



Advice to the Department of Conservation to assist
in development of the Himalayan Tahr Control
Operational Plan (TCOP) 2022-2023

February 2022



Game Animal Council
NEW ZEALAND

Development of the Tahr Control Operational Plan (TCOP) 2022-2023

Advice to the Department of Conservation from the Game Animal Council, pursuant to the Game Animal Council Act 2013, Section 7(1)(f), (g) and the functions of the Tahr Plan Implementation Liaison Group (TPILG).

Context

The following advice occurs at two levels:

1. the strategic level, which focusses on principles and priorities, and
2. the management level, which includes advice on how control effort should be allocated across tahr management units. More specific advice on control operations at places within the management units will be provided by the NZ Tahr Foundation, the NZ Deerstalkers Association, and others.

Principles

The Game Animal Council's (GAC) mission statement is "Sustainable management of game animals and hunting for recreation, commerce and conservation." Pursuant to that mission statement, we recommend using the following principles and priorities to guide compiling the Tahr Control Operational Plan 2022-2023 (TCOP).

1. Focus control where it will have the greatest conservation benefit

Rather than seeking to cover the whole tahr range, control should be focussed on locations where tahr (i) are in high numbers, or (ii) are causing the most significant adverse environmental effects.

- This principle requires effects-based tahr control, concentrating control effort on locations of most significant current or potential effects, informed by science wherever possible.
- The GAC strongly supports trialling the new vegetation and herbivore monitoring regime being designed by George Ledgard (DOC), which is an important step towards science-led, effects-based tahr management.
- In the short-term, tahr management must necessarily be based on limited information about tahr abundance and effects at place, including expert observations from the hunting sector and DOC submissions to this draft TCOP from the hunting sector, based on extensive field observations, will identify priority areas for tahr population reduction.
- The GAC is concerned that some commentators continue to use catch per unit effort (CPUE) as an index of tahr abundance. There is strong scientific evidence that CPUE can have extremely low correlation with abundance. CPUE is not an indicator of environmental effects of tahr, whether current or potential. Consequently, CPUE should not be used as a guide to identification of priority areas for tahr population reductions.

2. Have regard to the needs of recreational hunting, guided trophy hunting, and WARO

Reduced tahr abundance has a commensurate effect on the number of male tahr available for the hunting sector, particularly if males are culled. Tahr are polygynous – the future abundance of tahr is not directly affected by the current number of male tahr.

- WARO can be a key tool in tahr management but can only be commercially viable under specific conditions. Projected meat price increases suggest an opportunity for more animals to be recovered through WARO rather than be shot to waste. WARO needs to be used at a targeted geographic scale, rather than over the whole range. Better integrating WARO into the wider suite of tahr management tools could be benefitted by spatially targeted WARO permits.
- Trophy bulls (males) are the primary motivator for tahr hunting participation by most recreational and essentially all guided hunters. Fewer bulls can reduce recreational hunter participation, with commensurate effect on incidental female tahr harvests, and loss of income for professional hunting guides. Official control should avoid targeting identifiable male tahr.
- Hunting guides inform the GAC that there is significant international demand for NZ tahr hunts, much demand having accumulated during the border closures. Mature bulls will be in high demand when the New Zealand borders re-open – projected for later in 2022. Official control should avoid targeting identifiable male tahr.
- Official control should avoid areas around huts, known popular campsites and areas with easy access

3. Implement control method priorities for each MU as set out in the HTCP where it is sensible to do so

Control Priorities: (1) recreational hunting, (2) guided hunting, (3) WARO, (4) official control.

Priority should be afforded to methods that utilise any tahr that are controlled. Mixed methods may help overcome tahr behavioural adaptations to persistent application of one type of hunting (e.g., helicopter aversion).

The GAC notes that it is beneficial to vary control method priorities over time within an operational plan period, and spatially within management units. Official control should focus on places where other hunting methods are ineffective, such as steep or high-altitude terrain, places where access is limited, places where vegetation precludes hunter effectiveness, and places with low tahr abundance, such as the exclusion zones and outside the feral range. There may be benefit to follow-up of initial hunting sector targeted control by official control.

4. Apply adaptive management principles

Tahr behavioural changes because of helicopter aversion is clearly a problem. This may require alternative management responses, including professional ground hunting and adoption of a 'spelling' regime for aerial control. Hunter access remains a significant limitation.

Trial new and revised methods such as:

- combined aerial and ground control operations, and
- targeted hunts using recreational hunters (as per the two current trials being conducted by DOC and the NZTF). Focus initial control work only on areas advised by the hunting sector.

The recent mid-point reviews have been extremely productive, resulting in improved allocation of the limited control resource, reduced interactions between ground hunters and aerial control operations, and better buy-in from the hunting community. The GAC strongly supports continuation of the mid-point review.

5. MU1 Hunter-led management

The hunter-led management program will be developed during the period of this TCOP. As part of program development, and to assist the transition to hunter leadership, the hunting sector will direct control operations. Some hours of official control and/or helicopter support should be allocated to support development and operationalisation of the program.

6. Overall Priorities for control of tahr in zones

Priority 1 - Tahr outside the Feral Range

Priority 2 - Tahr in exclusion zones and adjacent to Feral Range boundaries

Priority 3 - Tahr inside the Feral Range but outside the management units.

Priority 4 - Tahr within management units

The hours proposed in the table for allocated hours of control are indicative, with minor modifications from the previous plan. The GAC is of the opinion that the areas where official control will be most beneficial outside of the national parks are in management units 2 and 6. In both these units there are extensive areas where ground hunting is ineffective, and where environmental effects have been exacerbated by tahr occupying heavily vegetated habitat.

7. Areas for control activity focus

Management Unit 2: Adams Range, Wilberg Range, TL Lord/Lambert, TL Perth

Management Unit 6: Makawhio (Jacobs) - particularly in the bush, Landsborough - particularly scrub/bush areas, Otoko/Paringa/Clarke headwaters, Steep north-facing slopes in the Mahitahi and Morse rivers

8. Allocation of Control Effort Across Management Units

Management units	Allocation 2021-2022	Allocation 2022/2023	Notes
	Helicopter Hours	% of total Helicopter Hours	
MU 1	0	10 hours	Allocate as required to support hunter-led management
MU 2	25	9%	
MU3	10	10 hours	Hold in reserve for concentrations of animals that hunters cannot reduce using targeted hunting-sector-led hunts, trialled during 2022/2023 TCOP
MU 4a	90	20%	No Bulls culled
MU 4b		5%	No Bulls culled
MU 5	10	3%	General tidy up of large mobs
MU 6	40	15%	Focus on known concentrations
MU 7	0	0	No official control. Tahr numbers remain low
INSFROMU	20	8%	Prevent spread from Mus to outside feral range
OSFR	120	40%	Establish a more comprehensive judas tahr network to help detection
Totals	315	TBC	
ZIP and OSPRI			Tahr carcasses used to support these operations should be obtained from areas of high control priority, noting the need for proximity, to have best effect
WARO			WARO should be used in preference to official control where economically viable

Himalayan Tahr Control Plan 1993

Although outside the scope of the development of the 2022/2023 TCOP, the GAC believes it is time to start a conversation on tahr control operational planning strategy (moving from a reactive, ad-hoc annual approach to a more structured management regime) and discussion of limitations and potential amendments to the HTCP, including whether it should be retained, based on 29 years of experience and scientific advances. Some key points are:

- It is not possible to count tahr with the degree of precision (and possibly accuracy) required to monitor tahr consistent with the objectives of the HTCP 1993.
- Tahr range has expanded considerably.
- The Plan's promotion of tahr density objectives undermines achievement of best environmental outcomes when resources are limited. The Plan should support effects-based management in preference to tahr density-based management.
- The Plan does not adequately address heterogeneity within management units.
- The Plan does not adequately address tahr management issues across different land tenures.
- Comprehensive monitoring of the environment to inform management decisions on control options takes too long and is too costly.
- The Plan has failed to keep pace with new demands on the tahr resource such as guided hunting/AATH.
- The Plan, even though designed to be 'adaptive', has not been adapted, reviewed, or changed in any way since its inception.
- New government initiatives (such as Te Mana o Te Taiao Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy 2020, and Te Ara Ki Mua), which embrace management of valued introduced species for both negative effects and hunting benefits. The current Plan focusses only on negative effects of tahr, using hunting as a control tool without recognising the significant value of Himalayan tahr, and their hunting.