

# BRIEFING TO THE INCOMING MINISTER OF CONSERVATION

## NEW ZEALAND GAME ANIMAL COUNCIL

“Sustainable management of game animals and hunting for recreation, commerce and conservation.”

OCTOBER 2020



Game Animal Council  
NEW ZEALAND

# ABOUT THE GAME ANIMAL COUNCIL

The Game Animal Council (GAC) is a statutory body established under the Game Animal Council Act 2013. It represents the interests of the hunting sector and seeks to improve the management of game animal resources while contributing to positive conservation outcomes. Game animals can be feral pigs, chamois, tahr, and all species of deer.

Key functions of the GAC include:

- To advise and make recommendations to the Minister of Conservation on hunting issues
- To provide information and education to the sector
- To raise awareness of the views of the hunting sector
- To promote safety initiatives
- to liaise with hunters, hunting organisations, representatives of tangata whenua, local authorities, landowners, the New Zealand Conservation Authority, conservation boards, and the Department of Conservation to improve hunting opportunities
- To conduct game animal research
- To undertake management functions for designated 'Herds of Special Interest'

## THE COUNCIL

Game Animal Councillors bring a wide range of knowledge, skills, attributes, and interests and have valuable connections within the hunting, guiding, deer farming, tourism, farming, forestry, kaitiakitanga and scientific sectors. Councillors are not appointed to represent any affiliated bodies but rather represent all hunting sector interests. The GAC employs a general manager to oversee its operations.



## STRATEGIC PLAN

The Game Animal Council has in place a Strategic Plan with the following overall objective:

The GAC is a national game animal management organisation undertaking management of people and animals to the benefit of all stakeholders. It works cooperatively both within the hunting sector and, as importantly, with those outside hunting circles. In being effective, the GAC is openly communicative and democratic, with a sound structure and governance, backed by appropriate legislation and as far as practical is self-funded. It is accountable to its stakeholders and produces better outcomes for them; is respected for its balanced advocacy based on good science and research and gives authoritative advice.

Recreational hunters are adequately trained in safe hunting practices, understand the role of hunting, and their responsibilities, together with the conservation of indigenous species. They have good information on where to hunt and how to hunt successfully. Recreational hunters are complemented by a sustainable commercial harvest of game animals. Hunting guides and game estates provide clients with safe, quality hunting experiences.

The Strategic Plan is based around eight key themes:

- **THEME ONE** - Enhance the quality of game animal herds while remaining consistent with conservation values
- **THEME TWO** - Develop positive relationships between the Game Animal Council and stakeholders through effective communication
- **THEME THREE** - Promote hunter safety
- **THEME FOUR** - Reduce conflict among stakeholders
- **THEME FIVE** - Improve the acceptance of hunting as a safe and legitimate activity
- **THEME SIX** - Promote standards for hunting and management of game animals
- **THEME SEVEN** - Develop appropriate management and administration structures
- **THEME EIGHT** - Promote the interests of the Game Animal Sector



## NZ HUNTING SECTOR

Over 160,000 New Zealanders are annually involved in some form of hunting with an estimated 50-60,000 of those involved in large game animal hunting (deer, chamois, tahr and wild pigs). Around 34,000 individuals get permits to hunt on public conservation land each year.

Hunters annually harvest approximately 135,000 deer, 132,000 other big game animals and over 230,000 feral goats. This far exceeds the annual commercial harvest (10,000 to 30,000 animals).

The total gross sales effect of New Zealanders participating in hunting has recently been calculated to be in the order of \$350 million annually. Large game species are a major focus of that hunter spend. Hunting also plays an important role as a source of mahinga kai for many communities, has a positive impact on wellbeing for tens of thousands of people and encourages greater interest and participation in conservation.

New Zealand is internationally recognised for the quality of its game species. It is considered a safe, stable country and attracts a discerning, influential hunting clientele. The New Zealand guided hunting industry is estimated to bring in over \$100 million of direct overseas revenue annually and directly employs approximately 470 people in full time or seasonal employment and a further 64 registered people in the associated taxidermy and trophy exporting services.



## COVID-19

Like almost all sectors of New Zealand society, COVID-19 has had a severe impact on hunting, and particularly commercial and guided hunting. Most of the guided hunting industry's income is generated in the four-month period March to June and is heavily reliant on international hunters. Having been effectively shut down for the 2020 season, guides, game estates and other commercial operators are facing a very uncertain time, and many may be forced to consider their future in the industry.

Direct impacts on the guided hunting industry and support services from COVID-19 include:

- Up to 90% loss of income for hunting guides, game estate operators and taxidermists
- A considerable impact on the income of helicopter operators, expeditors, freight forwarders, transport providers and accommodation suppliers
- Financial strain on overdrafts, credit lines and debt for guides and game estate operators as a result of the costs borne in preparing for the upcoming season
- Mental health and wellbeing of members of the industry, which is comprised of many small family enterprises

Recreational hunters, like other New Zealanders, were compelled to remain at home during the level 4 lockdown and while day hunting was permitted on private land during level 3 this still excluded the majority of hunters. Recently revised alert level rules now allow day hunting close to home under level 3.

While the number of game animals harvested reduced during the lockdown, it is unlikely that this will have any significant impact on future game animal numbers. The lockdown coincided almost exactly with the roar, which is the time of year when most hunters target male deer as trophies. The lockdown also had an impact on the start of the busy period for bull tahr and chamois hunting. As these game animals are highly polygynous, reduced harvests will have had little effect on animal numbers.



# GAME ANIMAL MANAGEMENT

Large game animals (deer, tahr, chamois and wild pigs) have been here for well over a hundred years and have long been recognised as valued introduced species in New Zealand. That status has been further enhanced by their inclusion in Te Mana o Te Taiao - Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy 2020.

Large game animals are part of New Zealand's heritage, are a significant source of mahinga kai for many communities and provide important recreational and commercial opportunities. Large game animals can present certain challenges for conservation, but the GAC firmly believes that responsible, well-considered, science-based management can provide the benefits the animals are valued for while also ensuring that indigenous biodiversity is protected.

## HIMALAYAN TAHR

Tahr management has been a divisive issue. The 1993 Himalayan Tahr Control Plan sought to achieve a balance between hunting and conservation interests and imposed a target population of 10,000 animals within seven management units. The intention was for the Plan, including population densities, to be reviewed following vegetation and population monitoring. Unfortunately, this research and monitoring was never adequately undertaken and a long-term management strategy has never been established. This has led to conflict with the sector.

The 2018-19 Tahr Control Operational Plan originally proposed by DOC to significantly reduce tahr numbers and including measures that involved the culling of male tahr, was met with opposition from the hunting sector. The GAC stepped in and successfully worked with hunting sector stakeholders and DOC to develop an alternative proposal that excluded the targeting of identifiable male tahr. This was accepted by the multi-stakeholder Tahr Plan Implementation Liaison Group and was successfully implemented. GAC was also involved in the development of the 2019-2020 Operational Plan, which targeted tahr outside the feral range and in sensitive conservation areas.

Unfortunately, the hunting sector, including the GAC, was blindsided by the size and scale of the proposed 2020-21 Tahr Control Operational Plan. It was also unfortunate that DOC chose to severely restrict consultation on the Plan. This was challenged in the High Court by the NZ Tahr Foundation, forcing DOC to reconsult.

The GAC's submission, which is publicly available, advocated for an inclusive and adaptive management approach based around highly targeted control work, ongoing monitoring and flexible adaptation using up-to-date data. We consider that control based on this method would recognise the future sustainability of alpine vegetation as well as local tahr densities and demographics while not risking over-culling. We proposed the following hierarchy when deciding where to target control:

1. Places of particular environmental concern (which may not have high tahr numbers, but where the environment is particularly susceptible to tahr).
2. Areas of high tahr populations.
3. Inaccessible areas where it is difficult for hunters to harvest tahr.
4. Overall management unit density.

While the removal of all tahr from the national parks continued, GAC worked with DOC to make some positive changes to control work outside the national parks. This resulted in a reallocation of hours with more accessible tahr hunting areas being left for hunters and greater emphasis on control work in inaccessible and remote locations.

The GAC is committed to ongoing collaboration with DOC to build the scientific basis for future tahr management, including improved understanding of populations and herd demographics, as well as the impact of tahr on native vegetation in different locations.

## DEER

The GAC is currently working alongside DOC on the issue of deer management in New Zealand. In some locations deer numbers have increased beyond a reasonable carrying capacity for the environment. This is not only bad for the health of the forest but also has an impact on the quality of the animals. Other areas currently free of deer are at risk of incursion and the GAC is supportive of those remaining deer-free. There are also areas where numbers are low and herd management practices may be required to preserve special herds, such as the Wakatipu whitetail.

Deer management is a very complex issue as different deer species in different locations and environments pose different challenges. Hunters' attitudes have changed in recent times and hunting sector organisations like the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation, Central North Island Sika Foundation and the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association (NZDA) are committed to management that emphasises quality over quantity and seeks to preserve a healthy habitat.



The GAC is committed to the open partnership we have with DOC staff working on this project and we consider a region-by-region strategy can be developed that will broadly satisfy both conservation and hunting interests.

## HERDS OF SPECIAL INTEREST

Under the Game Animal Council Act the Minister of Conservation may designate any species of game animal in a specified area on public conservation land to be a herd of special interest.

An example of how this model can work both for the benefit of hunting and conservation already exists through the accord that DOC has with the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation. The impacts of deer in the wapiti area of Fiordland National Park are actively and successfully managed through a hunter-led, hunter-funded management regime that sees up to 1000 deer removed annually to enhance the quality of the herd as well as to reduce the pressure on vegetation.

The GAC considers herds of special interest to be a tool that should be considered in order to help more intensive management of specific game animal herds in certain locations for both hunting and conservation purposes.



## CONSERVATION

The Hunting sector provides many benefits to conservation in New Zealand. The harvesting of large game animals has obvious conservation value, but hunter-led conservation work also includes involvement in a number of predator trapping and species conservation programmes. Both the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation and Central North Island Sika Foundation run extensive trapping programmes for who recovery, while hunters are involved in bringing kiwi back to the Kawekas, various pest control projects around the country, as well as surveying and banding Kea in Fiordland. Hut building and restoration work is also provided by the Rakiura Hunters Huts Trust, New Zealand Deerstalkers' Association and Safari Club International. Hunters are prominent participants in the Backcountry Trust, which has played a major role in refurbishing DOC huts.



Following the initial COVID-19 lockdown the GAC partnered with the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation and the Department of Conservation to reconfigure the annual wapiti deer harvest into the Fiordland Wapiti Area Venison Mince Project. This project removed around 600 deer from Fiordland National Park and processed them into 18,000 kg of venison mince for foodbanks and vulnerable families across New Zealand. We are working alongside DOC, MSD, FWF, meat processors and helicopter operators to further expand this project in the future.

## HUNTERS FOR CONSERVATION

The GAC is supportive of this new movement within the hunting sector. 'Hunters for Conservation' is not only about promoting the conservation work already being undertaken by hunters but also inspiring hunters and hunting sector organisations to increase their conservation efforts by actively encouraging greater engagement and involvement in conservation initiatives.

## ZERO INVASIVE PREDATORS

The GAC assisted Zero Invasive Predators (ZIP) to assess tahr mortality during the possum eradication trial in the Perth catchment in South Westland through a monitoring programme using radio tracking collars. The outcome, where no monitored tahr died, is important for both hunting and conservation. The results are invaluable for better understanding how predator control can be carried out while minimising adverse effects on game animals, as well as the potential for tahr carcasses to be used to mitigate the risk of aerial 1080 to kea.

The GAC is now engaged with ZIP over implementing a similar trial for chamois.



# PUBLIC ACCESS

The ability to access public conservation land is essential for the preservation of hunting and game animal management in New Zealand. Anecdotally, we know that access across private land to public conservation land has reduced and become more difficult over the last 10 years or so. This is a major concern for organisations right across the recreational sector.

The GAC supports the work of the Walking Access Commission as a statutory body with the mandate, tools and expertise to address issues surrounding access to our outdoor resources. We would, however, like to see the Act and Commission renamed the Outdoor Access Act and Outdoor Access Commission as a reflection that access to the outdoors is much more than just walking. It is important to provide suitable access for vehicles as well as hunters carrying firearms and accompanied by dogs (where dogs are permitted on the land the access is provided for).

The GAC recommends that the objective of public access should be to provide all types of access and then limit those for reasons dictated by the nature of the specific accessway and the land to be accessed.

## HUNTER EDUCATION STRATEGY

The GAC is currently working on the development of a Hunter Education Strategy as referenced in the Minister of Conservation's Letter of Expectations 2019-20 and 2020-21.



In an increasingly urbanised population, more people have less exposure to or knowledge of hunting and the outdoors than in the past. The GAC's objective is to develop an increasing population of New Zealand hunters trained to maximise success and do so safely. We want them to understand sustainable wildlife management principles and hunters' role in conservation. Hunters will be trained in a GAC accredited programme with consistent and relevant knowledge delivered across the country.

Whilst firearms safety has a high profile, the statistics show that more hunters die in the outdoors from non-firearms related incidents, with many more sustaining injuries or requiring rescue. The Hunter Education Strategy has a significant emphasis on outdoor safety in general, in addition to firearm safety.

Recreational hunters also require good information on where to hunt and how to hunt successfully. Information on population dynamics, New Zealand's flora and fauna and unique native species, and the contribution of hunting to conservation outcomes is extremely important, enabling hunters to make educated decisions whilst out hunting, and improving their experiences and ultimately the number and quality of animals they harvest.

Development of the programme so far has identified three levels of training:

1. Introduction to hunting - classroom education
2. Essentials of hunting - online education modules
3. In-field practical training - HUNTS programme

It is likely that the GAC will require additional funding to adequately deliver the Hunter Education Strategy. We request that the incoming minister continues to support this piece of work as it is developed from the initial proposal phase.

# BIOSECURITY

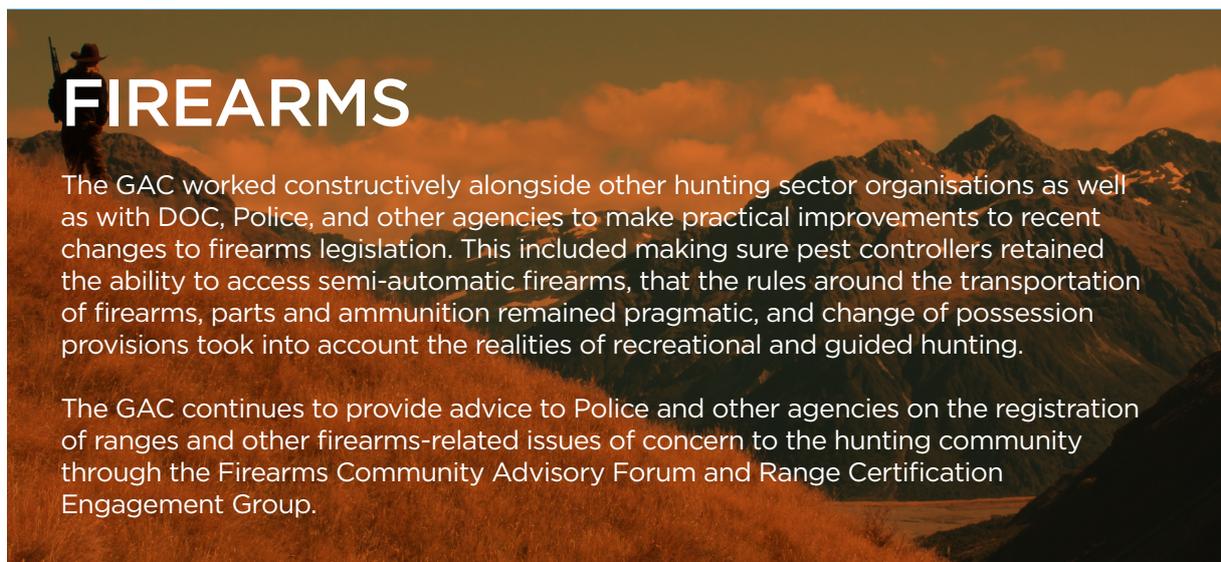
There are a number of diseases that affect game animals and hunting, which present a significant threat to New Zealand's biosecurity. The GAC endeavours to make hunters aware of these and to support initiatives to prevent incursions.

The GAC continues to support the goal of eradicating **Bovine Tb** from New Zealand. The overriding concern for the GAC is the direct and indirect effects of Tb control operations on game animals and hunting. The Council has a history of working constructively and cooperatively with DOC and OSPRI, around mitigation measures including, but not limited to, the ongoing development and application of deer repellent, and will continue this approach.

**Kauri Dieback Disease** is of significant concern and the GAC supports current mitigation measures to prevent its spread.

**Chronic Wasting Disease** is a fatal neurodegenerative disease of both farmed and wild deer. It occurs in most species of deer and is present in USA, Canada, South Korea and Norway. The GAC has provided advice to hunters and hunting guides on the importance of declaring and cleaning gear used in CWD-endemic regions to prevent its arrival into New Zealand.

**African Swine Fever** is spreading in Europe and Asia with many wild and domesticated pigs becoming infected and dying. The GAC is making sure pig hunters are aware of Biosecurity NZ advice with regards to what to look out for and how to prevent its spread if it does arrive in New Zealand.



## FIREARMS

The GAC worked constructively alongside other hunting sector organisations as well as with DOC, Police, and other agencies to make practical improvements to recent changes to firearms legislation. This included making sure pest controllers retained the ability to access semi-automatic firearms, that the rules around the transportation of firearms, parts and ammunition remained pragmatic, and change of possession provisions took into account the realities of recreational and guided hunting.

The GAC continues to provide advice to Police and other agencies on the registration of ranges and other firearms-related issues of concern to the hunting community through the Firearms Community Advisory Forum and Range Certification Engagement Group.

# ANIMAL WELFARE

The GAC represents the hunting sector on the Animal Behaviour and Welfare Consultative Committee and provides advice regarding existing hunting practices, codes of practice and regulatory proposals including the use of dogs in hunting.

# GAC FUNDING

Currently, the GAC is primarily funded through a government appropriation via Vote Conservation. In 2020/21, funding of \$250,000 was allocated.

The GAC has formulated a funding strategy in line with statutory requirements. The strategy includes a 3-tier partnership funding model that would ensure the future of the GAC. The 3-tiers are:

**1** Government appropriation

**2** Commercial guided hunting sector contribution in the form of an export tag levy

**3** Hunting/recreation contribution in the form of a voluntary levy on firearms and ammunition

Revenue generated from an export tag levy will be severely affected by the loss of visiting international hunters due to COVID-19 and the corresponding reduction in exports of hunting souvenirs. It is anticipated that sufficient revenue will be generated via a voluntary levy on firearms and ammunition, however this figure is unknown due to the uncertainty in the current market. It is also anticipated that funding sources such as donations will generate a small amount of additional revenue in the low \$1000s.

The GAC requests the incoming minister actively considers the GAC's funding strategy with a view to confirming it as soon as possible.

## SUMMARY

The Game Animal Council is focussed on making a positive contribution to the way game animals are managed for both hunting and conservation. We are convinced that hunting and conservation interests are far more closely aligned than is sometimes the perception. The GAC is committed to working with DOC and other government agencies as well as hunting sector organisations and key conservation stakeholders to achieve shared objectives.

If you or your staff have questions about the information provided in this briefing please do not hesitate to contact:



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