

# Drought has a bright side for ducks

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Wetlands will be quiet on the third Saturday of March, usually the opening day of the duck-shooting season. The peace should be permanent.

**T**HIS year, at least, wild ducks will be spared the obscene slaughter that a dwindling band of shooters calls sport. In cancelling the 2003 duck season, acting Premier John Thwaites said six years of drought had greatly depleted the duck populations of South-Eastern Australia and many birds had migrated to wetlands in southern Victoria. Most of the region's breeding stocks were concentrated on relatively few wetlands, making them particularly vulnerable to hunting. The cancellation follows a similar decision in South Australia, but the Victorian Government should have gone further and foreshadowed a permanent ban, on the grounds of cruelty and environmental harm. Last month, the government's animal welfare advisory committee recommended that duck shooting be phased out.

Shooter groups have objected to the cancellation. They may have a valid complaint about not being consulted, but their other arguments look increasingly tenuous. Field and Game Australia chief executive officer Rod Drew said last week that shooters did not accept the minister's scientific advice and, based on duck counts in the state, believed the season was sustainable. Sporting Shooters Association Victorian president Sebastian Ziccone said ducks were in "plague proportions" in the state's south and there was no cruelty concern. The organisations seem oblivious to the facts of duck migration and the number wounded each season. In addition to the eight permitted target species, endangered species remain at risk even though licensed shooters must pass the "waterfowl identification test" introduced in 1990. Three years later, half the freckled ducks known to be in the state at the time were shot. The freckled duck is one of the world's rarest waterfowl. Total duck numbers have halved since 1999, on top of a long-term decline driven mostly by habitat degradation and loss, not hunting, which, nonetheless, makes populations more vulnerable.

As for cruelty, the sheer weight of evidence from both direct observation and scientific analysis leaves no room for doubt that this is a prime concern. Shotgun dispersal patterns mean there is no such thing as the clean shot that hunters of most other game take pride in. (Hunters can play an important role by humanely culling feral species such as deer, goats, foxes and rabbits.) Research indicates shooters wound one duck (many of which succeed in flying off) for every duck they retrieve. Long-term studies, involving the

capture of tens of thousands of waterfowl, found shot lodged in the flesh of 6 to 17 per cent of the birds (the figure increased with body size). These were survivors of previous shootings; wounding, shock and lead poisoning would have killed many others over days or weeks. Though a ban on lead shot was announced in 1992, opposition from shooters resulted in the phase-out being extended to 2004, even as wetlands have been polluted with an estimated 200 tonnes of lead each year. Waterbirds that ingest shot, mistaking it for grit, can take weeks to die. Lead also poisons other wildlife and contaminates ecosystems for decades.

Western Australia banned recreational duck shooting in 1990 and New South Wales followed suit in 1995. Even in Europe, where hunting traditions stretch back centuries, public opinion has turned against shooters who, in defiance of European Union conservation measures, insist on their right to hunt migrating birds in landscapes emptied of wildlife. France has about 1.5 million hunters, but nearly two-thirds of its public opposes hunting. Fox hunting, one of England's defining traditions, is on the way out. And so is duck shooting in Australia.



Victoria is the country's last bastion of duck shooting, with about 85 per cent of licensed shooters, but they are a rapidly shrinking, literally noisy, minority. In 1986, Victoria had about 95,000 duck shooters; today the state licenses about 20,000 and only a few thousand were active last season. As their numbers dwindle, so does the significance of their financial contribution to shooting retailers and rural towns. In the past, shooters have done much to protect areas for duck breeding, but this was offset by the damage done each season to sensitive wetlands and the diverse wildlife, not only ducks, that inhabit them. After decades of debate, the public, conservation groups and the RSPCA support a permanent ban, which also was Labor Party policy. A decade ago, *The Age* argued that an end to duck shooting should be the first step in a wider campaign to discourage the use of guns. Instead, public opinion brought about a ban on semi-automatic guns, which became a factor in the rapid decline in duck shooting. We did not expect to have to restate the case for a ban in the 21st century, but it appears we do. Mr Thwaites, who bears prime responsibility as Environment Minister, said the cancellation was based on scientific evidence and it was "not a question of a permanent ban". Based on the evidence, the question he must answer is, why not?