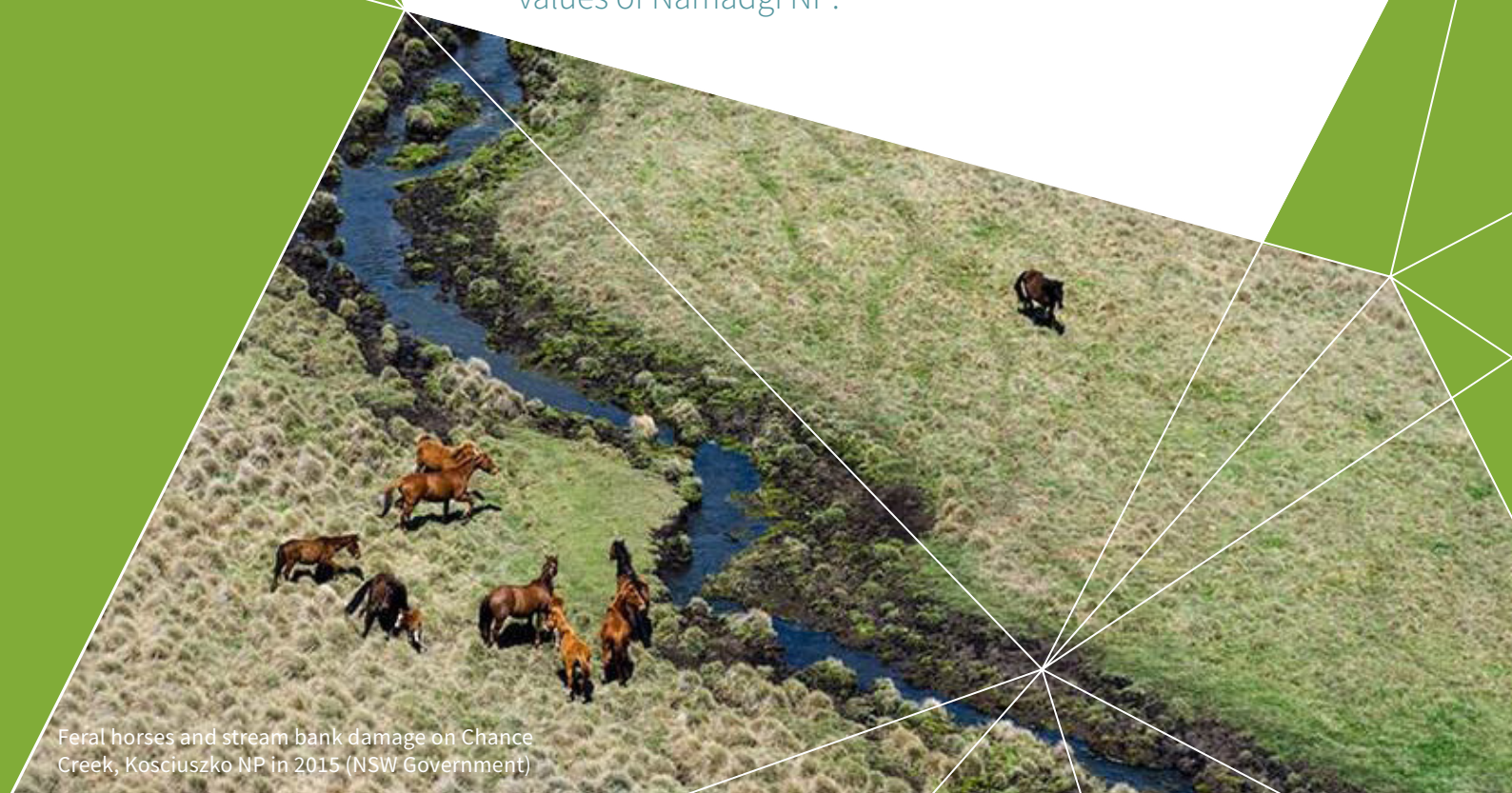
ACT Government

NAMADGI NATIONAL PARK FERAL HORSE MANAGEMENT PLAN 2020

SUMMARY

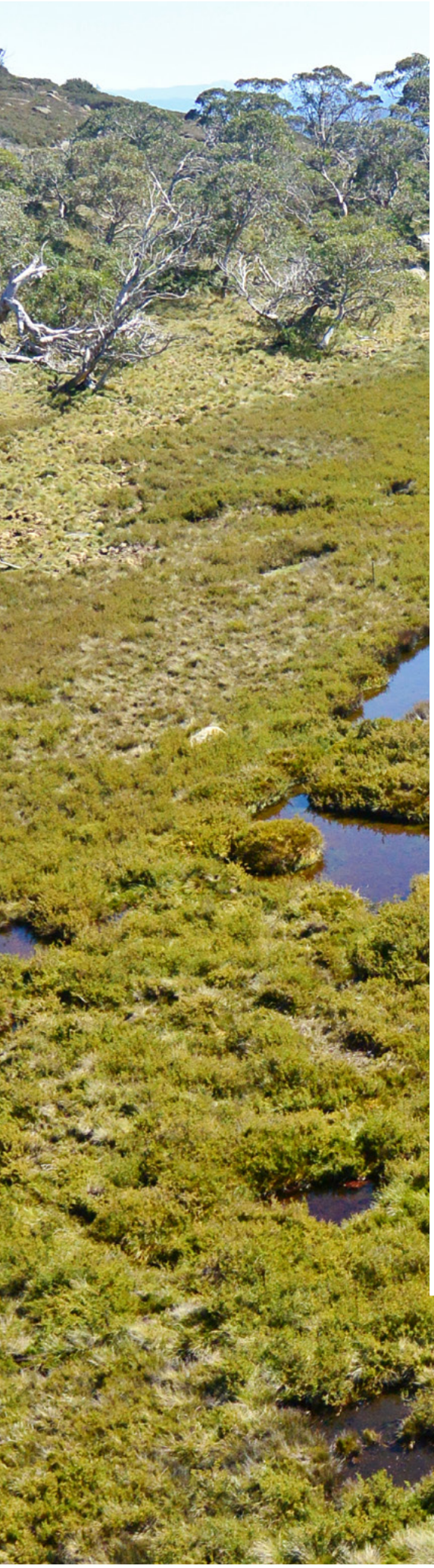
Namadgi National Park (NP) is located at the northern end of the Australian Alps network of national parks, which is recognised for its unique natural and cultural values and is included in Australia's National Heritage list. Namadgi NP contains habitat for several threatened species and threatened ecological communities. It also includes the headwaters of the Cotter River, which provides an important source of water for local communities and contains subalpine wetlands that have regional, national and international significance.

The ACT Government's zero-tolerance policy on feral horses is critical to successfully protect the natural and cultural values of Namadgi NP.



Feral horses and stream bank damage on Chance Creek, Kosciuszko NP in 2015 (NSW Government)

Cotter Source Bog (M Jekabsons)



FERAL HORSES IN THE REGION

Historically, feral horse populations in Namadgi NP have fluctuated in response to natural events and control measures. Previous control activities implemented in Namadgi NP include brumby running, trapping and humane destruction, ground shooting, and barrier fencing. No resident feral horses have been recorded in Namadgi NP since 2011.

Since 2007, there has been a sustained and significant increase in feral horses across the Australian Alps. Surveys undertaken in 2019 estimate the population to be over 25,300. The population of feral horses within the northern area of Kosciuszko, which poses the biggest threat to Namadgi, has grown to over 15,600.

In addition to this plan, control of feral horses in the region is currently undertaken in accordance with the Kosciuszko National Park Horse Management Plan December 2008 (NSW) and the Protection of the Alpine National Park Feral Horse Strategic Action Plan 2018–21 (Victoria).

THE IMPACT OF FERAL HORSES

Horses can cause significant environmental damage primarily via herbivory and the degradation of habitats, including trampling vegetation, contributing to soil erosion and compaction, and impacting the integrity of water bodies. Unsurprisingly, these impacts can have flow-on effects on native wildlife.

Research undertaken within the Australian Alps illustrates the specific impacts feral horses are having on natural, cultural and historical heritage values across the region. These include:

- Degrading water quality and increasing variability in water flow from mountain catchments.
- Reducing the condition of water, vegetation and soil associated with *Sphagnum* bogs (including the EPBC-listed Endangered Alpine *Sphagnum* Bogs and Fens).
- Negatively impacting the condition and richness of subalpine and alpine vegetation across grasslands, heath and woodlands.
- Changes to fauna assemblages, including threatened and vulnerable species such as the Northern Corroboree Frog, Broad-toothed Rat and Alpine Water Skink.
- Direct or indirect impacts to European heritage sites and sites with significance to Aboriginal people.

Horses grazing in a montane fen, Kosciuszko National Park. (NSW Government)

THE THREAT TO NAMADGI NATIONAL PARK

There is significant opportunity for feral horses to expand into many areas of the Australian Alps not currently occupied, including Namadgi NP.

If feral horses do enter the Park, many significant values will be at risk. These include:

- Waterways that play an important role in providing water to local communities.
- Several alpine and subalpine wetlands, many of which have local, national and/or international significance and include Endangered High Country Bogs and Associated Fens (listed under the ACT Nature Conservation Act 2014).
- Montane grasslands, including Critically Endangered Natural Temperate Grasslands (listed under the ACT Nature Conservation Act).
- Threatened species, including more than six flora species and 17 fauna species.
- European heritage sites, archaeological sites and other areas significant to Ngunnawal people. Several heritage sites in Namadgi NP are listed on the ACT Heritage Register.

Broad-toothed Rat (K. Green)

METHODS FOR CONTROL OF FERAL HORSES

Several methods have been implemented across the region to control horses or other feral animals. These include:

- Passive trapping and removal
- Passive trapping and humane destruction on site
- Ground shooting
- Aerial shooting
- Fencing, mustering, and fertility treatments.

Guidelines have been developed to ensure these methods are implemented in a consistent way, according to current best practice. Each method has limitations and may be best suited to specific conditions.

NAMADGI NATIONAL PARK HORSE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The goal of the 2020 Plan is to protect the natural and cultural values of Namadgi NP from the impacts of feral horses.

Several management objectives and strategies have been identified to achieve this goal:

- **Prevent horses from entering and establishing in Namadgi NP** through:
  - strategic surveillance
  - rapidly responding to reported sightings
  - working with NSW authorities and rural landholders
  - erecting and maintaining fences where appropriate.
- **Rapidly eradicate all feral horses entering Namadgi NP** using one of three methods:
  - passive trapping and humane destruction on site
  - aerial shooting
  - ground shooting.

These control strategies have been selected to cause the least amount of pain and suffering to horses, while minimising other risks. Many considerations, including horse population dynamics and local conditions, will be evaluated in determining the most appropriate control method to be applied.

All control activities in Namadgi NP will adhere to recommendations outlined in the Model Code of Practice for the Humane Control of Feral Horses (Sharp & Saunders 2012) and other relevant Standard Operation Procedures.

- **Maintain ongoing community support** for ensuring Namadgi NP remains free of feral horses.

MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT OF FERAL HORSE MANAGEMENT IN NAMADGI NP

As Namadgi NP is currently free of horses, the priority monitoring activity is surveillance of the western border of the Park. If feral horses do become established in Namadgi NP, a monitoring, assessment and eradication program will be developed. This program will include monitoring before, during and after the operational phase of any control activity. It will track changes in the number and distribution of horses and their impacts. It will also evaluate the outcome of control operations, including animal welfare and the recovery of sensitive sites.

REFERENCES

Sharp, T. & Saunders, G. 2004. Model Code of Practice for the Humane Control of Feral Horses. NSW Department of Primary Industries, Orange.

Tussock grassland