



Tasmania's Deer Dilemma

Invasive Species Council

Tasmania's population of fallow deer (*Dama dama*) has exploded. With no signs of slowing down, they threaten to leave a path of ecological, cultural, and economic destruction in their wake.

Fallow deer were introduced into the Midlands region of Tasmania in the 1830s for hunting and meat. There they remained in relatively small numbers for over a century. However, since the 1980s, the population has increased exponentially and expanded beyond its historic range. While the exact numbers are uncertain, Tasmania's feral deer population now numbers well above 50,000 and occupies 27 percent of the state.

A Biological Powder Keg

Fallow deer populations already occupy the eastern Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Deer are found in relatively high abundance in the Central Plateau Conservation Area, around the Great Western Tiers, and have even been observed in the Walls of Jerusalem. Deer have also spread into some of Tasmania's most iconic national parks, including Freycinet National Park, Ben Lomond National Park, and Douglas-Apsley National Park. Satellite populations of deer can now be found all over Tasmania, including on Bruny Island, around Temma, and on the outskirts of Launceston, Hobart, Mole Creek, Deloraine, and Dover.

Tasmania's growing deer population shows no signs of slowing down. Scientists at the University of Tasmania predict that if deer continue to be managed under the current policies, the population will exceed one million by 2050 and will likely inhabit more than 56 percent of Tasmania. Fallow deer could live almost anywhere in Tasmania apart from the densest and wettest forests and the low productivity buttongrass plains of the west. Scientists predict that a warming climate and increased wildfire frequency will further increase the number of regions fallow deer can inhabit.

The Consequences of Doing Nothing

Tasmania is a remarkable landscape of unique and outstanding natural and cultural value, along with prized agricultural and forestry industries. This landscape is also the cornerstone of Tasmania's economy, and is threatened by the burgeoning feral deer population.

Many of Tasmania's most precious wilderness areas are susceptible to the negative environmental impacts of deer. Even small numbers of deer in sensitive areas can have dramatic impacts. Deer can damage native vegetation and ecologically fragile areas by overgrazing, browsing, trampling, rubbing their antlers against trees, spreading weeds,

creating trails, and degrading water quality in creeks and rivers. Grazing pressure can reduce the density and diversity of vegetation in peatlands, heathlands, grasslands, and the forest understorey, reducing habitat quality for native wildlife. In fire-sensitive ecosystems, browsing deer can inhibit post-fire recovery and potentially result in permanent changes to the ecosystem.

Not only can feral deer inflict significant damage to the environment, but they are also an affront to Tasmania's identity as a pristine, natural place. Feral deer threaten the ecological integrity of Tasmania's wild places.

Fallow deer do not yet occur at high densities in most of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, but the latest research from the University of Tasmania shows that if current management practices continue, deer will inevitably establish, and once they do, they will be nearly impossible to eradicate. According to Dr Calum Cunningham of the University of Tasmania, who has been researching deer in Tasmania, "*Our models indicate there is ample suitable habitat for deer in the world heritage area, and that deer are on the cusp of firmly establishing there.*"

Top: Feral fallow deer (*Dama dama*) Tasmania.
Image: Faye Beswick.



Deer can damage native vegetation and ecologically fragile areas by overgrazing, browsing, and trampling. Image: Nicole Anderson.



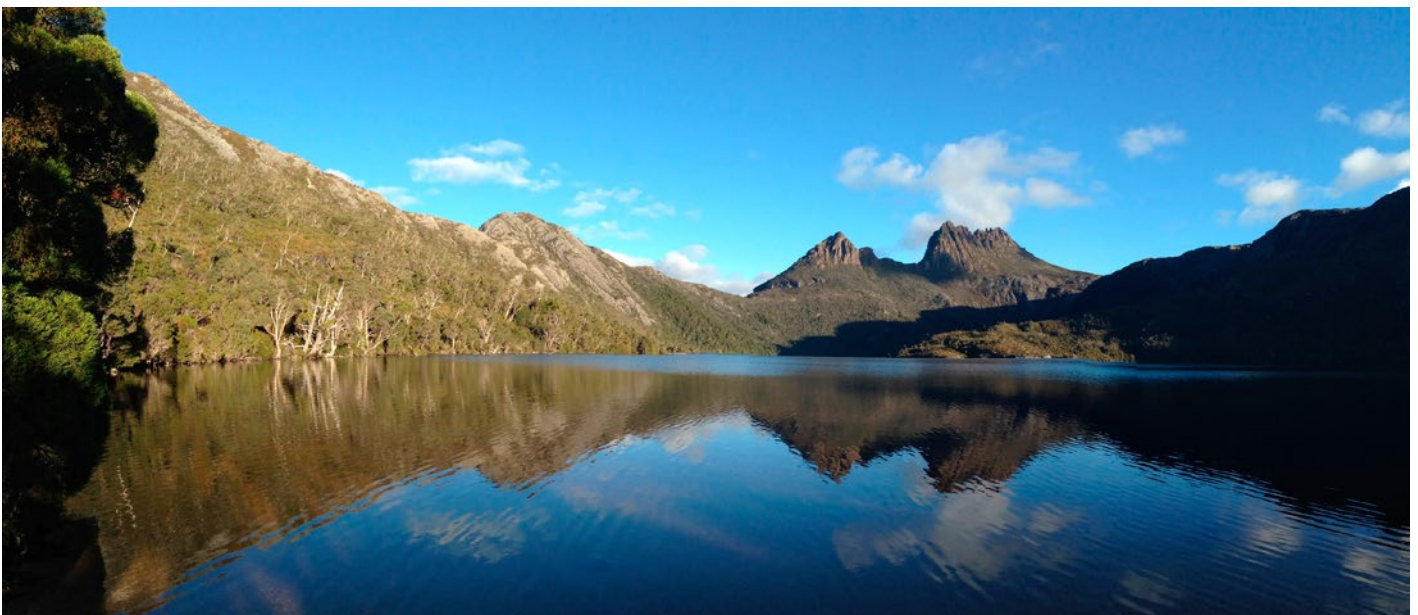
Even small numbers of deer in sensitive areas can have dramatic impacts, particularly in fragile alpine ecosystems. Image: Bob Brown.

Deer inflict damage not only on Tasmanian ecosystems but also the Tasmanian economy. Estimates suggest deer cost Tasmania farmers eighty million a year due to destroyed infrastructure and damaged crops. Protecting trees from deer incurs significant costs to forest plantations, ecological restoration, and carbon farming. Greening Australia estimated that 30 percent of its six million budget for the Midlands Restoration Program was spent preventing deer impacts.

Conflicted Management

Tasmania is lagging behind the rest of the country regarding recognising deer as a serious feral pest and managing them appropriately. Tasmania's deer policy remains firmly focused on recreational hunting, with fallow deer classified as 'partly protected wildlife'. A policy of maintaining the supply of prized hunting targets rather than controlling the population and mitigating their negative impacts has allowed for feral deer's dramatic expansion across Tasmania.

In February 2022, the state's Liberal government released a five-year plan to manage the population of fallow deer. While this plan has made several improvements, it lacks ambition and detail. Properly managing deer numbers will require very serious action plans with identified actors, budgets, and targets, none of which have been provided. Disturbingly, the plan sanctions the retention of deer in some areas of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, and Ben Lomond and Douglas-Apsley National Parks.



Failure to control the exploding numbers of fallow deer (*Dama dama*) across Tasmania could see them invade the world-renowned Cradle Mountain in Lake St Clair National Park. Image: Richard Siu.

Tasmania is at a Crossroads

There is no question that the deer population is expanding, and with it, their negative impacts on the environment, society, and economy. The current policies will not prevent deer from establishing throughout Tasmania. The situation is serious and dire, but there is hope. With concerted and targeted action, the invasion of deer into Tasmania's most valuable and iconic wilderness areas can be prevented. "We need targeted control by the state government to eradicate deer from areas of outstanding natural value like the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. There are also a number of small, isolated populations that should be prioritised for eradication, like Bruny Island and northwest Tasmania, before they become problematic and impossible to eradicate. These outlying populations are economic low-hanging fruit – a no-brainer," says Dr Cunningham.

It is time to stop managing feral deer for the enjoyment of the few at the cost of the many. As stated by former Tasmanian Senator Christine Milne, "The Tasmania Government has ignored the mainland experience of massive feral deer environmental damage, has ignored the pleas of Tasmanian land managers, has ignored its responsibilities to protect the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, all to curry favour with a few deer hunters."

For further information on feral deer in Tasmania or to get involved in our campaign, please visit <https://tinyurl.com/TASDeer>



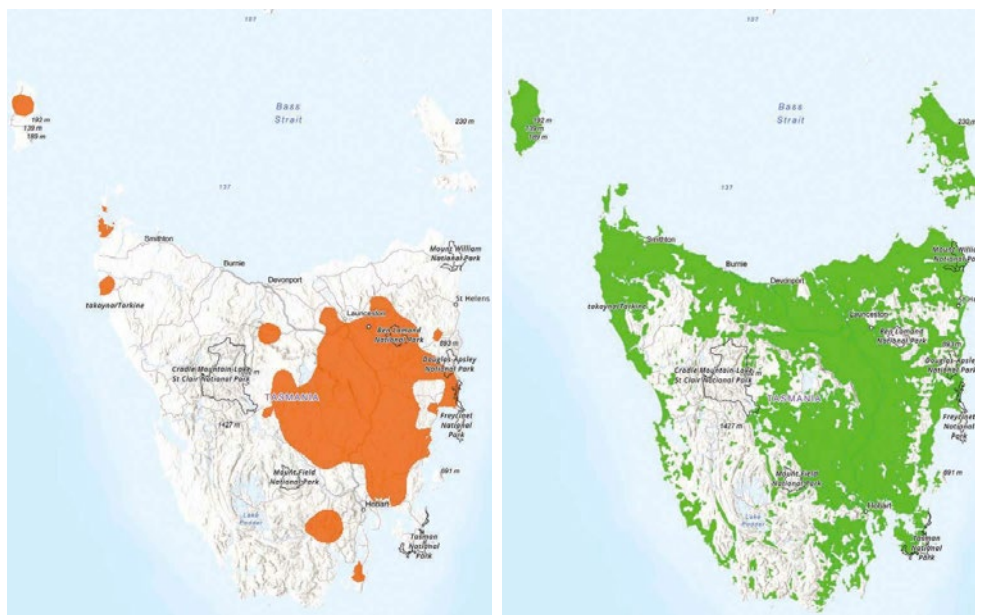
Fallow deer (*Dama dama*) have established throughout Tasmania, including in the Tasmanian World Wilderness Heritage Area. Image: Tasmanian Land Conservancy, Five Rivers Reserve.



Fallow deer (*Dama dama*) can now be found throughout Tasmania, including Ben Lomond National Park. Image: Richard Siu.



The new management plan sanctions the retention of deer in some areas of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Image: Tasmanian Wild Fallow Deer Management Plan 2022-27.



Current (left) and potential future (right) distribution of fallow deer (*Dama dama*) in Tasmania based on climate and habitat suitability. Image: Cunningham et al., 2021.