons less than 12 years old are not permitted to use a firearm or to hunt or take game. Prior to applying for a Game Licence to hunt game ducks in Victoria, hunters need to pass the Waterfowl Identification Test.

This information is intended to enable hunters to identify some important waterfowl (ducks, geese and swans) in Australia. For sound conservation it is essential that hunters should be able to identify game ducks before they shoot. Most of the written descriptions of game waterfowl and other common waterbirds are accompanied by illustrations. The illustrations are intended to highlight important distinguishing features and allow for positive identification of the bird, both in flight and in the hand.

Each season the ducks able to be shot are specified. In the 2017 the specified species are Pacific Black Duck, Grey Teal, Mountain Duck, Wood Duck, Chestnut Teal, Hardhead Duck and the Pink-eared Duck. These ducks are designated for shooting because pre-hunting surveys have indicated their numbers are large enough to allow their being hunted. (It should be noted that these judgements are vigorously disputed by some experts.) In 2017 the Blue-winged Shoveler was named as not to be hunted because of low numbers.

A Provisional Game Licence allows juniors to go hunting for duck without the need to first pass the Waterfowl Identification Test. However, a junior hunting under a Provisional Game Licence must be under the direct supervision of an adult who holds a valid Game Licence specific to the species being hunted.

To possess, use or carry a firearm in Victoria, it is necessary to hold and carry a current Firearms Licence issued by Victoria Police or any equivalent current interstate Firearms Licence. In addition, all firearms must be registered. This includes all shotguns and rifles.

3. Duck hunting is of economic advantage to Victoria

Supporters of duck hunting highlight the importance of the duck hunting season for rural economies, attracting large numbers of shooters to rural communities where their provisioning and support make a valuable financial contribution to regional areas boosting profits and local employment.

In announcing its Sustainable Hunting Action Plan in December 2016, the Victorian Government noted, 'Hunting continues to grow in popularity and makes a significant contribution to our state's economy. An estimated \$439 million flows into towns and regional centres across Victoria, supporting approximately 3,500 jobs.'

In terms of the direct gross State product impact of the different animal groups, pest animal hunting is the most significant (\$59 million), followed by deer (\$57 million), duck (\$43 million), and quail (\$18 million).

At the start of the 2017 Victorian duck season, the Minister for Agriculture, Jaala Pulford, stated, 'Duck season is a customary trip away for many families and is an important economic contributor to the rural economy, bringing 26,000 licensed duck hunters to small towns and regional centres across the state.'

Blair Findlay, chairman of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party of Victoria Geelong branch,

has welcomed the opening of the 2017 duck hunting season for the economic benefits it will bring to rural Victoria. Mr Findlay stated, 'It'll attract people to the region and when hunters travel they spend money in rural areas.'

A similar remark was made at the start of the 2017 duck hunting season by Geoff Abrahall of H&S Firearms in Sale. Mr Abrahall said he was 'optimistic' about the impact the season would have on the local economy. He stated, 'It's fantastic that the announcement's been made; it's that time of year that everyone gets excited. The opening weekend is a great time for families, and we get a massive influx in Sale.'

This point has also been made by David McNabb, the general manager of Field and Game Australia, who has stated, 'They [hunters] spend a lot of time out and about every weekend, scouting and looking at conditions and specific wetlands and monitoring the progress of the great breeding event, so that's money already flowing in. It's a tank of fuel here and pies at a bakery there.'

On January 9, 2016, Neil Jenkins of the Combined Firearms Council of Victoria argued that those who argue for the banning of duck hunting underestimate the importance it has for rural economies. Mr Jenkins stated, 'While a ban on duck shooting has an appealing and simplistic appeal to the inner urban set who know nothing about it, a ban would have serious economic consequences for the Victorian economy.'

A recent study by the government's own Game Management Authority shows duck hunting is worth more than \$100m to the Victorian economy... [A ban] would affect key regional areas such as Traralgon, Mansfield and Kerang.'

The importance of duck hunting to rural Victoria has led some spokespeople for the sport to condemn what they believe is the inconsistent manner in which governments have regulated duck hunting, complaining that without greater reliability the full advantages to country regions cannot be realised. This point was made at the start of the 2017 Victorian duck hunting season by Rob Treble, the chairman of Field and Game Australia. Mr Treble stated, 'We want a season where consistent management actions are applied, avoiding the extreme caution that caused the snap closures of wetlands in 2016 which had a direct impact on hunters and regional economies.'

4. Duck hunting is a valued recreation for many people

Supporters of duck hunting note that for many people hunting is a highly valued activity which promotes skills of hand and eye co-ordination, while allowing hunters to enjoy the natural environment in a very direct and engaged manner.

It is argued that hunting has been important to human beings from very early in human evolution and that even now when it is no longer required in order for Australians to feed themselves, it supplied an elemental satisfaction that is very important to some people.

Sporting Clays Australia notes on its Internet site, 'It is human nature to hunt. Throughout history hunting has played a significant role in the development of societies all over the world.'

Referring specifically to Australia, Sporting Clays Australia notes, 'In Australian society today the practice of modern hunting continues a tradition extending back through many centuries. Despite the fact that hunting is no longer essential to human survival, the hunting tradition is kept alive by popular desire to maintain certain cultural values, just like the traditional aboriginal hunting and bush craft and the use of indigenous foods or 'bush tucker' which also generates enormous interest.'

Sporting Clays Australia stresses the importance of duck hunting in contemporary Australia. The group argue, 'The place of hunting in today's society is sometimes questioned. We hunt for the same reasons that we catch fish, grow our own vegetables, or choose to make our own clothes. Besides companionship and general outdoor experience, hunting these days involves a range of other activities including conservation, bush craft and the preparation of special game meals for the family at home.'

Those who hunt ducks typically argue that they do so for a range of reasons - to exercise a skill, to savour the wetlands environment, for the challenge of the hunt and for the pleasure of adding a wild-caught, free-range creature to their menu. This last motivation was stressed in a comment

written by Rohan Anderson and published in The Guardian on March 24, 2014.

Anderson writes, 'Before dawn, I roll out of bed and gear up. My 12 gauge is loaded and my pockets filled with some extra shells. The morning is often crisp and the sun is still in slumber. In the darkness I walk in fields of long wet grass, my boots soaked from the evening's dew. The early morning birds perform a symphony that can bring goosebumps and a tear. I'm all alone bar my hunting dog Henry, who heels beside me.'

Anderson details the manner in which he and his family savour the meat of the ducks he shoots through the season, 'I tend to poach, roast or steam the ducks so I can retrieve every morsel of meat from the life I have just taken.'

5. Duck hunters play a leading role in wetland conservation

Supporters of duck hunting claim that duck hunters are playing an important role in the management and conservation of wetlands.

Field and Game, Australia, states on its Internet site, 'A primary objective of Field & Game Australia is to preserve, restore, develop, and maintain waterfowl habitat in Australia. Waterfowl hunters are aware of the importance of our wetlands and the biodiversity associated with them.' Field and Game, Australia, further claims, 'Field & Game Australia have consistently been at the forefront of wetland conservation, often being the first to notice changes in waterfowl habitat and population, continually seeking the reasons for these changes. Wildlife scientists agree that the loss of habitat is the greatest threat to waterfowl, far greater than recreational hunting. Several species including the Hardhead, Blue-wing Shoveler, Blue-billed Duck and the Musk Duck have been considerably effected through the alteration or loss of their habitat, reflecting a continuing need for Field & Game Australia's wetland restoration and conservation programs.'

Field and Game, Australia, note, 'Hunter-led conservation contributes much to wetland health: several of these unique wetlands may have been drained and destroyed decades ago, if it were not for some concerned hunters wanting to protect waterfowl populations and habitat.'

In its Sustainable Hunting Action Plan 2016-2020, the Victorian Government promotes a case study of the Heart Morass Wetland. The Government states, 'Hunters and environmental conservationists have come together in a long term commitment to conserve the Heart Morass wetland. In a joint initiative between Field & Game Australia, Bug Blitz, Watermark Inc. and the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, the Heart Morass wetland has been rehabilitated from a wasteland in 2007 to a thriving wetland at the mouth of the Latrobe River in Gippsland. Following initial funding for the land purchase from members and branches of Field and Game Australia and the Hugh Williamson Foundation, the wetland is now a place of national significance for waterbirds and other wetland dependent flora and fauna.'

Hunters licence fees also contribute toward habitat management. As Sporting Clays Australia has noted on its Internet page, 'A major fund raising initiative involved lobbying State Governments for the introduction of a game licence fee levied on all hunters. This raises more than \$1.5 million dollars every year across Australia, much of which is channelled into wetland conservation projects and wetland purchase and lease agreements. In addition to firearms owners contribute more than \$5 million annually to the economy through licence fees, much of which is available for wildlife management purposes.'

Arguments against duck hunting

1. Duck hunting kills birds in unsustainably large numbers

Opponents of duck hunting stress the large number of birds which are shot each season and the impact this is having on bird numbers.

The RSPCA recommended with regard to the 2017 duck hunting season, 'While we understand that the Government made an election commitment not to ban duck shooting, there is a need to allow bird populations to recover from recent climatic impacts in order to secure their long-term sustainability. Therefore, we recommend the following:

- cancel the 2017 duck shooting season; or
- if the season must go ahead, significantly reduce the bag limits on opening day and for the entire

season, and substantially reduce the season length.'

Despite the RSPCA's recommendation, in 2017, no additional limits have been imposed on the number of duckers hunters are allowed to take. This means hunters are permitted to shoot 10 birds each (the legislated maximum number of birds) every day of the 12-week season, starting on 18 March.

Victoria's 26,000 licensed duck hunters reported killing 203,935 ducks in 2015, most of which were bagged on the opening weekend. These numbers were reported in a year when bag limits were significantly lower than those set for 2017. In 2015 the limit was reduced by two, to eight birds on the opening day, and by five, to five birds per hunter per day for the rest of the season. The chief executive of the RSPCA, Dr Liz Walker, said the organisation's position on the 2016 season went beyond its long-held opposition to any form of recreational hunting, saying that the allowable level of hunting has 'put the long-term survival of the species at risk'. In 2016 the bag limit was eight birds per hunter per day.

Even greater concerns have been voiced for 2017 because of the higher allowable bag limits. The most recent survey of waterbird abundance, conducted in October 2016, has found bird abundance was the lowest recorded in the survey's 34-year history, and that despite an increase in the number of birds breeding over the unusually wet winter, breeding abundance was below long-term averages. Professor Richard Kingsford, who conducts the annual duck abundance survey stated in December 2015, 'When you're down at the bottom of the trough, which is where ducks are ... if you have a duck shooting season you are really only going to be shooting adults, which will reduce the capacity of the population to bounce back.'

In 2009 Professor Kingsford stated in *The Age* that Victoria's duck numbers had declined more than 70 per cent in the past 25 years, but the drop had been an astonishing 60 per cent between 2007 and 2008. Game bird species numbers are lower in 2017 than they were in 2007 and 2008, when previous Labor premiers Steve Bracks and John Brumby respectively decided not to allow hunting.

It has also been noted that many hunters appear to shoot more than their bag limit per day. At the start of the 2017 duck hunting season, the Coalition Against Duck Shooting found a buried cache of nearly 200 duck carcasses which it is suspected were the bodies of birds shot over the bag limit and dumped.

2. Protected species are being put particularly at risk

Opponents of duck hunting claim that threatened species will be pushed into extinction if duck hunting continues. They argue that, despite prohibitions, hunters are continuing to kill threatened species either through carelessness or an inability to distinguish between species.

BirdLife Australia has reported that on the opening weekend of the 2017 duck hunting season, at least 118 Freckled Ducks and 38 Blue-billed Ducks, both threatened species, were killed at First Marsh near Kerang.

BirdLife Australia had called on the Victorian Game Management Authority (GMA) to close the First Marsh wetlands due to the presence of at least 200 Blue-billed Ducks. The GMA argued that Blue-billed Ducks are 'rarely shot' as they are 'reluctant', weak flyers that inhabit deep water and tend to dive rather than fly. BirdLife Australia believes that the killing of almost 20 percent of these threatened birds within this region casts doubt on GMA's competence to manage duck hunting in a way that genuinely preserves species.

GMA released a statement condemning the actions of hunters who have 'done the wrong thing'. The demonstrated lack of respect for Victorian hunting laws and regulations last weekend ultimately led the GMA to close the Koorangie State Game Reserve to hunting. The Reserve, which encompasses Lake Bael Bael and First, Second and Third Marshes, is to be closed due to the presence of Freckled and Blue-billed ducks. The GMA appears to doubt that hunters can be relied upon to refrain from shooting protected species.

Even Field and Game Australia, a body which represents and lobbies for hunters, has endorsed the closing of this wetland. It has stated, 'Normally we would dispute that wetlands need to be closed due to the presence of these birds, as we did last year when closures were implemented

based on assumptions. However, the evidence presented and behaviour observed last weekend has damaged the reputation of all responsible hunters...

Field & Game Australia condemns the irresponsible and illegal hunting which took place last weekend. Uncollected game, non-game species, and early shooting are unacceptable for the majority of hunters, and for Field & Game Australia.'

On their Internet page calling for an end to duck hunting, the Greens state, 'In 2016 at just one wetland - Lake Toolondo, near Horsham, rescuers recovered 18 illegally shot threatened Freckled Ducks, 21 vulnerable Blue-winged Shovelers and 30 Eurasian coots and one Egret.'

3. Duck hunting is cruel

Opponents of duck hunting argue that the sport is unavoidably cruel.

Greens spokesperson for Animal Welfare, Sue Pennicuik MP, has stated, 'Duck shooting is cruel and anachronistic. Many birds are shot but not retrieved by shooters. Others are wounded by shooters and if they are not rescued, will suffer a slow, painful death or survive with shot gun pellets in their bodies. Ducklings are not able to cope alone and also die as a result of the shooting of adult birds.'

The same point has been made by Animals Australia which has stated, 'Many [ducks] are maimed and left for dead, with broken limbs and punctured internal organs.

The "lucky" ones are killed instantly. The unlucky ones - an estimated one out of every four birds shot - will suffer for days or even weeks before finally succumbing to their injuries.'

The RSPCA's position on all forms of hunting as stated in 2016 is 'RSPCA Australia is opposed to the hunting of any animal for sport as it causes unnecessary injury, pain, suffering, distress or death to the animals involved.'

In relation to duck hunting, the RSPCA's position is: 'The RSPCA opposes the recreational hunting of ducks because of the inherent and inevitable pain and suffering caused. Every year, during the government-declared "open season" many thousands of ducks are shot over the wetlands of Australia in the name of sport. Some of these ducks will be killed outright. Some will be wounded, brought down and killed on retrieval. Many others will be crippled or wounded and will die within a few hours or days. Some will suffer prolonged pain before they die.'

The RSPCA has acknowledged that the exact percentage of water birds wounded and left to suffer (i.e. are not retrieved) through recreational duck hunting is very difficult to determine with certainty. The Association has cited a number of studies which give a broad indication of the extent of the suffering of wounded birds. The results from six annual surveys conducted from 1977-1982 reported that New South Wales duck hunters estimated 9.9% of their total kill were 'shot but not retrieved'. Another study to examine the impact of hunting activity on black ducks, chestnut teals and mountain ducks in Victoria from 1972 to 1977, reported 'cripple losses' ranging from 14% to 33%. Also, an x-ray study of trapped live ducks in Victoria over the period from 1957 to 1973 reported that between 6% and 19% of ducks had embedded shot.

4. Duck hunting is of no significant economic advantage to Victoria

It has been claimed by some of those opposed to duck hunting that the activity does not contribute in a significant or reliable manner to the Victorian economy.

A new regional lobby group has been formed in 2017 of businesses and landowners claiming that duck hunting actually damages rural economies.

The group, Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting, claims that bird watching would attract more tourists to rural Victoria than bird hunting, and the shooters' presence deterred other visitors during the annual, three-month season.

A spokesperson for the lobby group and central Victorian resident, Kerrie Allen, has questioned the economic worth of duck hunters to regional Victoria. Ms Allen has stated, 'We don't see hunters coming into the town, buying cases of wine or buying trinkets in the shops.' Ms Allen claims that most of what duck hunters require they bring with them from outside the region, while their disruptive presence discourages other tourists who are more likely to spend money in local towns.

Ms Allen has summed up the group's position as 'We want peaceful, ethical, sustainable income year-on-year.'

The question of sustainability is a significant one where duck hunting is concerned. The viability of duck hunting varies dramatically from year to year, dependent on weather conditions and duck numbers. This point has been made in the study commissioned by the Game Management Authority estimating the economic contribution of hunting to Victoria. The Victorian Government cited the study to justify the opening of a full duck hunting season in Victoria in 2017, noting, 'An estimated \$439 million flows into towns and regional centres across Victoria, supporting approximately 3,500 jobs.' However, this is the estimate for the economic benefit that derives from all forms of hunting. That which derives from duck hunting is much smaller and less reliable. The same 2013 study states, 'Duck hunting is particularly sensitive to climatic fluctuations. Since 2000, 11 duck hunting seasons have been modified with three of these being completely cancelled. This has a significant impact on duck hunters and their expenditure, especially when consecutive seasons are cancelled.'

The 2013 economic estimate continues, '2013 saw a return to "normal" conditions after three historically wet years. Game birds dropped from record numbers down towards long-term median levels. Although the success of game bird hunters was still good, it was below the levels recorded in the previous years with fewer hunter days in the field. It could be reasonable to assume that associated spending was also lower. Generally speaking, game bird hunters spent less time hunting and took fewer birds when compared with 2011.'

In opposing duck hunting, the Greens have quoted another study of the economic impact of duck hunting undertaken by the RSPCA and titled 'Out for a Duck'. This concludes that claims that duck hunting contributes significantly to the economy of Victoria are false and that revenue from non-hunting tourism is far more important to Victoria's economy.

5. Duck hunting is a minority sport which is opposed by most Victorians

It has been claimed by groups opposed to duck hunting that the activity is one a majority of Victorians oppose and only a small minority of Victorians participate in.

Animals Australia's fact sheet on duck shooting states, 'Since the commencement of the campaigns against duck shooting in the 1980s, the number of shooters has been dramatically reduced. It is no longer supported by the majority of Australians. For example, in Victoria, where by far the greatest number of duck shooters reside, duck shooter numbers decreased drastically from about 95,000 in 1986 to around 20,000 in 2010/11.'

After a low turnout of shooters across the 2015 duck hunting season, the campaign director of Coalition Against Duck Shooting, Laurie Levy, stated, 'There has been a major shift in public opinion where the numbers of duck shooters have been reduced from 100,000 in 1986 to 20,000 today. Duck hunters are 0.4 per cent of Victoria's population.' (It should be noted that as of 2017, the Victorian Minister for Agriculture, Jaala Pulford, has claimed there are 26,000 licensed duck hunters in this state.)

Regarding the number of people in Victoria who oppose duck hunting, on October 7, 2010, a petition was presented to state Parliament bearing 30,000 signatures and calling for the banning of duck hunting. Critics of duck hunting note that the petition carried more signatures than the total number of licensed duck hunters in the state. A 2007 Roy Morgan poll found 87 per cent of Victorians oppose duck shooting. The poll specified, 'Those living in Melbourne (91 per cent) were more likely than those in country areas to think the shooting of native waterbirds should be banned, but even in country areas an overwhelming majority (77 per cent) think the activity should be banned.'

The poll further noted, 'Women (94 per cent) were more likely than men (81 per cent) to say the shooting of native waterbirds should be banned. Support for banning this activity was highest amongst younger people (14-17-year-olds -- 91 per cent) and lowest amongst those aged 35-49 (86 per cent).' Critics of the sport argue that the high level of opposition among young people indicate that the number of duck shooters is likely to further decline over time.

Opponents of duck hunting also point to the number of Australian states and territories where

duck hunting is either banned or has never been made legal. Duck shooting was banned in Western Australia in 1990 - 27 years ago; in New South Wales in 1995 except for on some public land where it is still allowed - 22 years ago; and in Queensland in 2005 - 12 years ago. It has never been allowed in the Australian Capital Territory.

Further implications

It would appear that as the number of ducks in south-eastern Australia is in decline, so too is the number of duck hunters. There is no direct casual connection between these two diminishing populations.

In 2010, Professor Richard Kingsford, Director of the Centre for Ecosystem Science at the University of New South Wales, demonstrated that duck populations had declined by 70 per cent in the preceding 25 years. Duck numbers are showing a long-term decline apparently as the result of the increasing loss of wetlands through changing land use and extended periods of drought. Opponents of duck hunting argue that given the vulnerability of duck species, duck hunting puts unwanted pressure on duck colonies, constituting an additional negative variable that could push threatened species into extinction and accelerate the ultimate destruction of many more. From this perspective it would appear to be good news that the number of duck hunters also seems to be falling.

The most recent figure for those holding a duck hunting licence in Victoria is 26,000. This is a marked decline from the 100,000 registered duck hunters in the state in 1986, though it represents a rise from the less than 20,000 registered duck hunters in 2010. Since then the duck hunting lobby has succeeded in having the Victorian government introduce junior licences so that shooters as young as 12 are now able to hunt ducks and, so long as they are accompanied by an adult, fully-licensed hunter, may do so without having passed the Waterfowl Recognition Test. The intention of junior licences would appear to be not only to boost the immediate number of duck hunters, but to attempt to increase the number into the future by training children who will grow up to become committed hunters. This may have some measure of success; however, it seems unlikely to hold out against societal trends which show an increasing urbanisation of Victoria's population and a massive decline in rural communities. This pattern is unlikely to foster a growth in duck hunting.

Commentators in the United States have noted a similar decline in the nation's hunting population. They have also noted that with this decline there has been a drop in funding to support habitat conservation.

Dr Mark Vrtiska of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has published research claiming that organised and licensed hunting has boosted the amount of money being spent on conservation in the United States. More than two million hunters paid for a "duck stamp", a federal licence to shoot the birds in the 1970s. The researchers claim that 98 percent of the money raised was spent on purchasing or leasing habitat within the National Wildlife Refuge System. The dramatic decline in the number of hunters has seen a commensurate drop in the amount of 'duck stamp' money directed toward habitat conservation. The researchers are not optimistic that the numbers of duck hunters will ever rise again, due, as in Victoria, to changing cultural and social factors.

It would be simplistic and untrue to suggest that duck hunters are necessary in Victoria to ensure that wetland habitats are conserved. However, the fact remains that their licence fees make a significant contribution toward the government funds used to attempt to preserve habitats. Many of Victoria's State Game Reserves were originally established using licence fees paid by duck hunters.

There are currently 200 State Game Reserves across Victoria which cover an area of about 75,000 hectares. The first State Game Reserves were purchased using licence fees collected from duck hunters who had recognised that the draining of wetlands was seriously impacting waterbird habitat and populations. Jack Smith Lake Game Reserve was the first State Game Reserve to be proclaimed in 1958. Since then additional reserves have come to play an important role in conservation and recreation. Seventy State Game Reserves support threatened species

and eighteen State Game Reserves are listed as wetland of significant importance under the international RAMSAR convention.

Should Victoria reach a point where government and citizens are no longer willing to sanction the annual shooting of ducks, then a commitment will need to be made toward the maintenance of wetlands that are currently game reserves. Additional funding will need to be found and conservation of these areas will need to remain a priority.

Newspaper items used in the preparation of this issue outline

(Newspaper items used for this particular issue outline are available in the Internet Information / Web Links and Documents section.)