

To, Game Management Authority

5 January 2020

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE 2021 DUCK SHOOTING SEASON

**The progressive Victorian Andrews Labor Government acknowledges that *'animals are sentient, and experience feelings and emotions such as pleasure, comfort, discomfort, fear and pain'* – therefore, recreational duck shooting seasons must be abolished.**

Today, duck shooters make up only 0.2 per cent of Victoria's population.

The role of the Game Management Authority (GMA) has been to cater to the needs of duck shooters, while the responsibility of looking after Australia's native waterbirds has always been left to concerned volunteer members of the public. Wounded birds are rescued from wetlands and rushed by volunteers to mobile vet clinics where they receive the best medical care possible in difficult circumstances.

The GMA is subsidised by millions of taxpayers' dollars, yet the task of rescuing native waterbirds and recovering illegally shot, protected and threatened species is still left to volunteer rescuers.

The violence and cruelty duck shooters inflict on sentient native waterbirds must now be seen by the Andrews Labor Government as having no place in a progressive 21st century Victoria.

### **Royal Commission required to investigate duck shooting and why the RSPCA was dumped as a POCTAA regulator**

If a duck shooting season goes ahead in 2021, the Victorian Government would also need to hold a Royal Commission into duck shooting, including why the RSPCA was removed as a POCTAA regulator from Victoria's largest wildlife slaughter.

In an activity that inevitably includes violence and cruelty to Australia's native waterbirds, why was the RSPCA prevented from prosecuting duck shooters for cruelty offences? We believe a pro-hunting GMA board member allegedly played a major role in the demise of the RSPCA, and the GMA taking over as the POCTAA regulator.

The Commission needs to investigate the GMA's serious conflict of interest. The authority's role is to protect the interests of its duck shooting clients; yet on the other hand, it is also expected to somehow act as a regulator under POCTAA to prosecute its own duck shooting clients for cruelty.

Before a prosecution can take place, the GMA must submit cruelty evidence obtained by members of the public and stakeholders to a departmental 'expert' legal committee, which we believe was established to prevent cruelty cases from going to court. This so-called 'expert' committee also works as a buffer to protect the GMA from any criticism for not prosecuting cruelty cases against duck shooters.

We believe that duck shooting cruelty cases along with any video evidence must instead be tested by a Magistrate in a court of law and not just dismissed by what appears to be a biased, politically motivated 'expert' legal committee.

It is also important for the Royal Commission to examine the alleged undue influence that a pro-hunting GMA board member exerted over the RSPCA's management, which successfully resulted in the RSPCA being excluded from its role as a regulator of duck shooting. We believe that to help protect duck shooters, the GMA was involved in sidelining the RSPCA on this issue.

The Commission must also investigate the reasons why the RSPCA signed a Memorandum of Understanding agreeing to remove itself from prosecuting duck shooting cruelty cases, in a move that would be applauded by the duck shooting organisations.

A Royal Commission would expose the pro-hunting GMA board member who was allegedly responsible for preventing the RSPCA from taking its high-tech mobile veterinary clinic to the wetlands to treat wounded waterbirds. The GMA pro-hunting adviser allegedly advised the RSPCA that it shouldn't be seen taking wounded birds from rescuers who were breaking the law by being on the wetlands before 10am. Yet these brave empathetic volunteer rescuers risk their lives to assist defenceless wounded birds.

We were extremely disappointed that the RSPCA complied with this viewpoint. It seemed to us that the GMA bigwig has been the RSPCA's chief adviser, while at the same time, looking after the interests of duck shooters. If this is not a serious conflict of interest, I don't know what is.

However, we believe a Royal Commission would be able to reinstate the RSPCA's authority to prosecute duck shooters and help care for all animals great and small under the POCTA Act. The RSPCA must be able to do its job as a regulator without fear or favour and without outside pressure.

The Royal Commission must establish how a duck shooting GMA powerbroker was so easily able to influence and remove the RSPCA from an activity that involves unacceptable violence and cruelty to native waterbirds?

The RSPCA is concerned about the mental health of confined dogs; yet it overlooks the mental health of terrified native waterbirds targeted by duck shooters.

To our knowledge, there have only been two cruelty-related incidents where the GMA prosecuted duck shooters for failing to kill wounded birds. But these were under the Wildlife Act, rather than as cruelty offences under the POCTA Act. While this is encouraging, it is only a token effort as in a normal year there would be tens of thousands of cruelty incidents - which is why the RSPCA should also be prosecuting duck shooters for cruelty under the POCTA Act. This short video of a wounded Pink-eared Duck is an example of the cruelty that takes place on a huge scale:

<https://youtu.be/SRSyn-HoLYI>

It took a Royal Commission to force the banking regulator, ASIC, into doing its job. The same applied when the Royal Commission into the churches exposed the regulators who continually failed to prosecute paedophile priests; and it took a Royal Commission to shine the spotlight on nursing home regulators who had also failed to do their jobs to protect the aged and needy residents. So how can we expect the GMA to be able to regulate its own clients?

## **GMA hunter knowledge survey – bad look for duck shooters**

An end to the recreational shooting of native waterbirds is supported by a recent GMA survey of 4,381 hunters which found major gaps in hunter knowledge. For example, only:

- 37 per cent of duck shooters could correctly answer a two-part question on wounding;

- 13 per cent of duck shooters could answer a detailed question on the humane killing of downed birds;
- 20 per cent only of duck and quail shooters were able to answer a three-part question on identifying game species.

The most knowledgeable group were hound deer hunters while duck shooters with dogs performed the worst.

## **Koorangie Marshes 2017 massacre**

Following the opening morning of the 2017 duck shooting season, the GMA informed its minister that duck shooters had been well behaved. On this Ramsar-listed wetland of International Importance, it took volunteer rescuers to discover and report that a massacre had taken place.

Instead of taking our evidence to the GMA, it was provided to the media. That year rescuers recovered just on 1,500 dead birds, of which 296 were illegally shot, protected species including 183 illegally shot, threatened Freckled and Blue-billed Ducks.

Concerned members of the public have spent 35 years exposing the violence and cruelty that duck shooters inflict on native waterbirds and the illegal shooting of protected and threatened species.

This massacre forced the government to order an investigation into the GMA by Pegasus Economics. The report was damning of the GMA's capability and failure to enforce compliance with the law.

## **Declining waterbird numbers**

Climate change is impacting on birds globally and waterbirds are not immune. Professor Richard Kingsford's October 2020 Aerial Survey of Wetland Birds in Eastern Australia once again highlighted the dire situation native waterbirds are facing. In 2019, the waterbird populations had fallen by as much as 90 per cent and this year showed a further decrease. The abundance of all game species was well below long term averages – in some cases, by an order of magnitude.

This fact alone indicates that as a matter of urgency, duck shooting must be banned now if we are to allow our waterbirds any chance of recovery and survival into the future.

It's an astounding situation when Victorian duck shooters' end of year polls show some 400,000 so-called game species were shot, yet the GMA cannot provide what percentage that figure is of the total population of native duck species that were in Victoria before those seasons commenced.

To conclude, the public anger at the recreational shooting of native waterbirds was powerfully expressed in a recent letter to the Bendigo Advertiser (29 December 2020):

*'Victoria's native wildlife is in decline due to many mounting pressures, including climate change, bushfires, drought and habitat loss.*

*It is unconscionable to add to this decline by continuing the barbaric sport of killing waterbirds for pleasure.*

*It is 2021, not 1821.*

*It is time the Vic Government banned duck shooting to bring our state up to date with social expectations.'*

*Neil Simpson, Lakes Entrance*

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