



A Tragedy is Taking Place in Kosciuszko National Park

Reclaim Kosci

Kosciuszko National Park is an ancient landscape where the Snowy, Murray, and Murrumbidgee rivers spring from the ground, rugged snow-covered mountains fill the landscape, and rare alpine wildlife like the Critically Endangered northern corroboree frog (*Pseudophryne pengilleyi*) call home.

Tragically, it is now also the place where introduced horses have been allowed to populate and imperil our native species, trampling and compacting fragile soils, and carving up waterways with their heavy hooves. The last official count put Kosciuszko's feral horse population in the tens of thousands, with the management of horse numbers at a standstill.

In 2020, just a few hundred horses were removed from the park, nowhere near enough to limit or reduce the herd's untrammelled growth. And while thirty-two percent of Kosciuszko National Park was burnt by the catastrophic summer 2019-2020 bushfires the feral horse population was little affected by the fires – within weeks of the fires being extinguished, hundreds of horses were seen grazing on regrowth in the fire grounds.

A High Price to Pay

The roll call of endemic Australian species facing the risk of becoming Endangered or Extinct continues to mount. In fact, 1,805 native flora and fauna species are now listed as Threatened under Australia's conservation law – the Environment

Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

In Australia, invasive species, and yes, that includes feral horses, are now recognised as the key driver of native animal extinctions and they continue to drive our threatened flora and fauna closer to extinction. In Kosciuszko National Park, eleven threatened native animal species and twenty-three threatened plant species face some sort of pressure from introduced horses – whether it be from selective grazing, trampling, soil compaction, or watercourse disturbance, which leads to habitat degradation and loss.

Above: Alpine sunrays, Kosciuszko National Park.
Image: Mike Bremers



The northern corroboree frog (*Pseudophryne pengilleyi*) is Critically Endangered under federal and state conservation laws and is threatened by habitat disturbance from feral horses. Image: Michael McFadden

Horses are an introduced animal that belongs in a paddock, safe in the hands of caring human owners, not in one of Australia's most loved national parks.

Tide is Turning

Two years ago, a campaign to protect Kosciuszko National Park's natural values from booming numbers of feral horses was born. Called Reclaim Kosci, it has become the flag-bearer for those who want to see the New South Wales Government not just control but reduce feral horse numbers in the park.

A key to this reduction is repealing the 'Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018' – a piece of legislation that protects feral horses in the park to the detriment of Kosciuszko's fragile ecosystems.

Spearheaded by the Invasive Species Council, Reclaim Kosci has worked tirelessly to raise awareness of the damage being inflicted on Kosciuszko National Park by introduced horses.

Now, an increasing number of Australians and decision-makers are starting to understand the impact



Horse trampling impacts the streambanks at the headwaters of the Ingeegoodbee River in Kosciuszko National Park. Image: Ian Pulsford

feral horses are having on the iconic landscape of Kosciuszko National Park and the urgent need for a management plan that reduces those impacts.

The fight to protect Kosciuszko is paying off. In 2020, leading voices from all sides of the political spectrum – federal and state, conservative and progressive – joined our calls for action.

The Federal Environment Minister, Sussan Ley, was visibly shocked at the feral horse damage she saw following an inspection of the park organised by Reclaim Kosci.

“I remember the park when this area was my electorate when I first became a member of parliament and clear differences between then and now, and the pressure of horses, is a call to action I think for agencies, state government, and people who care about the environment and agriculture and farming and the balance between the two,” she said during her visit.

“So, it is all a balance. It isn’t all about one versus the other, it’s about looking after everyone and looking after the environment and we do have to get that balance right.”

Midnight Oil frontman and environmental advocate, Peter Garrett, has also stood up for Kosciuszko. After visiting the park in December 2020, he put out an impassioned distress call. “I’ve spent many years in different capacities – whether as a muso, a pollie, as an environmental activist – walking around and seeing many parts of the most beautiful country on earth for me.



Billy button scenes in Kosciuszko National Park. Image: Mike Bremers



Australian National University Professor Jamie Pittock, Invasive Species Council Chief Executive Officer Andrew Cox, legendary rock icon Peter Garrett, and Invasive Species Council Indigenous Ambassador Richard Swain inspect feral horse damage in Kosciuszko National Park.



The Endangered alpine she-oak skink (*Cyclodomorphus praealtus*) is only found in the Australian Alps. Horse grazing and trampling impact its habitat. Image: Zak Atkins



Australian National University expert, Renee Hartley, shows Australia’s Federal Environment Minister, Sussan Ley, an endangered alpine she-oak skink (*Cyclodomorphus praealtus*) while inspecting feral horse damage in Kosciuszko National Park.



Following an aerial and ground inspection of the northern end of Kosciuszko National Park, Peter Garrett declared an important part of our national heritage was being wrecked by the feral horse invasion in the unique alpine region.



An enclosure plot fence constructed in 1999 with protected (left) and unprotected (right) sedge and grass wetland at Cowombat Flat in Alpine National Park. Image: Ian Pulsford.

“And yet to come to this place and see the damage that’s been wrought by these feral animals has broken my heart. We need to reduce these numbers urgently,” he said. A flight over the park, sponsored by the Australian Wildlife Society, cemented Peter’s position. “When we got off the helicopter this morning and I had a chance to look around and think about what I had seen, I was just struck by firstly, what a disaster is unfolding,” he said.

Time to Reclaim Kosci

The New South Wales Government is expected to seek public comment on a new management plan for Kosciuszko’s horses in the first half of 2021. It will either spell out how Kosciuszko National Park and its native inhabitants will be protected for future generations or condemn Kosciuszko to further destruction from heavy horse hooves.

As a matter of urgency, the New South Wales Government must reduce the impact of horses in the national park and begin the urgent work of restoring the catchments’ slopes and trampled alpine wetlands.

We encourage all those who care about the natural biodiversity of Kosciuszko National Park to have their say when the plan is released and urge the New South Wales Government to listen to the science and implement an effective and humane horse management plan. For further information on Reclaim Kosci please visit reclaimkosci.org.au

A Message From the Editor

The Society is proud to financially support the Reclaim Kosci project which aims to protect Australia’s native wildlife from invasive species such as the feral horse.



Feral horses are not unique to Kosciuszko – they are found in eleven New South Wales National Parks. Here, horse trampling to streambanks is evident in Barrington Tops National Park.