

Fury as 'fowl' sport set to continue

COMMENT

By **FIONA BYRNES**

MORE than 1.6 million Victorians now live regionally, with the right to peaceful enjoyment of their properties.

Regional businesses need tourism. Farmers need protection from trespass and crop contaminants.

Less than half of one per cent of the Victorian population fire shotguns at native birds for recreation. But the adverse impact on the rest of us is significant.

Recreational native bird shooting is banned in Queensland, New South Wales, Western Australia and the ACT.

Ongoing professional polls show most Victorians want it banned here too. A UComms poll in 2021 showed the strongest support for a ban came from the regions. There's good reason.

Duck shooting ain't fishing.

In our latest survey (May 2023) of 821 respondents regarding impacts of bird hunting;

- Over half reported safety concerns, stress and anxiety;
- Over a quarter said they had witnessed illegal activity of duck or quail shooters including trespass, littering, shooting in the dark, leaving wounded birds, shooting protected species, removing habitat, leaving campfires unattended, etc, and;
- Nearly 40 per cent lived within three kilometres of bird shooting (the distance shotguns are audible). A quarter lived within 1km, 16 per cent within 350m and five per cent within 60m.

Survey comments were heartbreaking.

"Stressful to be woken by what sounds like cannon fire", "trying to fish during duck shooting is dangerous", "men dressed in cammo, brandishing weapons whilst our children are enjoying water sports", "seeing ducks still alive but in agony - shot but not dead", "shotgun pellets striking the house."

Some ecotourism businesses were forced to close. Farmers couldn't move around their farms for "fear

of being shot at." Shooting "freaked out" racehorses. Traumatized tourists went home. Animals were sent panicked through fences. Children were inconsolable.

Gippsland MPs should be asking these questions: how many constituents live within 250m of bird shooting? When were safety risk assessments or a cost benefit analysis done? What is the commercial risk of toxic lead (from quail shooting) in our farm produce? Or the cost to taxpayers of lost tourism? It's well-known shooting deters tourism.

Latest government data shows the number of duck shooting licences across the entire state has dropped to just 21,959 - the lowest since the millennium drought.

Most electorates have between zero and half of one per cent of their voters with a duck shooting licence. A third of them aren't even used.

Economically, the Parliamentary Budget Office puts the net contribution of bird shooting at just \$12 mil for the entire state.

The latest government survey of duck shooters reported their alleged spend fell 46 per cent across Victoria between 2013 and 2019.

In Gippsland it fell further. Claimed duck shooter spend in Latrobe fell 52 per cent, East Gippsland and Wellington fell 58 per cent and Baw Baw 73 per cent. The already low spend areas of Bass Coast and South Gippsland fell off the list of mentions. The key towns of Traralgon and Bairnsdale fell 72 per cent and 67 per cent respectively while Rosedale slipped to inconsequence.

This is without accounting for the costs of lost tourism, lost productivity (as folks can't work from home and shift workers can't sleep), compliance monitoring, helicopter duck "counts", or eye-watering government grants to hunt clubs.

Conversely, birdwatching - which is not compatible with bird killing - brings more than \$3 billion to the country. It's time Victoria got its share.

Fiona Byrnes is a Health & Safety Director for Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc.