

The Game Council NSW and its emerging role in game and feral animal management in NSW

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Introduction

In other states and countries, responsible hunters are contributing to positive environmental, social and economic outcomes through organised *conservation hunting* activities, but until the establishment of Game Council, NSW society had not taken full advantage of the capabilities of private hunters operating on public and private land, in an organised, regulated way. The Game Council NSW was established in 2002 and is presently establishing itself in the important role of facilitating private hunters in assisting in the management/control of game and feral animals on both private and public lands in NSW.

The Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002

The *Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002* was assented on 10 July 2002 and the subsequent creation of the Game Council of NSW occurred in 2003. A major task of Game Council NSW has been to establish the State's first NSW game hunting licensing system, to achieve the objectives of the Act which are:

- (a) to provide for the effective management of introduced species of game animals, and
- (b) to promote responsible and orderly hunting of those game animals on public and private land and of certain pest animals on public land.

Game Council Structure

Game Council's board comprises 16 Councillors appointed by the Minister for Primary Industries. Half of the Council members have been appointed from research agencies and government departments and the remainder represent a wide cross section of the hunting fraternity. The Game Council is a Statutory Authority charged with administering its own act of parliament. As such it is an organisation reporting directly to the Minister for Primary Industries. Game Council NSW presently has 10 full-time and 5 part-time staff including:

- Five Game Managers; four based in the regional areas of NSW, one in the Sydney Metropolitan area, and
- five management and support staff based at the Central Office in Orange, and
- four part-time staff managing the written permission booking system and associated call centre in orange and one assisting with the introduction of R-Licence requirements in the Sydney Metropolitan area.

Game Council Functions

Game Council NSW has the following seven functions which reflect the objectives of the *Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002*:

- To liaise with the Pest Animal Council, Rural Lands Protection Boards and other relevant bodies in connection with their respective functions
- To promote or fund research into game and feral animal control issues
- To administer the licensing system under this Act for game hunters (including the granting of licences and the enforcement of the Act) and to engage agents for that purpose
- To represent the interests of licensed game hunters in matters arising under this Act
- To make recommendations to relevant Ministers for the purposes of Section 20 (Declaration of public lands available for hunting game)
- To provide advice to the Minister on game and feral animal control (whether at the request of the Minister or on its own initiative)
- To engage in such other activities relating to the objects of this Act as are prescribed by the regulations.

Objectives of the Game Council in the near future

Following the roll out of the NSW Game Hunting Licensing System in September 2004, the objectives and functions stated within the Act have shaped the medium term objectives of Game Council NSW. These include;

1. Developing the systems required for public land hunting, including;
 - a. Game Council Hunter Education Handbook and hunter accreditation system for the NSW Restricted Game Hunting Licence
 - b. Working with public land managers and applying the AS 4630 Risk Management to hunting on public lands and developing controls to **minimise** risk,
 - c. Declared public lands written permission booking system (available on-line or through a call centre to appropriately licenced hunters)
2. Declaring public lands for game hunting involving;
 - a. In accordance with Section 20 of the Act, before making a declaration, due regard must be given

- to:
- i. the impact of the declaration on public safety, and
 - ii. the rights of others using the land, and
 - iii. any plan of management or other policy document relating to the use or management of the land, and
 - iv. any recommendation of the authority that has care or control of the land, and
 - v. any recommendation of the Game Council.
- b. Extensive consultation undertaken with neighbours adjoining State forest other stakeholders (letters to 6,300 neighbours adjoining 170 State forests throughout the State),
 - c. The first systems test hunts successfully undertaken on declared public land in mid-February 2006
 - d. 31 State forests declared available for hunting and gazetted on March 10th 2006
 - e. Other State forests, Crown lands and a State Recreation park will be declared progressively throughout 2006 with the possibility of almost 2 million hectares of public land available for conservation hunting by the end of 2006
3. Promoting responsible hunting on both private and public lands in NSW
 4. Represent licensed hunters to public land managers and government
 5. Better facilitate licensed hunter involvement in game and feral animal management programs throughout the state;
 - a. Since the establishment of Game Council NSW, licensed hunters are becoming more involved in a growing number of game and feral animal mitigation and management programs throughout the state. These programs vary from duck mitigation programs on remote rice growing properties in the Murray-Riverina to deer control programs adjoining urban areas (For example, Mid North Coast Deer Control Program and the Illawarra Deer Management Working Group). Farmers and land managers are increasingly recognising the benefits of utilising Game Council licensed hunters to undertake game and feral animal control programs at no cost to their operations.
 6. Lifting the standard of hunting by promoting hunter education opportunities, a mandatory code of practice, public awareness campaigns and setting benchmarks for hunting organisations and their membership.
 - a. The Game Council has developed a hunter education program, the accreditation for which will be a pre-requisite for any hunter wishing to hunt legally on declared public lands. *The Hunter Education Handbook* covers issues such as safety, legislation, animal welfare, and ethical behaviour.

Through public awareness campaigns, Game Council NSW will assist in addressing issues such as of illegal hunting, rural crime, and responsible, ethical hunting.

Case Study:

Council Role in facilitating private hunter involvement in community-based feral animal control programs in the Mid-North Coast

The Game Council operations staff provide an essential coordination and communication role between Game Council licensed hunters, land owners/managers, community groups and other agencies. This role has facilitated licensed hunter involvement in a number of community-based game and feral animal control programs, for example on the Mid North Coast, the Hunter Valley and the Illawarra region.

Program: Mid North Coast Deer Working Group

The Mid North Coast Deer Working Group was formed in Port Macquarie in 2002. It includes representation from RLPB, NPWS, Forests NSW, NSW Police, Hastings Council, the Deer Farming Industry, RSPCA, Hastings Valley Hunting Club, and other interested groups. The establishment of the Working Group is a result of growing community concern about increasing deer population in the Port Macquarie and Coomba Park areas. Deer pose a number of problems in these rural-residential areas, particularly in relation to motor vehicle accidents. They are also causing damage to crops and market/residential gardens in these areas.

Game Council NSW joined the Mid North Coast Deer Working Group in July 2004 and set about assisting the Working Group by facilitating the involvement of NSW Game Hunting Licence holders in the deer control programs under the auspices of the Working Group.

With deer posing problems at the urban-rural interface, there were a number of safety-related concerns regarding the use of firearms in close proximity to residential areas. To address this, a Risk Assessment Procedure was developed to provide advice and ensure safe procedures for the control of deer in these areas.

The risk assessment process

In response to requests for assistance in deer control from landowners or land managers, the Game Manager undertakes a Risk Assessment of the property before developing deer control procedures. The risk assessment and procedures are submitted to the land owner/manager, Local Police, RSPCA and local Council for consideration before being finalised. Once approved, licensed hunters are linked with the land owner/manager to initiate control as per the risk assessment and procedures. This provides hunters with guidelines on how to best undertake control of deer on the property in the safest manner possible. The Procedures however do not replace or override any existing legislation regarding firearms or animal welfare.



An example of a shooting station and hunting area identified on private property. The yellow triangles represent corner markers of the hunting area, radiating out from the shooting station. This provides a shooting lane which is safe. Photo: Game Council of NSW.

Conclusion

While Game Council NSW is still very much in establishment phase, it is anticipated that government agencies, farmers, public land managers and pest control officers will embrace the concept of utilising responsible, licensed and accountable hunters in game and feral animal management. Another effective tool in the battle against feral animals can only benefit this State, environmentally, socially and economically.

As Game Council evolves, it will continue to work with other pest management agencies and land managers where hunting has been identified as a key management tool or as an add-on to existing integrated control efforts.

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Further information can be found on,
www.gamecouncil.nsw.gov.au/