

State takes two steps back on conservation

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The Age editorial

TED Baillieu said he would act swiftly on the state Coalition's promises. Regrettably, the new government's first moves include some of its most regressive policies: restoration of cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park and the first full duck-hunting season in years. The Age has long objected to both practices because of the environmental harm and, in the case of ducks, cruelty. The covert start to "scientific" trials of grazing, without Commonwealth approval as required by the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, is doubly objectionable.

The National Parks Association aptly describes the six-year study as "the terrestrial version of Japan's scientific whaling". Half a century of research disproves the claim that "grazing reduces blazing". That is because the key plants in fire spread are unpalatable to cattle. New South Wales ended grazing in Kosciuszko National Park in the late 1960s and the environmental benefits are plain to see. Research by the CSIRO, La Trobe University and the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation found alpine grazing had no significant influence on bushfires. In his report on the 2003 bushfires, Emergency Services Commissioner Bruce Esplin also concluded that decisions on alpine grazing "should not be based on the argument that grazing prevents blazing".

When the Bracks government closed the national park to cattle in 2005, its decision drew on 60 years of research. The Alpine Grazing Taskforce was advised by its scientific advisory panel that cattle damaged the alpine environment, which had been degraded for decades. Cattle posed a significant threat to at least 25 floral species and seven faunal species listed as rare, vulnerable or threatened with extinction. Even if grazing later resumed, cattle should be kept out for at least 10 years to allow recovery from the 2003 bushfires. Fragile alpine moss beds would take at least 20 years to recover.

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These delicate catchments, which feed the once-pristine headwaters of several major rivers through the seasons, and their unique flora and fauna have noticeably recovered since 2005. The reality, as taskforce member Tony Lupton wrote in The Age last month, is that alpine grazing "proved to be a lucrative form of public subsidy for a small number of privileged licence holders" and the "significant damaging impacts" greatly outweighed any modest benefits from grazing up to 8000 cattle in the park. Since the ban, the park has achieved National Heritage listing. The federal government should act on its legal obligation to protect this great natural asset.

The issue of grazing should not have been revived once licences were cancelled and graziers compensated. The policy is purely political, as is the licensing of duck hunting long after Western Australia, NSW and Queensland banned it. Even in Victoria, the bastion of duck hunters in Australia, the 95,000 licence holders in 1986 have dwindled to a few thousand active shooters.

A "clean kill" is possible with a rifle - hunters help to cull feral animals - but hunting flocks of wildfowl with a shotgun is unavoidably cruel and rare species are killed. Studies show that for every duck retrieved, a wounded bird flies off, often suffering a lingering death. Studies of tens of thousands of wild waterfowl found almost one in five birds of some target species has shot lodged in its body.

Most Victorians oppose duck hunting and its suspension from 2006 to 2009 was an opportunity to make the ban permanent. The Age felt the time had come in the early 1990s. After a 2002 recommendation by the state's animal welfare advisory committee to end duck hunting, this newspaper lamented: "We did not expect to have to restate the case for a ban in the 21st century." Now the season will run for a full 12 weeks and hunting will be allowed in much of the new Murray River Park. The new government has made some well-founded changes in other policy areas, so it is sad to see it make such ill-advised environmental decisions.