

12 June 2021



Speech to 73rd NZDA Conference

What a privilege it is to attend the 73rd National NZDA Conference here in Queenstown and be hosted by the Southern Lakes Branch and the wider NZDA community.

It has been great to have our Game Animal Council meeting alongside this conference and I know the Councillors appreciate all the work that has gone into the conference and the opportunity to meet with you all.

I would like to acknowledge Nicole McKee who is here and all the work she does, Lou Sanson and team from the Department of Conservation and Michael Dowling from COLFO. I also acknowledge Grant Dodson the Chair of the Game Animal Council and all the other Councillors in the room.

By way of introduction, I'm Tim Gale, and I'm the General Manager of the Game Animal Council. Currently, I live a few hours up the road in Pleasant Point, which is the home of red deer, tahr, chamois and those monster 20+ lb trout and salmon. For many years I lived in Taupo, spending most of my time in the Kaimanawas and Kawekas or on the banks of the Waitahanui or many of the other Taupo tributaries.

I have written in magazines, co-authored a hunting book and co-presented the How to of Deer Hunting in NZ DVD back when DVDs were still a thing. I have been a passionate recreational hunter for over 30 years and have been a hunting guide and a contract hunter both here and overseas. Some of you will know my dad, Alex Gale who as we speak is down in Lake Poteriteri, Fiordland, and as you probably guessed – he is hunting.

Now, the last NZDA conference I attended was in Blenheim, in 2013 and my dad was the guest speaker. Following that speech some people wanted to bury him, others applauded him, but it is good to see some of those things he pushed for are now reality.

For the next few minutes, I am going to talk about hunting, culture, game animals and their management and the important role recreational hunters play in conservation, and why game animal management is a key concept going forward.

First though I would like to acknowledge Craig Benbow as the NZDA National President and the significant value he brings to the organisation.

I have enjoyed getting to know Craig and look forward to working with him in the future. I will also say a few words about the engagement of Gwyn Thurlow, your new CEO.

This April I had the privilege of hunting with Gwyn for a week in the Rakaia high country chasing roaring red stags. We had an absolute blast, some great roar action and discovered some incredible country.

I commend the NZDA on employing Gwyn and I hope you all recognise what a great decision the organisation has made to engage a fulltime CEO and specifically Gwyn.

He is positive, cool, calm and calculated in his approach and has his eye on the future. He has made valuable contributions to the sector so far and we look forward to him applying his skill set for the betterment of the NZDA and the wider hunting sector. He's done a lot but he still needs your support and help.

It's also very encouraging to see the rebrand of the NZDA, the increased awareness of the organisation and where NZDA is heading and what you have been achieving of late.

Clubs and NGOs are the engine room of the hunting sector. It's your dedication and passion that makes it possible for so many New Zealanders to enjoy our sport. The Game Animal Council is here to support and work with the hunting sector NGO's alongside govt organisations and it has been a privilege and honour to work closely with many of you who are the leaders in the sector.

Throughout the year the GAC has worked closely with NZDA and the other hunting sector foundations and associations on tahr, deer, firearms, land access, hunter education and safety, game animal management to name but a few. We look forward to continuing our partnership with you and working closely together.

Speaking more broadly, the last few years have been significant for the hunting sector due to events such as new firearms legislation resulting in new regulation and licencing, the lost roar of 2020 due to COVID, the debate over the 2020 Tahr Control Operational Plan, the engagement of two fulltime CEOs in the big game hunting space, the rise of hunters for conservation, new adaptive game animal management plans, and partnerships to get wild game mince to needy families.

It is encouraging to see the hunting sector being portrayed in a positive light and also that the importance, scale and value that hunters provide to the community being recognised.

It has also been incredible seeing the hunter sector unite.

When I first started this job, one of my key mental models I had, was that the hunting sector needs to have a united front as we both tackle our many challenges and capitalise on our opportunities.

In the last few years, the sector has been forced to unite, but as a sector we are now beginning to take it seriously and realise that there are people and organisations out there that wish for there to be no hunters and no game animals.

There are proponents who wish to see the eradication of all game animals and that New Zealand goes back in time to some sort of pre-human utopia. We all know that going back in time is impossible, we can only go forward, therefore the question is how we go forward to manage our game animals for both their values and their impacts, for recreation, commerce, and conservation.

Late last year Game Animal Council Chair Grant Dodson and I attended a New Zealand Conservation Authority meeting. The collective perception from NZCA members was that "hunting" and "conservation" were at opposite ends of the spectrum. I walked away thinking that if that is how hunting and hunters are viewed then as a sector, we have missed the boat, and if that is the narrative being sold then we have already lost.

From that meeting a seed was planted and Hunters for Conservation was born...and now your conference is aptly entitled – Hunting is Conservation.

Hunters are conservationists.

We value our introduced game animal species and our indigenous species, and we want to see a thriving ecosystem that will work for both. I know I am preaching to the converted here but this is the message that we need to shout from the rooftops and demonstrate it through action. Conservation is the lynchpin.

I want to acknowledge the countless volunteer hours many of you contribute every year to conservation projects. Hunters throughout New Zealand are involved in hut and track maintenance, reintroducing, and protecting whio, kiwi and kea, cutting down wilding conifers, and killing stoats, possums, rats, and feral cats.

We do so much but we are not always the best at communicating what we do.

As was recently recognised in the New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy, big game animals are valued introduced species and many of these valued introduced species are critical to our everyday lives. As the Strategy states - *reaching a balance to ensure that valued introduced species continue to provide the benefits they are valued for, whilst also ensuring indigenous biodiversity thrive, is a key challenge.*

So, how do we meet this challenge?

I believe we can do this by further supporting hunter-led conservation initiatives and firmly establishing game animal management science and principles to inform management decisions.

A big part of game animal management includes both research and monitoring to make evidence-based decisions, and it also includes education. The more educated people are about hunting, game animals, and protecting the environment, the more they will learn to love and respect our conservation estate.

With respect comes increased value. If value is placed on game animals, quality management and their place in New Zealand's ecosystem, then they will be recognised and managed as such. Take the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation, the management they undertake, and the incredible conservation and hunting outcomes that are being achieved. It truly is one of the great success stories.

So, what is the relationship or the role of recreational hunters and game animal management?

Recreational hunters have the power to make the biggest impacts on the quality, structure and effects of our game animal herds.

Recreational hunters are the single biggest contributor to management. Kerr & Abell in a 2014 study estimated that recreational hunters kill about 135,000 deer and 132,000 other big game animals annually. If, by comparison, we look at WARO, that removes, on average, only about 18,000-20,000 deer per year across New Zealand.

We do have to acknowledge that there are other factors that also affect game animal populations such as poisons, official control, illegal releases etc etc.

For so long, there was an adage in New Zealand hunting - "shoot the spiker, leave the hind". This came from when deer numbers (and the number of other game animals) were at an all-time low. At the time, shoot the spiker, leave the hind may have been the right call to be making to ensure the ongoing viability of herds.

Fast-forward to 2021 and the conversation and game animal populations have changed, however some parts of our culture still echo this “shoot the spiker, leave the hind” philosophy. We have to move past this.

There is also a competing philosophy that sees game animals classed as a pest to be controlled and eradicated. Legislation that underpins much of the decision-making regarding game animals is old, out of date and in many cases not relevant to what is happening today.

Now both legislation and culture can be slow to respond and adapt. However, in the last few years, I believe the culture of New Zealand’s hunters has changed significantly. As I said earlier, this change may have been forced upon us, but it has been incredible to see the hunting sector unite and working together.

We need to continue to recognise the changing environment and adapt. We can do this by practising good game animal management. This means forgetting the “shoot the spiker, leave the hind” philosophy and start being active managers of both our game animals and the habitat they live in.

Cam Speedy and Roy Sloan have been leading this work for decades and I just want to acknowledge and honour the work they have done and continue to do.

The Game Animal Council recently developed a new online resource called [*Looking After Our Game Animals*](#). This resource is to help hunters, particularly new and inexperienced hunters, understand some key principles of game animal management and how making good harvesting decisions can have a positive impact on the health of our game animal herds and the habitats they live in.

The programme is broken up into four key themes

- Healthy Animals Require a Healthy Habitat
- Hunters as Caretakers
- It’s Quality over Quantity, and
- Measuring our Success.

Each theme outlines key aspects of good game animal management such as how the habitat is the foundation of the hunting resource; how male and female game animals have a different role in the herd and a different impact on the environment; and how, by targeting more females, hunters can achieve better quality herds in a healthier habitat.

We all know there are deer herds in certain parts of the country that have too many animals. If there are too many animals in an ecosystem this

results in a decline in the health of the ecosystem, poor quality animals both in terms of body condition and antlers, and therefore poor hunting.

By targeting the right animals at the right time hunters can help turn this around and work to achieve a lower-density and better-balanced herd that provides for more exciting hunting in a healthier environment with better quality animals. The result of this is a 'win-win' for hunting and conservation.

[Looking After Our Game Animals](#) explains how recreational hunters can make the investment in healthier game animals by harvesting more breeding age and yearling females. This, in turn, will help produce both trophy-class males and quality meat animals while also looking after our native species.

We will continue to develop this educational resource to educate on sustainable harvest, populations densities and in time further align it with research and monitoring to guide management decisions.

Please follow the Game Animal Council on social media, Facebook and Instagram, and if you want to look into this series more go to our [website](#).

There are still many opportunities and challenges for the hunting sector. We have a new conservation minister with an interest in the hunting sector and who sees hunters as part of the solution.

We need to ensure that advocacy is evidence-based and that we keep sharing the message that responsible management of game animals is in everyone's interest.

As a sector, whether we are commercial or recreational, hunt with a firearm, a bow, or a pack of dogs, we must be united and have a cohesive front. We also need to professionalise.

We need to continually demonstrate and communicate that we are part of the solution, therefore we need to be in the rooms and meetings in Wellington making the decisions as opposed to protesting when the decision has been made. By that time, it is too late.

I will close with this - After my two weeks during the roar this year, I came back and wrote in my journal: Our public land is epic. We have to protect it, the right to access it, to hunt.

As hunters and conservationists, protecting the right to access land, managing the game animals and the land they inhabit and educating the next generation will take all of us as it is a big job. Let us continue to

work together for the good of the unique landscapes, the bush and the open tussock lands, the insects, birds, and the tahr, chamois, deer and pigs that makes New Zealand so special. These things are part of who we are, hunting is what we love to do, it's what gets us out in the mountains and the hills and it is part of New Zealand's social fabric.

Let's protect hunting, let's grow the sector, let's move forward constructively and be a part of the solution.

Many of you here have taken up leadership roles in your local branches, and I commend you and thank you for that. We all need you. Keep up the good work.

Enjoy your conference.