

Additional questions on notice from Melina Bath

1. Ms Allen touched very briefly on wetland habitat area and species abundance, does **RVODH** agree that the greatest threat to the ecosystem and waterfowl abundance is habitat?
2. Can RVODH outline the projects and deliverables it undertakes to increase and or maintain wetland restoration and preservation?

RESPONSE from RVOTDS

Thank you for your questions. Please note our correct name is Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting inc. or RVOTDS.

Answer to Q1:

Habitat itself is not a threat to the abundance of native waterbirds and quail, the LOSS of habitat is. Prof Richard Kingsford (UNSW) has often written and spoken of two primary causes of habitat loss [diversion of natural flows from key river systems such as the Murray-Darling for irrigation, and also climate change] and the consequent negative impact on species abundance. See for example, the 2014 report *Birds of the Murray-Darling Basin*, edited by Kingsford, produced by Birdlife Australia.

However, like many other professors/scientists, Kingsford does not consider that habitat is the sole factor affecting abundance. Particularly when – as now - abundance and habitat are seriously depleted, it is recognised that shooting is a threat. For example, in 2015 the long-running aerial survey of waterbirds across eastern Australia showed both habitat and waterbird breeding were **at the lowest level on record**. [Kingsford said that given these results, any duck shooting season in SA and Victoria should have serious restrictions:](#)

"When you're down at the bottom of the trough, which is where ducks are... if you have a duck shooting season you are really only going to be shooting adults which will reduce the capacity of the population to bounce back."

Note that in 2019, habitat shrank to a new record low.

Hunting groups such as Field & Game Australia (FGA) and Australian Deer Association (it's unclear why this group is involved in bird shooting discussions) focus on habitat alone as the factor affecting bird abundance. They often quote a year 2000 report¹ chaired by Kingsford and claim hunting has no impact on abundance. However that report reviewed data stretching back decades when river diversion and climate change had not made inroads into habitat. That report is irrelevant today when habitat has been savagely depleted and bird populations are 90 per cent down on their 1980s levels. Curiously, neither the shooter groups nor the Game Management Authority (GMA) refer to the negative impacts of river diversion or climate change when they advocate for more bird shooting.

Nor do they refer to the ripple effect through a species of shooting one of a monogamous pair. (Many of our native ducks are monogamous).

There are numerous such studies which outline the modern understanding of adverse impacts of shooting to bird populations – many were referenced at the end of our submission.

¹ New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2000, *Scientific Panel Review of Open Seasons for Waterfowl in New South Wales*, New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, New South Wales

It is of interest to look at another (older one); *The Waterbirds of Australia*, produced in 1988 as part of the Australian Museum's Photographic Index of Australian Wildlife. The commentary on game birds had a consistent theme: will the species be able to continue to withstand the toll of shooting?

For example, in relation to the Pacific Black Duck, back in 1988:

"...the Black Duck, like all Australian ducks, is also threatened by the continuing drainage of the swamps and wetlands which it needs to breed and by the control of rivers to prevent floods... A combination of all these factors could quite easily reduce the numbers to a point where the species could no longer stand the toll taken by shooting."

Note Kingsford's survey reports have found a **statistically significant decline in this species over the period 1983-2020.**

Fraudulent distortion of evidence to conceal the truth

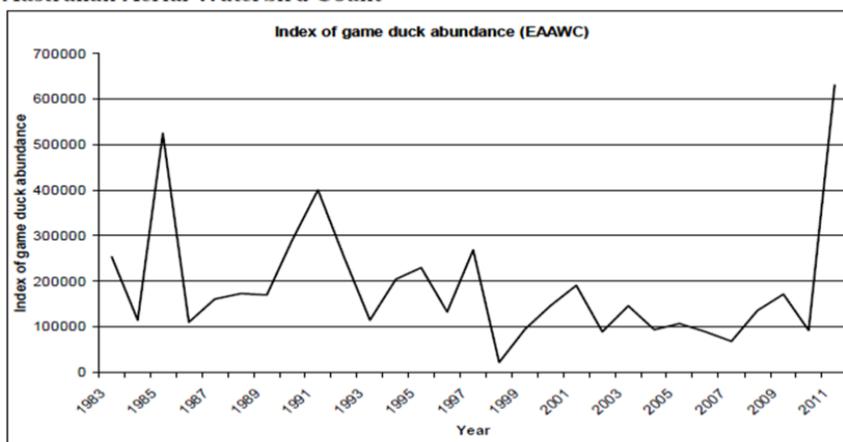
In 2012, the *Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012* were drafted after extensive consultation with hunting groups (it appears no consultation with other groups) and a 100-page *Regulatory Impact Statement* (RIS) prepared supporting proposed new hunting rules. It has only recently come to our attention that Kingsford's scientific data appears to have been fraudulently tampered with to defend the pro-hunting claim that shooting does not affect duck population numbers²:

"In fact, since the breaking of the [Millennium] drought in 2009, game duck numbers have responded to widespread flooding events across eastern Australia. A significant increase in wetland availability stimulated substantial breeding and, in 2011, eastern Australian game duck abundance recorded its highest level since the survey began in 1983 (see Figure 6)..."

"The current regulatory regime... is sustainable and has not prevented game ducks from reaching their highest level of abundance in 2011 in almost 30 years."

This claim is patently false. Kingsford's survey data shows in 1984, game duck abundance was 966,292 and in 2011 it was only 630,470 – 35% down. But the RIS produced a falsified graph (Fig 6, below) supposedly showing Kingsford's data. Note that the true 1984 abundance would not even fit on the vertical scale of this graph from the RIS.

Figure 6: Index of abundance of game ducks as recorded during the Eastern Australian Aerial Waterbird Count

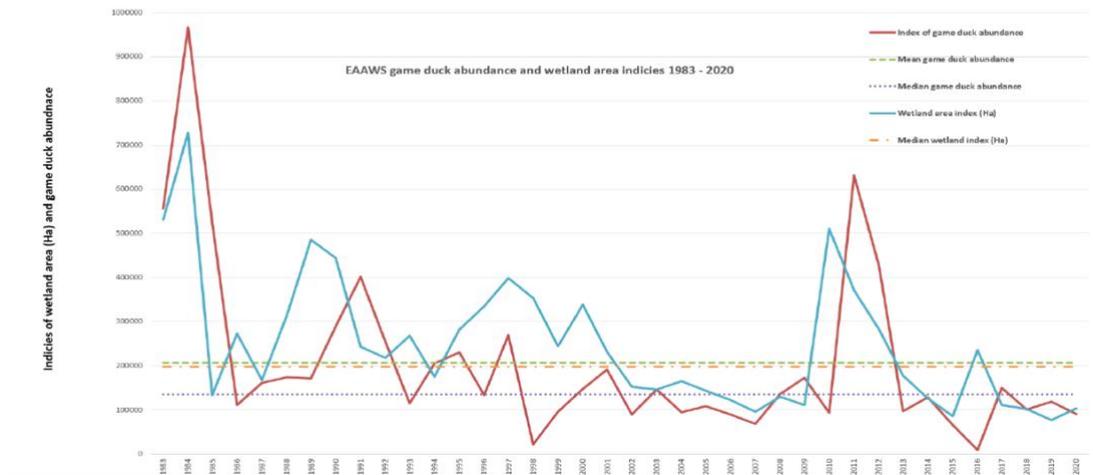


The current hunting regime and its enabling regulations are based on this falsified premise from 2012, that shooting has not depleted game duck populations.

² Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012, Regulatory Impact Statement, Dept of Primary Industries, 2012, pp35-36

The correct (non tampered with) graph is below (GMA Considerations for the 2021 Duck Season):

Game duck abundance, distribution and habitat - summary



From its beginnings in 2014, the GMA routinely claimed duck shooting had no effect on waterbird abundance, citing Kingsford’s year 2000 report for support. However even the GMA appears to have finally drawn the link between shooting and falling population numbers:

“Excluding 2016, there has been very little large-scale waterbird breeding since 2013 and the existing populations constitute core breeding stock”.
(Considerations for the 2021 duck season, p42)

According to the GMA, the average lifespan of a native duck is 4 years, so the arithmetic is not hard to do. Populations are falling off a cliff, because more birds are wounded or killed than are bred for replenishment. Yet no shooting season has been cancelled since the GMA was established in 2014.³

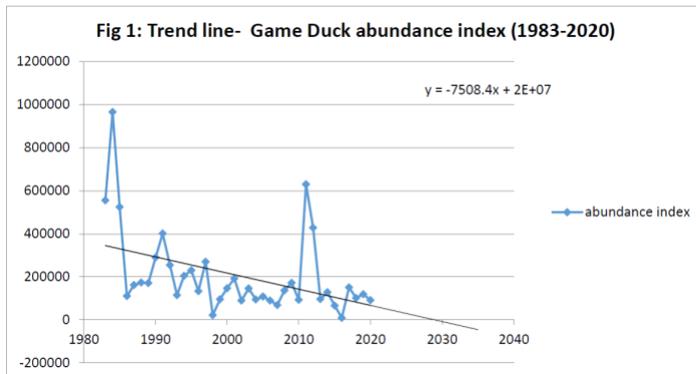
“Restricted” seasons don’t help. It is well known that most of the damage is done at the start of a season so a shorter season provides little relief for the species. As for bag limits, they are only as effective as the enforcement program. Given the vast numbers of waterways where duck shooting can legally occur, it is impossible to police them all. And in a shocking loophole, duck shooters are not obliged to show their bag for the Hunter Bag Survey, because the officials involved are not “authorised officers”.⁴ Neither GMA, nor the public, have any real idea of how many birds are killed as a result of shooting seasons, likely far higher than the numbers reported “harvested” by shooters.

In summary, proponents of duck shooting focus on habitat as the key threat to duck populations, ignoring the “inconvenient truth” supported by Professors / scientists including Kingsford that in the 21st century when waterbird populations and habitat are in a dire situation, species simply cannot replenish themselves sufficiently to recover from the losses of recreational shooting.

³ Previously, Victoria’s duck shooting season was cancelled for environmental reasons in 1997, 2003, 2007 and 2008

⁴ GMA Fact Sheet, [Hunter Bag Surveys](#), 2017

Although populations partially rebound in better years, Kingsford used the analogy in 2012: “it’s a bit like a bouncing tennis ball. Your bounces are getting lower and lower.”⁵ In the eight years since he made that observation, eastern Australia has suffered record drought, followed by record floods. The floods may bring a bounce-back, but it will likely be lower than in previous cycles.



Graph Source: Submission from Animals Australia to GMA, Dec 2020, p5, available [from GMA website](#).

****Note that if the trend remains linear, game bird extinction could occur on or before 2030.**

In relation to native quail, the GMA has no data on current populations. Last year should have sounded alarm bells as 71% of active quail shooters bagged no birds (GMA 2020 Season Report). SA has cancelled the quail shooting season for 2020 and 2021 but Victoria has once again allowed a full 3-month, 20 birds-a-day shooting season for 2021. Worse, quail shooters do not have to pass any test to show they can tell one species from another. They are allowed to shoot in the half-light, 30 mins either side of dawn and sunset. Quail are easily confused with the critically endangered Plains Wanderer, a bird that is being bred in captivity at Werribee Zoo in a last-ditch effort to save it from extinction. So public funds are being used to breed the Plains Wanderer while public funds are also subsidising the quail shooting that could eliminate the remnant population in the wild. It beggars belief that lead ammunition – banned from use in duck shooting decades ago due to its adverse impacts to wildlife and ecosystems – is still allowed for use in quail shooting.

All this clearly shows GMA’s dismal failure – despite millions in taxpayer funds - to ensure sustainability and minimise the adverse impacts of shooting to protected species, a requirement under the GMA Act.

Answer to Q2:

Like Mrs McArthur’s questions during the hearing, this seems more directed at our group than at ecosystem decline. As with Mrs McArthur, we have issued several invitations to meet with Ms Bath which have been ignored, precisely to discuss our organisation, the reasons we established, what we are doing and how she could help.

As with Mrs. McArthur, If Ms Bath is interested in our group, our offer still stands and we look forward to hearing from her office to arrange a meeting.

In the interim, a short outline of our projects and deliverables includes year-round clean-up of rubbish including ammunition cartridges around regional waterways near our homes, tree and native grass planting and weed removal. It also includes actively lobbying for a better way for our waterways. All this is done at our own expense and – unlike shooting clubs- with no government funding.

⁵ ABC Catalyst, 31.5.12 <https://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/richard-kingsford/11013822>

Ms Bath MP said in her maiden speech, she wished to advocate for those unable to advocate for themselves. Ours is a similar mission. Surveys continue to show that the majority of regional residents want an end to bird shooting. However many are reluctant to speak out individually because, they tell us, they fear retribution from shooters e.g. targeting their property, family, animals. While some may say this fear is irrational, consider the following:

- An online survey conducted by RVOTDS in 2018 was sabotaged by shooters.
- Bullying / intimidatory behaviour including via social media is common and a reason our members' details were approved by CAV to be suppressed.
- CEOs of shooting clubs have aggressively publicly attacked (in newsletters and media articles) those who speak out in opposition to duck shooting.
- Individuals including MPs who have publicly demonstrated their opposition to duck shooting have had death threats.
- A billboard at Rosedale in Gippsland paid for by RVOTDS and AWS (Australian Wildlife Society) was violently vandalised shortly afterwards.
<https://www.gippslandtimes.com.au/story/7097091/anti-duck-hunting-billboard-in-roosedale-vandalised/>
- "Authorities" have dismissed complaints and advised people who have lived in the country for years they "should move" if they don't like duck shooting.
- Some MPs who are pro duck shooting have also ridiculed, dismissed and arguably bullied constituents adversely impacted – consider the nature of Mrs. McArthur's (a member of FGA) questions to us at this Inquiry – particularly disappointing coming from an MP on the Committee for the Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline. It took much time, effort and bravery for our organisation to participate in the Inquiry but we felt strongly the content we are sharing is highly relevant.

Sadly there has been no public consultation, no risk assessment and no social-economic impact studies of duck shooting on anyone other than shooters. There is a need unfortunately for organisations like ours, to be the voice of those who have not been heard.

In relation to the Terms of Reference (TOR) of this Inquiry, RVOTDS is committed to representing the concerns of regional Australians who are extremely distressed by:

- The cruelty involved in maiming and killing our wildlife, in particular native waterbirds and quail - TOR (a)
- The associated population decline of this native wildlife – TOR (a)
- The economic and social disruption to families, businesses and animals caused by shooting seasons – TOR (a)
- The secretive use of taxpayer funds to support recreational bird shooting – TOR (c), (d)
- The desecration of our wetlands by those who engage in recreational bird shooting – TOR (b) to (e)
- The loss of tourism potential opportunities that would bring jobs and prosperity to the regions - TOR (e)
- Shooters trespassing on private lands in order to pursue their quarry – TOR (f)
- The lack of transparency and accountability of politicians and officials who support recreational bird shooting – TOR (c), (d) and (f).

Organisations like ours get no government funding. Yet it appears the voice and witness from community organisations like ours is the only way to highlight the negative aspects of bird shooting.

Consider that in 2017 at the Koorangie Marshes, it was volunteer members of the public - not authorities or regulators - who recovered 296 illegally shot protected species. Almost every season there are such instances where birds are found buried in pits, shooters are filmed snorting coke in public areas...by volunteer members of the public.

Frankly It simply does not pass the pub test to tell regional Victorians that maiming and slaughtering native wildlife has no impact on sustainability of remnant bird populations. We live among the wildlife. We know there aren't many ducks – or quail - around these days. We see their decline, the litter and the suffering.

Whilst it is not known if Ms Bath is a member of FGA like Mrs McArthur, it is known she has close ties with their group. Her question is likely a result of their promoting themselves as “conservationists” – a claim we don't believe passes the pub test either as follows.

As Ms Bath's question relates to wetlands restoration projects, let's turn to FGA's wetland restoration programs. This is relevant in relation to TOR (c), (d) and (f). There is a gross lack of transparency regarding the funding that goes from taxpayers to hunting groups. In fact Mrs McArthur MP stated in parliament on 17 March 2021 that FGA's wetlands projects get no government support but operate with member donations and philanthropy. She was incorrect. (And also omitted to mention – while singing the praises of FGA - that she is actually a member of FGA.)

Taxpayer contributions to FGA

It may shock taxpayers to learn how much they are supporting an activity most oppose. According to FGA's Annual Reports regarding taxpayer-funded financial assistance to FGA:

- 2011-12: FGA received \$29,363 in government grants and a \$100,000 donation from the publicly funded Trust For Nature. (Co-incidentally there is a shared Board member of TFN and GMA).
- 2013-14: FGA has gained funding of \$505,000 to be paid over 10 years from VicRoads tree offsets, via a Trust for Nature Native Vegetation Agreement.
- 2014-15: FGA received a \$750,000 grant from the state government's Shooting Sports Facilities Program (SSFP) for purchase of FGA's Greenvale property .
- 2016-17: FGA received more than \$1,000,000 in grants from the state-funded SSFP and a \$52,183 grant to develop a scoring system for FGA branches.
- 2017-18 state budget: The \$1m SSFP allocation to gun clubs across the state included funding for a Feasibility Study at FGA's Greenvale site, and funding for FGA to run the Shotgunning Education Program designed to improve the accuracy of duck shooters. (That program failed to attract interest among duck shooters, with only 57 participants in the years 2018 and 2019.) FGA also received a government grant to digitise the records of its Hunting Archive.
- 2018-19: FGA received \$115,361 in government grants.
- 2019-20: FGA received \$99,500 in COVID-related assistance (from state/federal governments) and another \$77,516 for projects at the FGA's Greenvale property. FGA will also receive (in the 2020-21 year) an amount of \$224,798 from the state government as a Victorian Community Sports Sector COVID-19 Short-Term Survival Grant.

The West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (WGCMA) website provides further evidence of taxpayer assistance to FGA and its wetland programs:

- The publicly funded WGCMA is a “partner” in the Heart Morass project

- The publicly funded Gippsland Lakes Coordinating Committee has made grants to FGA for its Heart Morass project.

It is surprising that FGA promotes its “conservation” activities without mentioning the considerable taxpayer support it receives.

FOI has disclosed that hunting has been subsidised by taxpayers by more than \$22m since the GMA opened its doors in 2014.

Conservation or gun fodder?

The acid test for FGA’s conservation credentials is whether it would continue this work without being allowed to shoot waterbirds.

It is said that recently, the managers of the Winton Wetlands asked FGA for help to shoot foxes in order to protect native wildlife. FGA refused unless they could also shoot native waterbirds. So the Winton Wetlands management refused to accept FGA’s offer.

Similarly FGA’s true “conservation” intentions were made clear in the Weekly Times (Feb 2021) with their CEO’s comment below:

“the community would lose thousands of hours of F&G volunteers’ time in managing game reserves if duck hunting was banned,”

Most would agree If FGA were true conservationists they would 1. be advocating for a ceasefire themselves given the decline in birds and 2. be happy to continue real conservation work (weed removal, tree planting, bird boxes) irrespective of whether or not they could shoot birds.

It should be noted FGA’s “conservation” credentials were publicly dented in 2009. At the height of the 13-year Millennium drought, FGA’s wetland manager Gary Howard was prosecuted and pleaded guilty to stealing water from the Latrobe River to artificially supply FGA’s Heart Morass wetland, attracting ducks for the opening of the next shooting season. (Gary Howard has since been honoured by appointment to Life Membership of FGA.)

We believe, simply re-diverting taxpayer funds from shooters to conservation groups who don’t insist on shooting to do it (and there are plenty of them), would be a good solution to ecosystem decline. In the future, profits from nature-based tourism will help to pay for any restoration wetlands need as well. RVOTDS sees enormous economic potential from showcasing our unique birdlife and wetlands. Regional businesses are missing out on this growth. When shooters do come they destroy the birdlife in a few weeks and thus deter other tourists for the whole year.

Secrecy

We note the two Committee members who appear most in favour of duck shooting are Ms McArthur and Ms Bath. It is interesting that neither mentioned duck shooting in their maiden speeches which extolled the economic, social and scenic attributes of the regions they represent. (Ms Bath does frequently get the alleged economic figure from duck shooting incorrect however – such as recent Hansard 17/3/21. And Ms McArthur did refer to “country pursuits so important to the region” in her maiden speech. Presumably this euphemism covers duck shooting. But if bird shooting has such popular appeal, why did it not rate a mention?)

In the federal parliament, Senator Bridget McKenzie lost her job for failing to disclose her membership of a rural gun club to which she gave a modest “sports-ports” grant of \$36,000. Federal MPs must disclose not only their personal affiliations that could cause a conflict of interest, but also those of their partners and children.

In Victoria, the parliamentary Register of Interests is a shambles, with hand-scrawled contributions acceptable (so computer searches don’t work) and no reference to potential conflicts arising from other family members. The Victorian leader of the Nationals has never disclosed his membership of FGA, despite being the former Minister responsible for hunting. FGA disclosed Peter Walsh’s membership prior to the 2018 election (scroll right to the end [of this link](#)). MPs such as Ms McArthur and Mr Rich-Phillips have a right to express their support for FGA and duck shooting, but they should on each occasion disclose their own involvement, as they should attempt to hear, be concerned for and reflect the views of, the majority of their constituents as opposed to just their personal hunting club.

The state of our ecosystems relies heavily on MPs’ ethics and accountability.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this response.