

## Alpine National Park Deer Control Trial Project Update

Parks Victoria is undertaking a deer control trial in the Alpine National Park to investigate whether ground shooting can be used to mitigate deer impacts on significant environmental values, including alpine peatlands. The trial is occurring in four relatively small focussed areas which contain sensitive alpine ecological communities, susceptible to damage from deer. Two of these areas occur on Bogong High Plains, near Falls Creek, and 2 in the Southern Alps, north of Licola. The trial commenced in 2014/2015.

The results to date are promising and Parks Victoria continues to adapt and improve the trial as more is learnt about which approaches work best. By continually adapting and improving methods through the monitoring and evaluation of the trial we will be able to develop approaches that best protect important alpine environments.

An essential part of the trial has been the contribution of volunteers from the Australian Deer Association (ADA) and Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (SSAA). The partnership and support from both organisations has been invaluable the achievements made thus far. Parks Victoria looks forward to continuing this important partnership approach.

In 2015/2016, Parks Victoria introduced deer control contractors to the Bogong High Plains and now will extend contractor operations to the Southern Alps. The deer control work undertaken by the contractors complements the work undertaken by volunteers, which will continue.

To avoid overlap with recreational hunters, contractors will operate in the Southern Alps during the closed recreational hunting season, i.e. from the 16<sup>th</sup> December until the 14<sup>th</sup> February. Two operations are planned, one of five nights in January and the other of six nights in February. Two teams of two will work across both of the treatment areas. The contractors will work under the supervision of Parks Victoria staff, and will be required to adhere to the *Firearms Act 1996* and the PV Firearms Use Operations Plan for the control of deer in the Alpine National Park.

In order to trial and assess a broad range of the potential deer control techniques Parks Victoria is also in the early stages of planning a Sambar deer aerial shooting trial in the Alpine National Park in 2018. The aim of the trial would be to demonstrate the technique in Victoria, and to assess its effectiveness, efficiency and cost. The trial area has not been confirmed but will be undertaken in an area of the park that is not open to recreational hunting, and outside the area that is the focus of the ground shooting trial.

Parks Victoria will use the outcomes of the trials to help determine the best combination of deer control techniques for different areas and circumstances. These results will then be used to guide the development of an ongoing, sustainable, landscape scale deer control action plan to manage the impacts of deer on high value vegetation communities and habitats, as per the Greater Alpine National Parks Management Plan (2016). Key stakeholders will be consulted during the development of this action plan.

## Frequently asked questions

### **Why does Parks Victoria want to control deer in the Alpine National Park?**

Deer are not native to Australia and can cause impacts on sensitive natural ecosystems through grazing and browsing, trampling and wallowing.

Over the past ten years, a significant increase in the number of deer and the area they occupy has been observed throughout the Alpine National Park, coinciding with increased impacts on a range of native plants and animals and ecological communities, including endangered Alpine Peatlands (also known as Alpine Sphagnum Bogs). Such communities are protected under state and federal environment legislation as are many of the rare and threatened species which occur in these environments.

Parks Victoria wants to control deer to protect these conservation values and mitigate the impact deer are having on them.

### **What is an alpine peatland and why is it important?**

Alpine peatlands are a special vegetation community of national and state significance. They are found only in small pockets in the high country of Victoria, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania.

Alpine peatlands, as the name suggests, are composed of peat, a type of soil made up of partially decomposed plant material. They form in waterlogged conditions over many hundreds of years.

They provide habitat and refuge for many plants and animals, including many like the Alpine Marsh Marigold and alpine bog skink that are rare and threatened. They also play an important role in maintaining the healthy functioning of several water catchments.

### **What are the threats to peatlands? What is the threat posed by deer?**

Alpine peatlands are a fragile community, highly sensitive to disturbance. Once damaged, they can be very slow to recover.

Deer impact on the vegetation in two ways – grazing/browsing and physical disturbance.

Sambar grazing/browsing results in a change to the structure and floristics/biodiversity of a community as a result of a decline in the species that are palatable to deer, the loss of plant biomass, the decline in plant diversity and compromised regeneration.

As large animals with hard hooves, the movement of deer through the landscape compacts the soil and results in the creation of tracks and bare ground, which in alpine areas is subject to frost heave and erosion. The tracks created by deer can also facilitate weed spread by creating gaps in the vegetation for weed seeds to germinate. In addition to this, male deer (stags) wallow in peatlands, destroying them and the habitat of the native plants and animals that rely on them.

### **What is the deer control trial?**

Managing deer to achieve conservation objectives is still relatively new to Parks Victoria, and managing deer to protect alpine peatlands had not been attempted before the Alpine National Park Deer Control Trial commenced in 2015.

The trial aims to test a number of different deer control techniques and assess which combination of approaches are the most efficient and effective at protecting alpine peatlands in different circumstances. The Alpine National Park Deer Control Trial involves ground shooting by contractors and volunteers from the ADA and SSAA.

Parks Victoria is also planning to introduce a separate Sambar Deer aerial shooting trial in 2018.

### *Alpine National Park Deer Control Trial*

The aim of the deer control trial is to investigate whether ground shooting can mitigate deer impacts on alpine peatlands.

The trial commenced in 2015. It involves three years of *targeted deer control*, by both contractors and volunteers from the ADA and SSAA, in two ~4000 ha areas on the Bogong High Plains and two ~4000 ha areas in the Southern Alps.

Deer abundance and density, and peatland condition, was measured prior to the start of the trial in these 4 areas as well as 4 similar areas where *no targeted deer control* was planned (other than recreational hunting, where it is permitted).

These eight areas will be measured again after three years of control have been completed and the results compared to those obtained prior to the commencement of control to allow Parks Victoria to determine how implementing deer control has influenced deer populations and impacts on alpine peatlands.

### *Sambar Deer aerial shooting trial*

Sambar Deer have not yet been controlled using aerial shooting in Victoria.

The New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW NPWS) Feral Animal Aerial Shooting Team (FAAST) has been undertaking aerial culling of Sambar Deer in the Kosciuszko National Park in recent years and have reported excellent results. Parks Victoria is interested in trialling this approach in Victoria, in collaboration with NSW.

The trial area has not been confirmed but will be in an area not open for recreational hunting. It is likely that the trial would be carried out over a 3 day period.

The trial would involve an independent Parks Victoria observer monitoring the success of the aerial shooting operation from the air, including the response of deer, deer seen, deer culled and catch per unit effort.

The Alpine National Park Deer Control Trial includes measuring catch per unit effort of ground shooting operations and comprehensive monitoring of deer abundance and impacts in environments similar those to where the aerial shooting trial is occurring. The catch per unit effort figures calculated from the aerial shooting trial will enable Parks Victoria to assess the efficacy of this technique and estimate the potential reduction in deer population and impacts through comparison with the data collected in the deer control trial.

### *What will happen when the trials are completed?*

Once the trials have been completed, all the data collected will be analysed and the results will be assessed to determine the level of deer control required to protect alpine peatlands and the best combination of techniques for different areas and circumstances. These results will then be used to develop an ongoing, sustainable, landscape scale deer control action plan to manage the impacts of deer on high value vegetation communities and habitats, as per the directions of the Greater Alpine National Parks Management Plan (2016).

Key stakeholders will be consulted during the development of this action plan.

### **Will Parks Victoria continue to use volunteers in the Deer Control Trial?**

Parks Victoria values the contribution volunteers make to all its deer control programs, including the Alpine National Park deer control trial. Volunteers have contributed valuable knowledge, skills and experience that has helped to continuously refine and improve the trial. Volunteers will continue to be involved in the trial until it concludes. It is expected that volunteer deer control is likely to continue to be an important component of integrated deer control programs in the future.

## **I am a recreational hunter and I like to hunt in the Southern Alps. How will Parks Victoria's deer control work impact on my ability to go hunting and shoot a deer?**

Parks Victoria's deer control work will have no impact on your ability to go hunting and limited influence on your opportunity to shoot a deer. Targeted deer control is restricted to small areas around significant environmental values, deer will not be eradicated and no areas are being closed to recreational hunting at any time. There are no changes to the current recreational hunting season.

The Alpine National Park covers an area of over 650 000 hectares. Of this, recreational hunting is currently permitted in more than 60% of the park, over an area of 395 000 hectares. In addition to this, neighbouring reserves and State forest, including the Avon Wilderness Park and Carey State Forest are also available for hunting.

An additional 95 000 hectares of the Alpine National Park will become available for recreational hunting following upcoming changes in the legislation in line with the new Greater Alpine Parks Management Plan. This will make more than 75% of the park available for recreational hunting (see attached map).

The Deer Control Trial is being carried out across 16 000 hectares (2.5% of the park); 8000 ha on the Bogong High Plains where recreational hunting is not permitted, and 8000 ha in the Southern Alps, where it is permitted. The trial is occurring in an area that represents only 2% of the area where hunting is currently permitted.

The trial differs from recreational hunting in that it is aimed at protecting alpine peatlands and is therefore restricted to the limited areas where these occur. In these areas, Parks Victoria's trial will complement the recreational harvest and provide information on the control regime needed, in addition to the recreational harvest, to reduce the impacts of deer to an acceptable level.

Deer numbers in eastern Victoria are at such a level now that eradication is not possible. The aim of Parks Victoria's deer control work is therefore to reduce deer activity and impacts on significant environment values, including alpine peatlands.

The park is not closed when deer control work is being undertaken so you can still go hunting.

The aerial shooting trial will only be undertaken in areas closed to recreational hunting. The area of the park where the aerial shooting will take place will be closed for the duration of the trial.

### **What will happen with the deer carcasses?**

In general, deer carcasses will be left where they fall.

Sambar deer weigh between 100 kg – 350 kg. A large number of the deer shot are likely to be in remote areas away from walking and vehicle tracks and to remove and/or move them would be unsafe and impractical. Harvesting meat would be time-consuming and would compromise Parks Victoria's ability to achieve the objectives of the trial.

Deer carcasses in wetlands or waterways, and those visible from walking or vehicle tracks, will be broken up and moved. In areas where they have no impact on visual amenity or water quality, deer carcasses will be left where they fall.

For further information, please contact Parks Victoria on 13 19 63.