



BRIEFING TO THE INCOMING MINISTER OF CONSERVATION

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

**NEW ZEALAND GAME
ANIMAL COUNCIL**

JUNE 2022



Game Animal Council
NEW ZEALAND

ABOUT THE GAME ANIMAL COUNCIL

The Game Animal Council has a five-year 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 Game Animal Council (GAC) is a statutory body established under the Game Animal Council Act 2013. It represents the interests of the hunting sector, provides advice to the Minister of Conservation and seeks to improve the management of game animals 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
- To provide information and education to the hunting 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'.

STRATEGIC PLAN

The Game Animal Council has a five-year Strategic Plan 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.



THE COUNCIL AND STAFF

Game Animal Councillors offer a wide range of knowledge, skills, attributes and interests, and have valuable connections within the hunting, guiding, conservation, 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 supported by a small team of contractors who fulfil specific functions including administration, project management, communications and the development of an online hunter education programme. The intention is to employ a fulltime policy advisor over the next few months.

GAC FUNDING

Currently, the GAC is primarily funded through a government appropriation via Vote Conservation. For 2022-23 this funding is expected to increase from \$250,000 to \$600,000 and to rise progressively over the following three years to 1,200,000 by 2025-26. Additional funding of \$70,000 has also been allocated through the Jobs for Nature Programme to progress online hunter education.

The GAC commissioned the development of a five-year funding strategy at the request of the previous Minister of Conservation. This has been completed and will be provided to the incoming minister in the near future. The GAC requests the incoming minister actively considers the GAC's funding strategy with a view to confirming it as soon as possible.

RELATIONSHIP WITH DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

The GAC relies on the Department of Conservation for governance support and has developed very good relationships with Department of Conservation staff. This has been built on good communication, a better understanding of the GAC's role and the evolution of policy with regards to the management of game animals and conservation. The GAC and DOC work closely together on a number of projects and advice flows easily between the two organisations. We look forward to further enhancing these relationships in order to improve hunting opportunities and the management of game animal species.



NEW ZEALAND HUNTING SECTOR

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

As well as its critical importance to game animal management, hunting is an important source of mahinga kai for many communities, has a positive impact on wellbeing for tens of thousands of people and encourages participation in community-led conservation initiatives.

Recreational hunters annually harvest approximately 135,000 deer, 132,000 other big game animals (tahr, chamois and wild pigs) and over 230,000 feral goats. The commercial harvest is highly volatile due to the fluctuations in the venison market but typically accounts for 10,000 to 30,000 animals annually.

The total gross sales effect of New Zealanders participating in large game hunting was calculated in 2012 to be in the order of \$180 million annually, however that has likely increased over the last ten years. Prior to Covid-19 it was also estimated that the tourist hunting sector brought in around \$100 million of direct overseas revenue annually, employed approximately 470 people in full time or seasonal employment and a further 60 registered people in the associated taxidermy and trophy exporting services.

The GAC works alongside a strong network of hunting sector clubs and NGO's, including the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association, New Zealand Professional Hunting Guides Association, New Zealand Association of Game Estates, Fiordland Wapiti Foundation, Central North Island Sika Foundation, New Zealand Tahr Foundation and SCI International (New Zealand).

GAME ANIMAL MANAGEMENT

Deer, tahr, chamois and wild pigs have been a part of New Zealand for well over a hundred years and have long been recognised as ‘valued introduced species’ by New Zealanders. That status has appropriately been recognised through Te Mana o Te Taiao - Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy 2020.

These animals represent a significant source of mahinga kai for many communities and provide important recreational and commercial opportunities as well as physical health and wellbeing benefits. Unquestionably they can also present a challenge for conservation, which is why the GAC is working to achieve well-considered, science-based game animal management that realises the value of these animals while ensuring that indigenous biodiversity is protected.

The GAC’s work in this area can be split into two broad categories. Firstly, is our involvement in the development and implementation of official management programmes, strategies and plans. The second is our promotion of good New Zealand game animal management principles and practices to the hunting sector, particularly the tens of thousands of recreational hunters who account for the majority of the game animal harvest.

IMPLEMENTATION OF TE MANA O TE TAIAO - AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY

The Game Animal Council was pleased to be involved in the development of Te Mana o Te Taiao - Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy 2020 (ANZBS) and contribute to the recognition of valued introduced species in it. This has paved the way for a more forward-focused and enlightened approach to game animal management in the New Zealand context.

DEER MANAGEMENT

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 deer numbers are low and herd management practices may be required to preserve special herds, such as the Wakatipu whitetail.

Fundamentally hunters want to hunt good quality animals in a healthy environment



and in order to ensure that we must institute modern management practices that fit with New Zealand's unique circumstances.

The GAC is currently working alongside DOC on the development of a deer management and goat control framework – **Te Ara ki Mua**. We welcome the announcement in Budget 2022 of \$30 million over four years to help implement this and are excited that the hunting sector will play an important role in delivering it.

With regards to deer, the funding will go towards initiatives that include regional and site-based planning and management solutions involving stakeholders and will balance the animals' ecological impacts with their benefits. This presents an opportunity to create enduring solutions to management issues that involve local communities.

WARO - THE CASE FOR A REVIEW

Wild Animal Recovery Operations (WARO) typically account for around 15-20 percent of the estimated annual deer harvest with recreational hunting accounting for almost all the rest. Because WARO is not adequately targeted it does not realise the potential benefits it could have for game animal management and conservation, and creates substantial conflict with the recreational hunting sector.

The Department of Conservation has commissioned a partial review of WARO, which is currently underway. This is limited in scope and substantially fails to address the core issues that have existed with the WARO system for many years. The GAC strongly recommends that a comprehensive 'review' of the WARO system takes place in the 2023-24 year.

The conservation and deer management challenge demands an integrated and modern approach and a comprehensive review is an essential step to maximising WARO's conservation potential and meeting the goals of the ANZBS and Te Ara ki Mua. The way WARO currently operates also provides for a high level of frustration for both operators and recreational hunters. Concerns relate to the number of deer being harvested in certain places, stags being harvested in accessible and popular recreational hunting locations and the boom-or-bust nature of the industry.

The Department has signalled to the hunting sector for well over a decade that a comprehensive WARO review is required and although it is a substantial piece of work the GAC believes prioritising it in 2023-24 is critical.

MANAGEMENT PROJECTS

The GAC has been involved in advising, supporting and implementing a number of recent game animal management projects including a red deer control programme in conjunction with the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation in Fiordland, sika deer management in the Kaimanawas with the Sika Foundation and the Lake Sumner RHA Management Operation with help from the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association.

TAHR MANAGEMENT

Tahr management has in the past been a divisive issue punctuated by polarising rhetoric on both sides. Fortunately, and partly due to the work of the GAC, this has been replaced by a constructive consultation process that has been largely free of conflict and where the voices of all stakeholders have been heard.

The GAC is broadly supportive of the recently released 2022-23 Tahr Control Operational Plan that builds on the management work undertaken in 2021-22. The plan is rightly focused on areas outside the feral range, where tahr densities remain high and where management will have the greatest conservation benefit. The Plan is adaptive and responsive to advice provided by the GAC and the hunting sector. We do, however, remain unconvinced of the conservation benefit of removing all recognisable male tahr from the two national parks and believe resources could be better spent managing breeding nannies in the national parks and in other sensitive parts of the range.

Work continues to progress between GAC, DOC, local Papatipu Rūnunga and Ngāi Tahu on the development of a hunter-led managed area for the South Rakaia/Upper Rangitata area of MU1.

With regards to the Himalayan Tahr Control Plan 1993 generally, the GAC remains of the opinion that it is time to move away from the reactive, ad-hoc annual approach to a more structured and adaptive management regime that provides for better protection of the habitat, a viable tahr herd and quality hunting.



PROMOTING GAME ANIMAL MANAGEMENT

As outlined elsewhere in this briefing, recreational hunting accounts for the vast majority of game animals and pest goats harvested in New Zealand. It is therefore an important part of the GAC's work to promote good game animal management principles to the hunting sector.

LOOKING AFTER OUR GAME ANIMALS

Looking After Our Game Animals is a campaign developed by the GAC to encourage hunters, particularly new and inexperienced hunters, to implement game animal management practices that will help achieve beneficial hunting and conservation outcomes.

The online resource at the heart of the campaign features information outlining 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 most importantly, how targeting more females and leaving younger males can achieve better quality and lower-density game animal herds in a healthier ecosystem.

NZ RED STAG AGEING GUIDE

Red deer are the most ubiquitous game animal species in New Zealand and good red deer management is about having hunters targeting old mature stags as well as harvesting their fair share of breeding-age hinds. Harvesting younger stags does nothing for herd management and means those animals never get the chance to mature and realise their full potential. The GAC produced this guide to provide hunters with information on how to judge the age of red deer stags in the field and positively contribute to their management.



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. 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 to improve both hunting and conservation outcomes.

A DOC/GAC collaborative work programme to develop the necessary process to implement HOSI is currently underway.

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 (New Zealand). Hunters are prominent participants in the Backcountry Trust, which has played a major role in refurbishing DOC huts.



KEY CONSERVATION PROJECTS

HUNTERS FOR CONSERVATION TRUST

The GAC is supportive of Hunters for Conservation and recently assisted with setting it up as a Trust. 'Hunters for Conservation' is about not only 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.

TAHR BALLOT KEA SIGHTINGS PROJECT

The GAC joined with the NZ Tahr Foundation and Kea Conservation Trust to develop the Tahr Ballot Kea Sightings Project so that hunters who undertake hunts as part of the annual tahr ballot can contribute to recording sightings of kea. Each hunting party that gains a ballot block receives the kea sightings pamphlet and records and submits their kea sightings following their flight out.



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 results, where no monitored tahr died, are valuable 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.

FIORDLAND VENISON MINCE PROJECT

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 550 deer from Fiordland National Park and processed them into 18,000 kg of venison mince for foodbanks and vulnerable families across New Zealand.



HUNTER SAFETY AND EDUCATION

The GAC consistently promotes hunter safety across the hunting sector and is currently working on the development of an online hunter education programme largely funded through the Jobs for Nature Programme and supported by our ministerial letter of expectations.



HUNTER SAFETY AND EDUCATION PROGRAMME

The objective of the hunter safety and education programme is to have an increasing population of New Zealand hunters trained to maximise hunting success and do so safely. We want hunters to understand sustainable management principles and their role in conservation.

The GAC's hunter education programme will have a significant emphasis on outdoor safety, in addition to specific firearms safety. Recreational hunters also require good information on where to hunt and when, and how to hunt successfully. Information on population dynamics and the contribution of hunting to conservation outcomes is extremely important, enabling hunters to make good game animal management decisions whilst out hunting.

The GAC has so far employed a Programme Lead, purchased an online domain, identified a suitable learning management system, server host and stood up a prototyping version to use while Programme content is further developed. Some modules are drafted and we are working with relevant stakeholders to review each module according to a comprehensive workplan. The GAC has commenced engagement with DOC to provide support in identifying key iwi stakeholders.

The relationship with the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association (NZDA) is critical as the Programme is intended to provide a bridge between gaining a firearms licence and the NZDA's practical HUNTS course.

CURRENT SAFETY ADVOCACY

The GAC works both unilaterally and with other outdoor recreation stakeholders as well as with DOC and other government agencies to promote hunting and outdoor safety. A key focus for this is around the March - May Roar period, which sees large numbers of hunters head in to the backcountry. The focus of our messaging is around making good preparations, carrying the right equipment, leaving appropriate intentions, being safe around firearms and making good decisions while on the hill. The theme of this year's safety campaign was Look After Your Mates and it was pleasing that the Roar passed without any hunting fatalities or significant events.



OTHER KEY ISSUES

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 recreation 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 reframed around outdoor access more generally 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 has concerns where public conservation land is reclassified above its true conservation value as this demands restrictions on access and activities that reduce participation in recreation, including hunting. This can lead to detrimental conservation outcomes where, without hunting pressure, game animal and wild goat numbers increase and adversely impact the native ecosystem.

FIREARMS

The GAC has 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.

Most recently the GAC has expressed concern at Police proposals that would make access to and operation of shooting clubs and ranges far more onerous. Some of the proposals, particularly around increased compliance on smaller clubs and ranges as well as age restrictions will have a detrimental impact on the provision of firearms safety training and sighting in opportunities for hunters.

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

COVID-19

Like almost all sectors of the New Zealand economy, COVID-19 had a severe impact on commercial and guided hunting. Most of the guided hunting industry's income is reliant on international hunters meaning that hunting guides, game estates and other commercial operators have been through a very uncertain time. This has led to considerable financial stress; however, indications are that international hunters are keen to return and future bookings look strong.

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.

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.

SUMMARY

The Game Animal Council is focussed on making a positive contribution to the way game animals are managed for both hunting and conservation and looks forward to providing you with advice and recommendations that will assist in achieving good outcomes for both. We remain committed to working with DOC and other government agencies as well as hunting sector organisations and key conservation stakeholders to also achieve these 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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