

## **Submission to the Game Management Authority regarding its proposal to conduct a 2020 Victorian duck shooting season**

**Due to the continuing environmental catastrophe across eastern Australia with dangerously low numbers of waterbirds, drought, rivers and major waterbird breeding wetlands dry, huge fish kills, and no relief in sight, the only responsible decision the GMA can recommend is for Victoria's wetlands to be closed to duck shooting in 2020.**

However, in previous years it was blatantly obvious that drought, low waterbird numbers and dry rivers played no part in the GMA's decision-making. It appeared that GMA's decision was made long before non-shooting stakeholders sent in their submissions.

Other reasons why a moratorium must be put into place for next year are listed below.

### **Victoria's 2019 duck shooting season**

In 2019, there were very few waterbirds in Victoria. We know this for a fact as the information came directly from a senior GMA manager in a meeting after the 2019 duck shooting season had ended. I made the comment that there were very few duck shooters on the state's wetlands during the season. The senior manager surprised me with his response when he said that there were very few duck shooters out on the wetlands because there were very few waterbirds in Victoria. The senior manager surprised me by saying there were few duck shooters because there were very few waterbirds in Victoria.

Yet in the lead-up to the announcement to hold a duck shooting season in 2019, stakeholder groups such as Birdlife Australia, RSPCA, Animals Australia, Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting and the Coalition Against Duck Shooting, all advised the Game Management Authority that a moratorium should be called because of the low numbers of waterbirds.

Aerial waterbird surveys conducted across eastern Australia by Professor Richard Kingsford had highlighted that waterbird numbers were in serious trouble. This begs the question as to why the GMA allowed a recreational duck shooting season to go ahead.

We believe that Victoria's financial contribution to Professor Kingsford's aerial surveys is a waste of taxpayers' money as long as the GMA continues to ignore his scientific information.

Or is it that the GMA deliberately misrepresents the low numbers of waterbirds by fudging the figures, to give a dwindling number of active Victorian duck shooters (who make up less than 0.2 per cent of Victoria's population) a shooting season, instead of protecting Australia's native waterbirds?

The GMA is failing to regulate duck shooters and is instead pandering to the very duck shooters it is supposed to regulate.

## **Pegasus Report condemns GMA**

The 2018 Pegasus Report following the massacre of waterbirds, including protected and threatened species, at the Ramsar-listed Koorangie Marshes, was scathing of the GMA's failure to regulate and enforce compliance with the law.

The only reason the 2017 Koorangie Marshes massacre was exposed to the public was because our rescue and enforcement teams were out on the Marshes with the shooters. The illegal massacre led to extensive media coverage.

The 2017 massacre occurred in front of a record contingent of GMA compliance officers, Parks Victoria and Victoria Police, who were forced to remain on shore because of Occupational Health and Safety Regulations. It's impossible for the authorities to see what is taking place on a wetland when they are forced to stand on shore.

This was not the first massacre to take place in Victoria. Following a previous slaughter at the Box Flat wetland in northwest Victoria in 2012, which was hushed up by the authorities, we exposed the 2013 Box Flat massacre to the media and the public, after being tipped off.

In 2012, Magistrate Peter Mealy, in a case brought against five rescuers, commented that he was "surprised" members of the public had to provide veterinary care when he thought this would have been the government's role.

The Coalition Against Duck Shooting believes it's time to call for a Royal Commission to investigate the violence, cruelty and abuse that native waterbirds are forced to endure at the hands of duck shooters, and the failure of the GMA to regulate and enforce the law.

The Royal Commission into banking was contemptuous of the regulator ASIC. Instead of protecting the banks' clients, the regulator was in bed with those it was supposed to regulate. The same applied to the building regulators who were caught out when the cladding scandal hit the headlines, highlighting how the regulators were protecting the interests of developers and builders instead of protecting the interests of the public who were entering into the biggest financial contracts of their lives. In the same way, the GMA falls down in its regulatory and enforcement duties.

During a recent board meeting, the GMA's Chairperson (a long-time duck shooter), was asked whether he thought he could pass an accuracy test if one was introduced before duck shooters were allowed out onto the wetlands. He said that he didn't know. If the Chairperson, who is an experienced duck shooter, didn't know if he could pass an accuracy test, one must wonder about the skills of other duck shooters. Maybe this is the reason why an accuracy test has never been introduced.

Due to the nature of a shotgun, cruelty takes place immediately a duck shooter pulls the trigger. It's totally unacceptable that the RSPCA has been banned from the wetlands. The only reason the GMA would want the anti-cruelty organisation banned from the wetlands would be to protect duck shooters from cruelty prosecutions. The RSPCA has also been banned from taking its high-tech mobile veterinary clinic out to the wetlands to treat

wounded and abused native waterbirds. This job is left to concerned and compassionate veterinarians who volunteer their services to ease the pain and suffering of wounded birds.

### **GMA fails the 'pub test' on cruelty and abuse of native waterbirds**

Following the damning findings of the 2018 Pegasus Report, the GMA remains unwilling to prosecute duck shooters, even when handed clear video images of obvious cruelty and abuse.

The GMA's stated excuse is that it's difficult to find a professional expert qualified to determine whether the cruelty images provided to the GMA are, in fact, cruelty images. The GMA knows very well that the videos do in fact show cruelty, but they are trying to obfuscate in order to avoid prosecuting duck shooters.

Do in fact show cruelty. Surely the RSPCA has any number of professional experts who could make a judgement call as to whether a cruelty offence has taken place. Instead of this continual negative response to prosecution, it's time for the GMA to be proactive in prosecuting duck shooters for cruelty.

Unless the GMA is prepared to prosecute duck shooters featured in the 2019 cruelty videos, there is no point in our enforcement team bothering to approach and work with the regulator. In future, our rescuers will bypass the GMA in favour of mainstream news coverage and social media.

### **GMA board members' serious conflicts of interest**

GMA board members who have, or have had, a serious conflict of interest include a former CEO of Field & Game Australia (FGA). In 2009, the shooting organisation was investigated for water theft during the millennium drought, just before the opening of the 2009 duck shooting season. Water had been illegally siphoned from the Latrobe River to fill FGA's private shooting wetland, Heart Morass, near Sale. Southern Rural Water investigated and laid charges. The FGA didn't fight the charges and instead, its wetland manager pleaded guilty to water theft in the Sale Magistrates' Court on 23 June 2009. In spite of the prosecution, FGA's then CEO was later appointed to a position on GMA's board. He held this position for a number of years.

Another GMA board member showed his cowboy cavalier attitude to our native waterbirds when he bragged on a shooters' internet site about shooting 250 birds before 8am on the opening of the 1974 duck shooting season. While this event sounds totally implausible, the board member has since admitted it is correct. You may wonder why this is important today. But it is still relevant because by bragging about the incident on social media, it highlights the cowboy mentality of this current GMA board member.

Duck shooters claim they only shoot for food. If this were true, then the GMA board member who shot 250 waterbirds before 8am, must have been exceptionally hungry that morning.

Also, if duck shooters only shoot for food, why wasn't Heart Morass closed to duck shooting in 2019, following the EPA warnings that birds there, (and at other nearby wetlands), had high levels of toxins from PFAS used in firefighting, and should not be consumed?

### **Data FAIL – honest mistake, or fudging the figures?**

The first version of the GMA's 2019 publication, *Estimate of duck and Stubble Quail Harvest in Victoria for 2019* section 4.1, stated that an estimated 5,401 active duck shooters hunted during the 2019 duck shooting season.

Yet this figure was quietly changed in later editions of the publication, increasing the numbers of active duck shooters to an estimated 13,550. Even this higher figure means that active duck shooters still only represent the miniscule figure of just 0.2 per cent of Victoria's population. It is no wonder that regional towns situated near duck shooting wetlands are in serious financial trouble.

Was this discrepancy an honest mistake by the GMA, or have the figures been fudged to make it look like there were more shooters out on the wetlands in 2019 than there really were? (It is surprising that this discrepancy was only picked up by the non-shooting stakeholder groups. One would have thought that a multi-million-dollar statutory authority that employs highly-paid professionals, would have noticed the error.)

The GMA reported that duck shooters killed an estimated 238,000 native birds in 2019. Since duck numbers were so low, they must have shot every bird in Victoria. Or were the numbers of duck shooters artificially inflated to match the GMA's figures of birds supposedly shot? Or was it just sloppy work by the GMA?

**There is no doubt that the shooting organisations will continue to push for a duck shooting season in 2020, no matter how few waterbirds are on the state's drying wetlands.**

In 2017, as an example that backfired on the shooters, FGA lobbied for the Koorangie Marshes to be left open to shooting even after threatened Freckled and Blue-billed Ducks were sighted. The shooters argued that because they had passed the Waterfowl Identification Test, the threatened birds would be safe. The GMA made the mistake of leaving the Marshes open to shooting. However, rescuers recovered 140 illegally shot threatened Freckled Ducks and 43 illegally shot threatened Blue-billed Ducks, plus other protected species, following the massacre that took place on that opening morning.

This out-of-control massacre led the government to instigate the independent Pegasus Report which was scathing of the GMA's failure to regulate duck shooting and enforce the law.

### **Latest data shows waterbirds in crisis**

The latest data from the Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey (EAWS) shows that waterbird populations have plummeted, on a long-term continuum, to a record low of approximately 10 per cent of their numbers in 1983 when these annual surveys began.

In addition, the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) has predicted more extreme heat, drought and bushfire conditions for Victoria and southeast Australia.

The GMA recognises the extremely dry and worsening conditions, and the serious decline in waterbird populations, including lack of breeding and habitat availability. The GMA states:

- 'Victoria has experienced "below" to "very much below" average rainfall for most of the state.
- 'A positive IOD, negative SAM and delay to the onset of the monsoon are contributing to the prediction for a hotter and drier summer for eastern Australia. Should this occur, waterbird habitat availability will continue to decline.
- 'Waterbird abundance, breeding and habitat availability are showing long-term declines.
- 'Excluding 2016, there has been very little large-scale waterbird breeding since 2013 and the existing populations constitute core breeding stock.'

With the huge loss of around 90 per cent of Australia's waterbirds since the mid-1980s, and the outlook for hotter and drier conditions over summer, waterbirds in Victoria need sanctuary and protection.

Because of drought and low bird numbers, conditions are now worse than when seasons were cancelled in 2003, 2007 and 2008.

It is likely that the shooting organisations will try to justify a 2020 duck shooting season by arguing there are plenty of birds in Victoria. But if this is the case, it will be due to birds escaping the drought and bushfires in NSW and Queensland and with major waterbird breeding areas in NSW, such as the Menindee Lakes and Macquarie Marshes completely dry, it is important that adult breeding birds can take refuge in Victoria until conditions improve.

Duck shooters should not be permitted on artificially filled wetlands. These wetlands act as sanctuaries for birds escaping the drought in other states and firing at them would equate to 'canned hunting'.

## Conclusion

While the GMA looks after the interests of duck shooters, concerned members of the public go out on the wetlands to look after and protect native waterbirds.

The Coalition Against Duck Shooting's objective has been to rescue wounded birds, provide mobile veterinary clinics to tend to their wounds and to recover illegally shot, protected and threatened species. We have also exposed the shooters' illegal activities and crimes against native waterbirds.

It is imperative that a moratorium is called for 2020 in Victoria, if not a permanent ban.

Failing this, Victoria needs to call a Royal Commission that will examine the violence, cruelty and abuse of Australia's sentient native waterbirds by a handful of active duck shooters who make up only 0.2 per cent of Victoria's population.

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