

Why some want duck shooting season banned

by Hayley Elg



There are calls for the state government not to allow the season to go ahead. Photo: Eleanor Dilley

Groups of regional Victorians are calling on the state government not to allow the duck shooting season to proceed this year, amid continued concerns about vulnerable ecosystems and the impact on communities.

In coming weeks, the state government will decide whether or not the 2021 native duck shooting season will go ahead.

Before the process closed last Wednesday, many people and groups sent submissions to the Game Management Authority.

Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting (RVOTDS) was one of the groups which called for the season not to proceed, for reasons including "dire environmental factors, significant long-term decline of all water bird indices, lack of critical data concerning protected species and lack of social/economic impact studies to the wider community".

RVOTDS spokesperson, Kerrie Allen, said that to allow any kind of shooting season this year would be "completely reckless and cause irreversible damage to vulnerable ecosystems and rural communities. After the hell of a year we've had, regional Victorians - all Victorians - deserve better."

In November 2019, the Victorian Labor Party voted almost unanimously to review its policy on duck shooting.

With a [Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions report from last year](#) revealing that duck shooter expenditure decreased by 46 per cent, while quail shooter expenditure decreased by 58 per cent from 2013 to 2019 and decreasing support for the activity in the community, Ms Allen said that if new Agriculture Minister Mary-Anne Thomas chose to allow another shooting season to take place then it would be in the public interest to know why.



Photo: Eleanor Dilley

Environment

Dr Peter Gell - a local resident and former professor at Federation University - has spent more than 30 years surveying water birds and has also studied the long-term history of wetlands.

His doctoral work focused on lakes in western Victoria. Noting that some of these lakes are Ramsar sites - meaning they were identified by the United Nations as wetlands of international significance - it means that Australia must adopt a principle of 'wise use',

with obligations including ensuring wetlands are in the best condition as possible and the populations of water birds are not unnecessarily impacted.

But Dr Gell said some of the populations which drove these listings were no longer being satisfied due to declined populations - though he noted that was not only because of issues here, but also due to migratory pathways.

In a drying climate and with a long record of wetland drainage for agriculture - with south west Victoria one of the areas which has experienced the greatest wetland loss in the world - the availability of suitable habitat for not only migratory waders but also waterfowl and other wetland species is diminishing, Dr Gell said.

"While it is certainly true that because we've got a naturally variable climate and our water birds boom and bust to some degree - breed up when it becomes wet, their numbers decline during drought."



Photo: Eleanor Dilley

Referring to his work in New South Wales, Dr Gell said that birds bred in larger numbers when lake levels were full and rising but when the water level dropped, so too did breeding.

With significant rainfall this year as a result of La Nina, Dr Gell said this could be a very important season for water birds to breed and for their populations to increase.

However, he said that climate modelling suggested these sorts of seasons would become less frequent and El Nino - which brings hotter and drier weather - would become more intense and much more frequent.

With increasingly dry conditions in landscapes where wetlands are largely degraded, he said the prospects of birds recovering their populations in wet seasons was reduced.

Dr Gell said we should be looking after our wetlands better, as water bird populations would come under stress with the drying climate in decades to come.

"With the summer we've just experienced, with the massive loss in biodiversity on account of those wildfires, we really should be pausing anything like shooting native species," he said.

"We have a massive feral animal problem that they could turn their attention to that actually would be beneficial, provided they do that ethically and under a permit system.

"The state of Australia's fauna is very much under pressure and our wetlands have never been in worse condition," he said, adding that the wetlands of Western Victoria regularly experienced blue-green algae blooms.

"We need to start doing things that are much more positive for the wetlands and their fauna."

Cruelty to animals

Animal Justice Party MP Andy Meddick said duck shooting involved "extraordinary animal cruelty".

"We're not talking about a single rifle here which fires a single bullet, which would require an extraordinary marksmanship to begin with to take a headshot on a moving bird at dawn or dusk, which is essentially in the dark when all you've got to identify it is a shadow.

"We're talking about shotguns where pellets fly through the air and all sorts of other animals and birds are wounded and die, including protected species like swans.



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"They're often just left to drown or die in the weeds."

A GMA report about [hunters' knowledge](#), released last year, revealed that only 20 per cent of duck and quail shooters understood how to correctly identify game species, while only 13 per cent knew how to dispatch a downed bird.

Mr Meddick hopes the government will not declare a duck shooting season this year.

Calling it a hangover from a bygone era, he said it was time for Victoria to follow other states - including Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory - and ban recreational duck shooting all together.

Impact on communities

Musician, founding member of the Warumpi Band and proud Aboriginal man Neil Murray lives at Lake Bolac.

He moved back to the area - where he was born and raised - from the Northern Territory to "complete a circle" and explore identity, the idea of belonging to country and in a sense, to try to become a custodian of the land.

The lake is a popular area for tourists and also attracts an array of birdlife - from large birds such as brolga and pelicans, to pacific black ducks, grey teal and threatened species.

But each shooting season, Mr Murray said the peace and serenity of the area was disturbed by an influx of hundreds of shooters.

The shooting season does not only impact native water birds, which are hunted, killed and injured in their own habitats, but other animals living in the area, including wallabies, are also disrupted.

As the weeks drag on it also "disturbs the peace" for the human residents, with Mr Murray saying residents were all on edge during the season.

"It sounds like a war going on and it goes on for weeks," Mr Murray told *The Courier*. "You just hear this 'pop pop pop' in the mornings and we are just so sick of it". Aside from the impact on animals and the environment, he said it also adversely affected tourism in the area.

With the recreational lake a popular spot with campers with an interest in water sports and fishing, he said many chose to steer clear of the area during one of the most beautiful times of the year as the activities were incompatible with the shooting season.

"People don't come when the duck shooters are here," he said. "People want to camp and enjoy the serenity but the shooting here destroys all that.

"How can you relax when there's people with guns beside you and waterfowl trying to get away?"

Mr Murray added the shooters also posed a risk, with some residents living on the lake foreshore finding pellets in their properties and landing on their roofs, while beer cans, cartridges and injured ducks were left behind.

He wants to see the lake made a sanctuary for waterfowl and other animals.

"In this day and age, I don't want duck shooting to be allowed. I am against duck shooting because with diminishing habitat we should be doing our best to protect the precious waterfowl."

Susan Moodie lives close to Lake Burrumbeet and has similar concerns about how not only native ducks but all native birds were being impacted in the area.

"To allow the murdering of our native species in this day and age is just unconscionable."

The state government was contacted for comment.