

Dead Horse Gap: Intergenerational Justice and the Culling of Horses in the Australian Alps

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IN LATE 2022 I WAS HIKING A SECTION OF THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS WALKING TRACK. I WAS walking, as most hikers do, to leave various things behind—responsibility, work, grief—and the air was full of the smell of horse dung. Despite camping by myself I did not feel alone, as throughout the night I was repeatedly woken by the steady sound of a horse tearing grass with its teeth on the other side of my tent wall. The names these creatures go by are fraught with the emotion firing vociferous debates about their presence and numbers in the Alpine National Parks that cross Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory: feral horses, wild horses, brumbies.

It is hard to think of another animal in this country with as much cultural freight attached to it as this creature. As ‘feral horse’, it is an invasive species responsible for significant damage to First Nations Country and sensitive alpine ecosystems, extinction of native species and threat to national water security. As ‘brumby’, it both a creature of attachment for some Ngarigo people and an icon of settler-Australian culture, embodying a way of life in the Australian mountains that is tied to a particular conception of settler/pioneer history and structured by a deep attachment to the specific landscape of the high country. Competing understandings of this species in the habitat of the Australian Alps continue to drive intense conflict over whether they belong in these places and in what numbers, and how these numbers might be managed (Menzies 202-4). Each of these understandings is marked by an affective intensity indicated by the death threats received by National Parks staff and the widely-reported fear of speaking in public about this issue (Davis; Cox, ‘Police Investigate’). In what follows, I use John Frow’s discussion of intergenerational justice to think through the stakes of this conflict in relation to questions of stewardship, inheritance, futurity and responsibility for those who are attached to the places occupied by wild horses (Frow).¹

The urgency driving Frow’s essay is related to a context of climate change and environmental destruction: ‘the poisoned legacy that [his] generation is handing on to as many of the following generations as will live to deal with it’ (25). Key terms in his discussion are those of inheritance (as cultural, legal, financial, as well as ‘the passing on of a physical world’) and stewardship, in the sense of managing an estate for others (30-1). Intergenerational justice is particularly fraught in Australia’s high country. While Frow raises the notion of Indigenous land management and caring for country as ‘salient’ models of stewardship in the Australian context (31), the contested landscapes of the Australian Alps raise

¹ While Isa Menzies suggests that the term ‘wild horse’ is a misnomer in the Australian context, as ‘the only true species of wild horse extant is the endangered takhi (Przewalski’s horse), *Equus ferus przewalskii*, native to the Central Asian steppes’ (203), I am following Simon Farley in using ‘wild horse’ as the most neutral term available. There is no way to refer to these horses that is not laden with cultural value.

questions about who holds responsibility for the stewardship of land and ecology in Australia, especially in the context of land demarcated as national park across multiple states in a settler-colonial federated nation. The question of who has the power and responsibility to 'gift' the future state of the land is vexed. ACT parks, for example, can cull the wild horses within its borders but cannot prevent those from NSW from entering it. National parks are tracts of land owned by the state, designated specifically for the public good (access/recreation) but also preservation (cultural heritage and ecosystems). The question of intergenerational justice is significant to the management of national parks, which might be regarded as responsible for stewardship of the land for the nation-state and its future citizens, but whose right to carry out such stewardship is contested. Ngarigo scholar Jakelin Troy, whilst advocating for the removal of wild horses in Kosciusko National Park, writes that the brumbies 'have become of our Country and it is for us to determine their future' (Reardon; Ngarigo Nation Indigenous Corporation). In Victoria, joint management agreements between state parks and wildlife departments and multiple groups of traditional owners have developed ('Negotiating'). This reveals a complexity not broached in Frow's essay: who are the appropriate stewards to hold responsibility for such places?

Conflict over the number of feral horses in Australia's Alpine national parks is a local example of how contested notions of cultural inheritance can impact an ecosystem, and the conditions in which it will be handed down to future generations of plants, animals and humans. The urgency and intensity of the conflict is motored by an imminent fear of loss: of no future for a culture, species, environment. A prominent strand of pro-brumby advocacy emphasises a 'way of life' in the high country that is seen to have been threatened and eroded over time: by the end of grazing leases, increasing involvement of the state in the ownership and management of land, the damming of the Snowy River and accordant drowning of the old town of Jindabyne, and now by threatened diminishment of wild horse populations. As brumby advocate Leisa Caldwell puts it, 'The brumbies are the last little bit of the heritage that's left. And that's why there is such an intense feeling about it' (Davis). Isa Menzies describes this as a 'reframing of feral animals as cultural heritage' (201), which is clearly reflected in the language of then NSW National Party leader John Barilaro's controversial 2018 'Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act': 'to recognise the heritage value of sustainable wild horse populations within parts of Kosciuszko National Park and to protect that heritage'. This is a form of heritage, or cultural inheritance, that is seen to depend on the continued flourishing of a specific species in a specific geographical area in order to survive. Frow talks about the problem of intergenerational injustice as being that 'the future is held hostage to the interests of the present' (26), but the political conflicts over the culling of wild horses in NSW and Victorian National Parks show that it is also held hostage to the past. What is happening here is the privileging of one form of posterity: a particular notion of cultural heritage as embodied by the

continued existence of a particular invasive species in a specific landscape, over another: the future survival of a threatened ecosystem.

There is a tendency across these debates—by pro-brumby and environmental advocates alike—towards what Eve Sedgwick would describe as paranoia, with its ‘distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive’ (146). Settler positions in these debates are anchored in an anticipatory/retroactive dynamic of a fear of loss of something that might never have existed in the first place. They seem driven by the question: what if ‘the estate turns out to be worthless’? (Frow 24). For those opposing the culling of brumbies, the physical existence of this animal in significant numbers is necessary to the passing-down of this cultural heritage. The high country, without brumbies, is one in which the way of life they embody will have disappeared. Environmental advocates see Alpine national parks with high numbers of horses as an estate irretrievably damaged.

In framing the political and interpersonal conflicts involved in decisions about legislating for the culling of wild horses in this region as a ‘debate’, I’m wary of falling into the tendency noted by Fiona Probyn-Rapsey and Lynette Russell, who write that:

The history of colonial conflict over animals in Australia is frequently framed as a two-sided conflict over animals. This is itself a largely settler colonial framing, given that it absents all but humans from the dynamic and as many Indigenous scholars observe, the colonisation of Aboriginal Country is both about ‘land’ but also Country, encompassing humans, animals, water, rocks, plants etc. (42)

They note that ‘disputes involving animals are never simply *between* Indigenous and settler colonial Australians, but also *within and across groups*’ (58). In this respect it is important to note that First Nations people living in and belonging to the high country also have conflicting views on the future of the wild horses in the region, all grounded in the importance of caring for Country. A number of members of the Wiradjuri, Yuin and Ngarigo community have been vocal in calls to protect Kosciusko from the damage done by wild horses, as cited in the press and in the activist documentary *Where the Water Starts*, which has been promoted by the Invasive Species Council (Becker; McManus and O’Mallon; Knowles). The Council’s Indigenous Ambassador, Richard Swain, has been travelling the country with the film, advocating for the removal of the horses from Kosciusko. Aunty Therese Webster, chairperson of the Ngarigo Nation Indigenous Corporation, introduces the NNIC’s citizen science survey into attitudes to brumbies on Ngarigo country by writing that ‘There is a long and ongoing relationship between Ngarigo people and brumbies. A natural affinity has developed over time which is precious

and has become part of the Ngarigo story'. This sense of country as something that changes over time runs counter to settler-colonial positions underpinned by idealised conceptions of this country's past: a pioneering, pastoral settler past evacuated of violence or dispossession, or an Arcadian view of a pristine and unchanging natural environment prior to 1788 (Farley 16; Head 173). The notion that an invasive species can become part of Ngarigo country poses a challenge, counter-intuitively, to the ideas underpinning the settler-colonial pro-brumby rhetoric: that the stories and meaning of a landscape can, and will, change over time.

A long history of human/animal entanglement underpins the affective intensity of these debates, although as Menzies notes the 'brumby is frequently conflated with the companion horse' in how it is framed and used (Menzies 206-8). This history has included the use of horses as a weapon of intimidation and violence against First Nations people (Fijn 5), widespread culling from the 1860s (Farley 2), as well as histories of encounter, domination and relation in embodied experience and in literary works—Paterson's 'The Man from Snowy River' (1890) and Elyne Mitchell's *Silver Brumby* novels (1958-2013)—that have become both talisman and index of the importance of the brumby to settler-colonial understandings of life in the Australian Alps. Frow's question about human responsibilities towards animals—'do they matter to us only to the extent that they are *our* companions on earth?' (28)—seems relevant here. As he notes, to think about intergenerational justice is to consider the rights of the many (including future generations) in relation to the rights of the few (27). This question is being played out across the plane of non-human species in relation to the wild horses in the high country: their existence directly threatens the continuation of a number of other species.² In question here are the rights of some animals (those with long histories of subjugation to humans, but here embodying perhaps a fantasy of freedom within/despite this history) over the rights of others (smaller, less noticeable to the gaze of some humans, under threat of extinction).

² Species under threat from damage caused by wild horse populations included the Broad-toothed Rat (*Mastacomys fuscus*), Alpine Water Skink (*Eulamprus kosciuskoi*), Northern Corroboree Frog (*Pseudophryne pengilleyi*), Mountain Pygmy Possum (*Burrhamys parvus*), Stocky Galaxias (a native fish, *Galaxias tantangara*), and the Alpine She Oak Skink (*Cyclodomorphus praealtus*) (Driscoll et al. 65).



On the second day of my walk a combination of overconfidence and enthusiasm led me to take a wrong turn out of my campsite at Tin Mine Huts, resulting in some swearing and a 14km detour. Eventually I climbed to Snow Gum Ridge, a place of sudden gobsmacking beauty: a cleared, flat trail on a ridge surrounded on either side by snow gum woodland and then, beyond it on either side, a range of mountains stretching far away. It felt like an elevated platform in the sky, garlanded by gums and flowers, surrounded by mountains. There was snow on the Main Range still, in November. At foot level, in this glorious place, were giant piles, tranches, slabs, of horse dung. Every few steps I would have to decide whether to squelch through or traipse around it. I was becoming increasingly annoyed at this stinking incursion into this spectacular place and my enjoyment of it, stomping crankily through the piles of dung. But as I continued along this trail my sense of grievance drained away. My people brought these horses here: like other stock animals, they were agents of empire, however unwitting. They are not the sole incursion into an otherwise pristine environment. They are just one part of the scale of damage that is everywhere under your feet, when you are walking a formed trail which is itself, of course, a form of damage. In my boots, in this place, I too am a hard-hoofed creature which this ecosystem has not evolved to accommodate. Despite the ethos of 'Leave No Trace' (which is itself a fantasy), to hike in any of Australia's national parks is to walk, and think, through damage. Colonial invasion and subsequent settler-governed land management practices

are the undisputable cause of the damage. This raises the questions: Who/what is justice owed *to*? What forms of reparation should be made, and by whom?

Discussions of long-distance hiking are often shot through with the language of empire and conquest. In the United States, to complete the three major long-distance trails is to attain 'the triple crown'. While long distance hiking has existed for some time in Australia, current practices and cultures of what is known as 'thru-hiking' across the world are shaped by American accounts especially as they circulate on YouTube and other social media platforms. In this sense, thru-hiking is a distinctively and hegemonically settler-colonial practice. My hike along part of the Australian Alps Walking Track began at Dead Horse Gap, near Thredbo in NSW, and was what is sometimes derisively referred to on the internet as an 'out and back': I walked to the Victorian border, at the headwaters of the Murray River, and back again. The out and back is seen as inferior to the loop or end-to-end trail because it does not involve the continued conquest or vista of the new: you are walking the same trail twice, seeing the same things again. At the time, and since, I have been thinking about the affordances of the out and back, as a way of resisting hiking's imperative to always be conquering a landscape anew. More broadly, I think it is important to be able to retrace your steps: to understand where you have been and where you are, to pay attention to what is changing and how. It has me wondering whether the intensity of the focus on loss and futurity is part of what makes the conflict over wild horses so ferocious.

At issue here is the notion of passing on a settler-colonial heritage that is an unstable mix of fiction, lived experience, memory, paranoia, repair and political expediency. As Frow puts it:

The very notion of tradition as a continuous handing-on of an unchanging heritage falsifies the way the content of tradition is appropriated and shaped by the needs and the interests of each successive present. Tradition is a kind of gift-giving, but any gift can be unwanted or at once an act of generosity and an act of control; and the gift must sometimes be refused, or else reworked to fit a world that has been transformed. (30)

Evident in the threats of fire-bombing of NSW Parks and Wildlife offices, and the fear of speaking out, is the intensity of the burden of all this handing-on and keeping alive of a heritage so apparently dependent on a horse. I want to refuse the gift of a cultural heritage that is grounded in the dispossession of First Nations people and now destruction to an ecosystem and a place that I am deeply attached to. But to just refuse that heritage, as a descendent of settler-colonists, seems neither entirely possible nor properly ethical. I propose the out-and-back as a model of not refusing but facing, and thinking about both the heritage and the

country it is grafted upon. When you travel out and back, the country looks—and, indeed, is—different each time. Any progress in the political impasse over horse culling requires being able to see both past and future differently. As Lesley Head suggests, ‘living with the consequences of [the changes to plants and animals wrought by colonisation] requires us to be open to the contingencies of both the past and the future’ (174).

The question of whether to cull wild horses in Australia’s Alpine national parks demonstrates how complicated the notion of stewardship, which is so central to Frow’s account of intergenerational justice, can be in a settler-colonial context. Richard Swain makes a pitch for collective responsibility in this respect, arguing that ‘we need to make the average Australian realise that that their actual heritage is the country, the land they’re standing on... Caring for country is our true culture’ (Knowles). I agree that it should be, but our culture as it stands right now is messier than that.

The question of the damage wrought by invasive species in the Australian Alps, and the culling of wild horses, is not a two-sided problem. It is a problem of entangled responsibilities, futures and senses of justice. What does it mean to care for country in which this species lives, and when both settler-colonists and First Nations people are bitterly divided? This is a problem generated by paranoia and fantasy—about idealised pasts and anticipated threats—by entangled histories between animals, settler-colonists and First Nations people: by attachment, love, fear and sorrow. This is the culture that those of us living in Australia have inherited, and that will determine the state of the Country that future generations will inherit from us.

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