

Bird expert attacks duck season OK

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By Mathew Murphy

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A WATERBIRD expert has criticised the Bracks Government for ignoring environmental conditions and giving this year's duck-hunting season the green light.

Richard Kingsford, from the University of NSW, says the Government has disregarded information that shows the effects of the drought are still being felt and that waterbird breeding is drastically low. His report is used each year to help determine if Victoria's duck-hunting season should go ahead.

The Government announced in December that a full 12-week season would go ahead, starting this Saturday, with each hunter permitted to bag seven ducks per day, an increase of two ducks a day from last year.

Dr Kingsford, who has prepared his aerial survey on duck numbers and water levels for the Government for 23 years, says this season should be banned.

He said he was not opposed to hunting but he felt the need to speak out because of the "substantial risk to waterbird numbers and the ecology of the areas".

"One of the facts that is missing from the Government is a good rationale behind having the season," he said. "I think the problem is that by having a season we run the danger of knocking off the adult birds who won't be able to breed."

When asked if he thought the Government was reluctant to ban the season because of the forthcoming state election, he said: "I think anyone would be naive to think that politics doesn't play a part in environmental decisions . . . we aren't looking at the ecology surrounding the argument."

Dr Kingsford's survey shows about 200,000 waterbirds present in eastern Australia. A similar figure in 2003 prompted the Bracks Government to ban hunting.

Dr Kingsford also found:

- That wetland area was the second lowest ever recorded.
- Breeding did increase slightly but it was dominated by two non-game species of ibis.

Laurie Levy, of the Coalition Against Duck Shooting, said Dr Kingsford's remarks needed to be considered.

"The State Government are not only ignoring but misrepresenting Richard Kingsford's data. He is respected right around the world as one of the leading ornithologists and the State Government are just discarding his work," Mr Levy said.

Field and Game Australia chief executive Rod Drew said wetland habitat had been severely reduced, resulting in many ducks flying north.

"Hunters won't be taking home large bags full of ducks," he said. "We had a wet winter and spring and some of the best breeding that we have had in 15 to 20 years, but many of the ducks have flown away."

Mr Drew said that hunters were equally concerned about providing a sustainable environment so future generations could hunt waterbirds.

A Government spokeswoman, Sofia Dedes, said all information was taken into account before deciding whether the season would go ahead.