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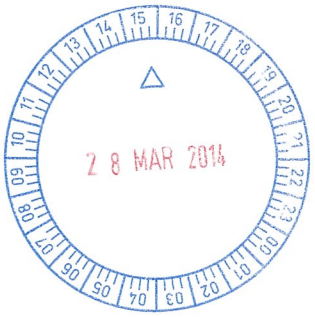

28 March 2014

Lauren Mesiti
Committee Clerk
Standing Committee on Public Administration Committee
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Perth WA 6000

By email and by post: lcpac@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Ms Mesiti

Inquiry into recreational hunting systems in Western Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the above inquiry.

RSPCA WA is opposed to the introduction of recreational hunting on public lands in Western Australia. We argue that any potential positive outcomes from recreational hunting are outweighed by the significant negative impacts, which include unnecessary (and often considerable) animal suffering, ineffective pest animal management and safety concerns for other public land users.

In this submission we present to you detailed information on the following issues relevant to the inquiry:

- the animal welfare impacts of recreational hunting
- why hunting is not the same as effective pest animal management
- how hunting will reduce public enjoyment of public parks

Whilst we recognise that there is a need to ensure that the impact of pest animals are minimised, opening public lands up to recreational hunters will cause unnecessary suffering to many animals, impair the effectiveness of coordinated and planned pest management programs, and jeopardise the safety and enjoyment of these places for the rest of the community.

Yours sincerely

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RSPCA WA SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO RECREATIONAL HUNTING SYSTEMS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

28 MARCH 2014

RSPCA

for all creatures **great** & **small**

Animal welfare impacts

RSPCA WA believes that recreational hunting, or the act of stalking or pursuing an animal and then killing it for sport, cannot be justified. Hunting has the potential to result in significant animal suffering. Animals are sometimes chased to the point of exhaustion and then killed with methods that do not cause a quick and painless death. Although some hunters may have the skills, knowledge and motivation to minimise the suffering of their prey, many do not, and it is inevitable that some animals will endure pain and distress.

With some hunting activities and practices, the potential for significant suffering is extremely high, in circumstances where:

- animals are injured but are not retrieved
- dogs are used and are not controlled properly
- hunters lack technical skills
- killing methods do not cause rapid death
- dependent young are left abandoned

If all hunted animals could be killed without fear from being chased or followed, and with a gunshot to the brain (that rendered them immediately unconscious and they died without regaining consciousness, and without other animals suffering, such as dependent young) then hunting could be considered completely humane. However, even in the best possible circumstances, this does not occur and distress, injury and suffering are highly likely, if not inevitable.

In the best case scenario:

- a hunted animal would be shot by an experienced, skilled and responsible shooter
- the animal would be clearly seen and within range
- the correct firearm, ammunition and shot placement would be used
- the animal would not be chased excessively prior to shooting
- if it was wounded, it would be located and killed as quickly and humanely as possible
- the death of the animal would be confirmed prior to shooting any others
- if it was a lactating female that was shot, its dependent young would be found and killed quickly and humanely
- relevant best practice guidelines would be understood and adhered to.

However, this is the exception rather than the rule.

Hunting involves more than just 'shooting'. Hunted animals are often chased long distances, sometimes by dogs as well as people. Arrows and knives are sometimes used to kill animals, rather than firearms. Other parts of the body are aimed at rather than the head. Wounded animals escape without being followed up, and dependent young are often left to fend for themselves. The skill level of hunters is highly variable and some are not motivated or required to follow standard procedures or best practice. The consequences of these practices are that many animals will endure significant suffering and a protracted death.

Affect of hunting on young animals

Hunting not only affects the target animal that is killed or wounded by a bullet, arrow or knife. It can also have a significant negative impact on other animals, particularly dependent young. If hunters do not find and euthanase the dependent young of shot females, they are left to fend for themselves. Depending on their age, orphaned young can suffer and die from starvation, dehydration or predation. Maternal deprivation is a significant stressor in many species, and even if orphaned individuals survive the initial acute stress of lack of nutrition, changes in physiology and behaviour can have a detrimental effect on their growth and development.

With some species it can be very difficult to locate and euthanase dependent young. Rabbit warrens containing kittens and active dens with fox cubs can be some distance from where the female is shot. Even if they are located, it is labour intensive to dig them out. Deer and goats will often hide newly born young until they are mobile and therefore are likely to go unnoticed by hunters when the mother is shot. With some species (e.g. deer and pigs) hunters may be aware that there are dependent young, but purposely do not euthanase them because they believe they grow up to be future hunting targets. It takes time, effort and patience to locate these animals and euthanase them with humane methods, and it is doubtful that all hunters are motivated to do this.

Adult animals that survive hunting can be affected by fear and also a disrupted social structure, if they are a species that live in a group. It is known that hunted populations of deer have significantly greater flight responses than non-hunted populations, which suggests that hunting is stressful to the surviving animals. Hunting with firearms and dogs close to native animals and livestock can also disturb them and cause fear. They can be wounded by stray bullets or injured if they try to flee the area. Hunting dogs that are not adequately trained, controlled, or escape could also attack native and livestock animals.

Pest animal management

Hunting differs from pest management control in many ways. Pest animal management programs are done with the aim of reducing the negative impacts on agricultural production and natural resource systems, using the most humane, target specific, cost effective and efficacious techniques available. In contrast, most hunting is primarily done as a desire to kill pest or game animals as a recreational activity.

Pest animal management programs must be carefully planned and coordinated to have a desired and lasting effect. Most recreational hunting is done on an ad-hoc basis. There is no defined objective, planning, monitoring or assessment of effectiveness. The methods used by hunters are not effective in reducing populations of pest animals over large areas for the long-term.

The following comparison reveals the ineffectiveness of recreational hunting of feral pigs compared with government run pest animal management control programs. The NSW Game Council has reported that 73,000 game and feral animals (including 11,079 feral pigs) were removed through hunting activities from declared State forests across NSW in the six years from 2006-2012 . In contrast, in 2012 in a single region in NSW, local livestock and catchment

management authorities worked together to undertake three large-scale integrated programs, conducted over several weeks and covering an area of approximately 1.6 million hectares, to kill almost 10,000 feral pigs. This means that recreational hunting removed roughly the same amount of feral pigs over a six year period that were removed by a coordinated and planned feral pig management program conducted over a matter of weeks.

In the limited circumstances where shooting is carried out as part of a pest animal management program, professional marksmen have been shown to be more effective than recreational hunters. For example, in the Gum Lagoon Conservation Park in South Australia, 65 recreational hunters over four days were only able to kill 44 deer, while one professional marksman in a helicopter was able to kill 182 deer in four hours.

In Tasmania, an investigation into wallaby shooting methods found that in two nights of shooting, a single professional marksman achieved the same level of population reduction as four recreational shooters were able to achieve in a year.

Hunters often do not want to reduce pest numbers, as they want to ensure they have animals to shoot in the future. Pest animal management programs target all animals (including females and young) whereas hunters will often target large trophy males and leave behind females and/or young to maintain a sustainable harvest for the future.

Hunters have interfered with the effective control of pest animals in some areas, especially in State forests. Evidence from genetic studies has shown that pig hunters have illegally transported feral pigs into new areas. The national threat abatement plan for feral pigs states that *"the continued release of feral pigs for hunting, either in new areas or in areas they do not currently occupy, is a major threat to the effective management of feral pigs and their damage"*.

Deer (especially fallow, red and chital) have been deliberately and illegally released into 'deer free' areas so that hunters don't have to travel too far for their sport. Hunters will also selectively take some individuals (large males) and leave others (females and young) because of the motivation to maintain animal populations for future hunting. It has also been shown that shooting feral pigs, especially where dogs are used, can be counterproductive to other control methods, because it can disperse pigs or make them more wary of humans.

Effective pest animal management programs take an integrated approach and use a variety of methods depending on the species targeted e.g. poison baiting, trapping, habitat manipulation, mustering, exclusion, biological control, etc. Ground shooting is sometimes used as a control method, but for most species (and in most situations) shooting by itself is not an effective way to significantly reduce animal numbers and is of limited use to achieve long-term control.

Hunters use ground shooting, bowhunting and 'sticking' (or stabbing) with a knife to kill animals. All of these methods are labour intensive and are inefficient for the long-term control of pest animals. They are used primarily because they are a test of the skills and technical competence of the hunter, not because they are useful for managing the impacts of pest animals.

Operators conducting pest animal management programs are highly skilled, experienced with firearms and hold the appropriate licences and accreditation. If they are shooting animals, they must undergo shooting proficiency tests and must always act in a professional manner. For example, operators who participate in aerial shooting operations are competent marksmen who hold an appropriate licence and are specifically trained for the task (e.g. NSW Feral Animal Aerial Shooter Training (FAAST) course, NT Parks and Wildlife Advanced Firearms course, QLD Biosecurity Aerial Platform Marksmanship Course).

In contrast, hunters have highly variable skill levels and there is no shooting competency test required to acquire a hunting licence. In a survey of hunters carried out by the University of Queensland in 2012, 58% of 6,892 hunters said they did not have any accredited hunter training.

As well as being less efficient than coordinated and planned pest animal management, many of the methods used by hunters are less humane than those used by professional pest animal controllers. For example, in some situations ground shooting has been assessed as being less humane than aerial shooting, whereby the distance from the shooter to the animal is much shorter and any wounded animals can be followed up quickly. However, aerial shooting is a technique suitable for use in government supervised pest animal management programs.

Skills of hunters

Professional marksmen can be very proficient at bringing about a humane death. For example, during a cull of 856 wild impala in the Mkuzi Game Reserve, South Africa by a marksman, 93% of animals were killed with only one shot (to the head) and 6% were wounded and then killed. The average survival time for wounded animals was 30 seconds and no animals escaped wounded. The animals were hunted at night, with the aid of a spotlight, to reduce animal stress prior to shooting and to ensure a high proportion of animals were killed instantaneously. In this example, the level of instantaneous unconsciousness quickly followed by death is comparable to what is achieved in commercial abattoirs (>94% stunned instantly).

Undoubtedly some recreational hunters are highly practiced at shooting, but there are many that are not. In New Zealand, 5% of recreational hunters account for more than half of all deer shot for sport, leaving the majority of hunters with limited experience of shooting live animals. The picture is likely to be similar in Australia.

Of great concern is the fact that there have been no independent audits of wounding rates of animals shot by recreational hunters. Until such studies are carried out, recreational hunters cannot make claims regarding the humaneness of their hunting. In WA, hunting is currently limited to the taking of feral animals on private property with a landholder's permission, there is no hunting permit or fee required, and there are no game species open seasons. An expansion of recreational hunting may lead to a push for open season on some species, similar to duck hunting in other States.

It is also disturbing that junior hunting licenses are given to children as young as 11 years old in some other States. It is very doubtful that children of this age would have the skills, knowledge and motivation to kill animals in a humane and efficient manner. In WA, a person must be 18 to hold a firearm licence under Section 10 of the Firearms Act, although children may use guns under the supervision of a licenced shooter. If recreational hunting is encouraged in WA, there will likely be a push to issue junior licences, which will allow children under 18 to shoot animals without the current level of supervision.

Bowhunting

Some hunters use a bow and arrow to hunt animals because they consider it to be an 'art' or challenge that requires skill and patience. However, from an animal welfare perspective it is less humane than hunting with a rifle. Wounding rates can be high, the time to death can be prolonged and animals remain conscious while they die from massive blood loss. The arrow is aimed at the chest to cause damage to the heart and lungs. Head shots are never used, since deflection of the arrow is likely to occur from striking skull bones.

The number of animals wounded (but not killed) by bowhunting is quite variable, but can be very high. For example, with deer hunting, surveys of bowhunters indicate that 12%-48% of deer may escape whilst injured. This is significantly higher than the reported 5% of wounded animals that escape when shot with a rifle by professional shooters. Wounded animals that are not retrieved and killed can suffer from the disabling effects of the injury, pain and wound infection.

When using a bow, hunters need to get very close (no more than 20 metres) to the target animal. The arrow's flight path to the chest must be unobscured by leaves or branches or it might be deflected and hit another part of the body. It can also be difficult to follow and kill mobile injured animals if they run off into thick cover, rough terrain or other inaccessible areas. Furthermore, with animals that are injured and have gone down, it can be hard to get another shot into the chest with an arrow, depending on the position the animals are lying in.

Deer hunting

With regard to deer, ground shooting by professional pest animal controllers is considered to be the most effective and humane technique currently available for reducing wild deer populations. A standard operating procedure for the ground shooting of wild deer by authorised personnel within managed parks and reserves describes how this is carried out.

To keep animal stress to a minimum, culling operations are carried out in accessible areas at night from a vehicle, with the aid of a spotlight or night vision gear. To reduce animal disturbance and facilitate accurate shooting sometimes a red filter is placed over the spotlight to reduce the amount of light seen by the deer, and rifles are fitted with sound suppressors. Dogs are not used at any stage during a professional culling program.

The aim is to shoot all animals in a group to prevent social disruption and distress in surviving animals. Shooting is conducted with the appropriate firearms and ammunition, and in a manner which aims to cause immediate insensibility and painless death. Shots to the head are preferred over chest shots, as they are more likely to cause instantaneous loss of consciousness. Fawns, calves and juveniles are shot before shooting mature deer, in case they escape and cannot be located. The target animals in a group are checked to ensure they are dead before moving on to the next group of animals.

However, this standard operating procedure advocating best practice management does not apply to the recreational hunting of deer which is regulated by the relevant State agencies responsible for hunting. The NSW and Victorian regulations state *"hunting of deer at night is prohibited"* and *"a spotlight or artificial source of light cannot be used to hunt deer"*. The reason why is given on the Victorian DPI website:

"The avoidance behaviour and cryptic nature of deer makes them difficult to hunt during daylight hours. However, at night under a spotlight, they are particularly vulnerable and may be easily shot. Spotlighting of deer has the potential to increase the total seasonal harvest, reducing hunting opportunity for law-abiding hunters. The majority of illegal spotlighting activity occurs from vehicles on public roads or thoroughfares, compounding the potential for firearm-related incidents. The use of spotlights and electronic devices to hunt game is also considered to be unethical".

Also, recreational deer hunters usually target the chest, rather than the head, to preserve the antlers for trophies. A chest shot causes more suffering than a well-placed head shot because it does not render the animal instantaneously insensible. Hunters often kill the larger males and leave smaller animals and dependent young, which can result in a disrupted social group and distressed and orphaned young. Therefore, the main aim of recreational deer hunting is to ensure that there are ample deer for future harvest, with much less emphasis placed on the welfare of hunted deer. In contrast, standard operating procedures for professional deer hunters aim to ensure the humane and efficient killing of deer.

Public enjoyment of national parks and other recreational areas

We believe that any potential economic, cultural or recreational benefits to a small number of individuals from recreational hunting are insignificant in comparison to the costs to the wider community. The main disadvantages will be that access to public lands will become restricted, and those using the land during hunting will be exposed to hazards from shooting, that could potentially lead to injury or death.

Furthermore, the national park network in Australia provides critically important habitat for our native plants and animals in perpetuity. National parks and state conservation areas are extremely popular places where the public can experience outdoor pursuits and encounter native wildlife in an undisturbed setting. Based on figures from Outdoor WA, State forests and recreational areas are visited by over 7 million people each year. Opening up these public lands for a small number of recreational hunters will restrict many other people from learning about and enjoying outdoor pursuits, and put the safety of those accessing these areas at risk.

For those people that like to hunt, there are many well-established shooting disciplines that simulate hunting, which can be enjoyed recreationally without the use of animals. For example, simulated field shooting involves using a shotgun to hit clay discs launched from within natural terrain, which represents traditional quarry such as rabbit, duck, quail and pheasant. Also, five-stand, skeet and trap shooting all simulate different types of live quarry shooting.

In conclusion, RSPCA WA can see no benefits to the introduction of recreational hunting in national parks. Whilst the Society recognises that there is a need to ensure that the impacts of pest animals are minimised, opening public lands up to recreational hunters will cause unnecessary suffering to many animals, impair the effectiveness of coordinated and planned pest management programs, and jeopardise the safety and enjoyment of these places for the rest of the community.

END