

## Reflection

The romance of the Australian high country and its interconnectedness with horses is deeply embedded in the (white) Australian cultural psyche. Popular narratives such as *The Man from Snowy River* poem by A.B. (Banjo) Patterson, and *The Silver Brumby* novels by Elyne Mitchell have reinforced the symbolic importance of horses to the cultural heritage of the 'Snowy Mountains' (Davis, 2021) and the hit 1982 movie based on Banjo Paterson's poem immortalised with cinematography the combined imagery of horses, horsemen to the mountains. Indeed, a recent podcast discussing Australian masculinity posited that the film *The Man from Snowy River* depicts a uniquely Australian version of alpha-male masculinity (Jensen & Powell du Toit, 2021). This attests to the power of these narratives in forming both our cultural consciousness and our response to the environment of high country. However, while social commentators discuss the role these narratives play from a social perspective, a bitter debate has been raging as to the value and damage that wild horses (also called brumbies, or feral horses) have, and may be doing to the sensitive physical environment of the Australian Alps (King 2020).

The Australian Alps span across three governmental jurisdictions: New South Wales, the ACT and Victoria. The number of wild horses in these alpine areas have reportedly risen sharply in recent years, endangering the survival of native flora and fauna (Davis 2021). These hooved, grazing animals are blamed for destroying the habitats of small and threatened species in the area. While one of the issues in dispute is the estimated number of wild horses (Reardon & Proust 2021) what appears to be indisputable is that a number of endemic native species are under threat in the area (Davis 2021).

The issue of managing wild horse numbers in the Alps falls to the relevant state or territory authority. The ACT management plan is a: "zero-tolerance brumby policy and [the government agency] shoots them as soon as they cross the border" (Davis 2021). Parks Victoria were challenged last year in the Supreme Court of Victoria over their proposed management strategy and had the court rule in favour of their "Feral Horse Strategic Action Plan" (Somerville 2020). This action plan includes the ground shooting of wild horses, although to date the agency is yet to begin ground shooting (Davis 2021). The issue of wild horse management is currently being actively debated in New South Wales, with the draft wild horse management plan soon to be released for public consultation (Davis 2021).

The notion of 'sustainability' is used by every stakeholder in the debate. A prominent pro-brumby group is named the "Snowy Mountains Brumby Sustainability and Management Group"; this group argues that the actual population of brumbies in the Kosciuszko National Park is far, far lower than government estimates (Reardon & Proust 2021). Alan Lanyon, president of the group says: "he opposed a population target of 3,000 by 2027 because brumby numbers were already lower than that" (Reardon & Proust 2021) and "The Snowy brumbies are part of our cultural heritage and the history of the mountains" (King 2020). Sustainability, then, for this group focuses on maintaining the culture and history of the mountains.

In opposition to this view is Richard Swain, Indigenous ambassador for the Invasive Species Council, Wiradjuri man and alpine river guide, who is outspoken in defence of the endemic native species and the ecosystems that maintain them. He says: "I would like to see Australians fulfil their role as custodians ... We've got the highest mammalian extinction rate ... anywhere in the world and keeping feral animals on our protected areas is of no use to us, it's of no use to our children and grandchildren" (Davis 2021). Sustainability, then, for him focuses on maintaining the native ecosystems, flora and fauna populations of the mountains.

Both Lanyon and Swain use emotive language to defend their position. Lanyon speaks of "telling the truth" (King 2020) and accuses his opponents of citing "fairy dust figures" (Reardon & Proust 2021). Swain says, "it's a desecration of country" and labels his opponents as "pro feral" (King 2020).

In contrast, scientists such as Renee Hartley from the Australian National University speak of the challenge in terms of the management of an unfortunate situation. She says: "There are plenty of scientists, myself included, who love horses. It's not about being anti-horse. It's about being pro-native species and ecosystem health. It's really unfortunate that we're in this position, but we are because we introduced horses to these areas and we have delayed management for a long time. And now impacts are getting severe" (Davis 2021). Sustainability here is framed in terms of maintaining the populations of every species, as well as the health of the ecosystem.

Similarly, NSW Environment Minister Matt Kean frames his statements in terms of 'balance' and 'management'. He says: "the draft [Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management] plan is trying to strike a balance between protecting the park's environment and recognising the cultural heritage values of horses. I recognise there are very strong and diverse views on this issue ... But at the heart of these views is a common desire to sustainably manage the park for the future" (Reardon & Proust 2021). Further, he says: "If we want to preserve this precious place and the plants and animals that call it home, we need to manage horse numbers responsibly" (Malone 2021). Sustainability here is framed in terms of balancing the seemingly competing claims of maintaining both the cultural heritage and the physical environment of the National Park.

The strongest narrative in the debate is one that has been inherited, rather than explicitly used in the current debate. The strength of Banjo Paterson's *The Man from Snowy River* is the way it is woven into the fabric of white Australian culture and identity. Anthony Sharwood, author of *The Brumby Wars*, says: "you can't research brumbies without also looking at their almost mythical role in Australian identity, and therefore at Paterson's work ... [My] book [is] about brumbies in the mountains but it's not a book about horses, really, it's a book about Australians competing over their vision of Australia" (Shepherd 2021). *The Man from Snowy River* narrative combines the extrinsic values of adventure and self-determination, with the intrinsic value of tradition (Public Interest Research Centre, 2012).

Competing with this strongly embedded narrative, with its easily recognisable imagery of horses and mountain landscapes, is a weaker and less iconic story of tiny animals, fragile ecosystems, and respect and care for country. Swain says: "Most of our native species are hidden from people, they're small ... They all live and survive in the thick, dense undergrowth and the horses are basically tearing the roof off their houses" (Davis 2021). The values being appealed to here are more intrinsic and idealistic: those of unity with nature, the equality of different creatures and protection of the environment (Public Interest Research Centre, 2012). Further, the narrative of caring for country speaks more to indigenous Australian culture and is one that the prevailing (predominantly white) culture is yet to adopt wholeheartedly.

Stakeholders not employing any obvious narrative devices are the scientists, whose language stems around ideas of 'evidence' and politicians, who use a style of language intended to be diplomatic. For example, ANU researcher Hartley says: "we have a solid body of evidence

that's all pointing towards [the scenario that] if we let the horse populations continue to increase, we will see severe and sustained impacts and loss on threatened species populations in these areas" (Davis 2021) and Environment Minister Kean says: "the plan will outline how we intend to protect the ecological values of the park by reducing the impact of wild horses, while also acknowledging their heritage value" (Davis 2021). Careful avoidance of emotive language is necessary to present an image of rationality, e.g. the neutral term 'wild horses' is used in preference to the emotive 'brumbies' or 'feral horses', however carefully neutral language does not win many hearts.

The value of narrative in this sustainability challenge is immense as the battle for the environment of the high country is predominantly being played out in the hearts of stakeholders, rather than in rational debate over scientific findings. Interestingly, Sharwood's book presents evidence that the fictitious 'man from Snowy River' of European descent was based upon stories of the heroics of an indigenous stockman (Shepherd 2021). Perhaps the way forward towards a sustainable solution is a new narrative which marries the dichotomies of the existing stories, and weaves them into a sustainable coexistence: European and indigenous history, native and introduced species. Indeed, to extrapolate on Rosalind Krauss's work on the mythological role of the grid on modern art: the grid, or in this case, the narrative, provides the unifying framework to hold those opposing ideas together. She writes: "for like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem ... to go away ... The function of the myth is to allow *both* views to be held in some kind of para-logical suspension" (Krauss, 1979). It could be argued that to achieve a sustainable coexistence between the wild horses of Kosciuszko National Park and native species and habitats, we first need a new myth, a new narrative, in which they live harmoniously.

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