



THE AGE

EDITORIAL OPINION

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Sitting ducks

OSCAR WILDE called fox-hunting "the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable". Perhaps we could describe duck shooting, Victoria's annual festival of feathers and firearms, as the incredible in pursuit of the inevitable (the shooters have no credibility and the ducks have no chance). Obviously the State Government thinks otherwise. On Wednesday, without warning and with feeble reasoning, the Minister for Natural Resources, Mr Coleman, extended this year's duck-shooting season by two weeks. It will now run from 19 March to 13 June. This has outraged conservation groups and delighted those who will relish the extra 14 days of wading through wetlands, blasting away at their prey in the name of what they call sport. We prefer to call it blatant, indiscriminate slaughter, which has no place in a civilised society.

Last year, this newspaper described duck shooting as an obscenity and argued that it should be outlawed in Victoria — views we still hold. Moreover, the banning of duck shooting should be the first step in a wider campaign to restrict and discourage the use of sports and non-sports guns.

If duck shooting is obscene, so are the Government's reasons for extending the season — the abundant num-

bers of ducks (a point as logical as saying the war will continue for another fortnight because there are still lots more soldiers to kill), and the fact that the season will now finish on a "recognised weekend" (the Queen's birthday holiday), "ending confusion among shooters", whatever that means. All this only strengthens the argument that the Government is on the shooters' side. They are already favored by regulations that limit the time non-shooters, such as bird rescuers and the media, can enter shooting areas, and now have more time to bag more prey.

No doubt next month will produce the usual confrontations between shooters, protesters and enforcement officers, choreographed to the popping of guns and the flapping of thousands of birds tumbling out of Victoria's skies. To qualify for a game licence, hunters have to pass a waterfowl-identification test. But protected species are still at risk — could even the sharpest-eyed shooter spot the difference between a water whistle duck and a grey teal duck before sunrise on a grey March day? The best solution to this whole sordid mess would be to follow Western Australia's lead and ban duck shooting. But Victoria, given its curious stance on the matter, seems unlikely to follow suit. More's the pity.