KEYNOTE SPEECH

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There is no question that urgent action is needed to substantially reduce feral horse numbers in Australia's alpine national parks. This is because we know unequivocally that:

1. The natural values—whether soil, water or nature conservation values—are the primary values of the network of parks in the Australian Alps (the Alps). These values are world-renowned. Governments have responsibilities under both state and federal legislation to protect these natural values.
2. Feral horses, like all ungulates, damage the natural values of the alpine national parks, in ecosystems that are very fragile and slow to recover from damage.
3. Feral horses in the Alps are abundant (over 6,000 in 2014), their numbers are increasing year on year (expected 20% increase per annum at range boundaries), and their range is expanding.
4. Failure to reduce numbers now will lead, in the near future, to substantially more damage to natural values, greater management costs and poor animal welfare outcomes.

Instead of rapid action to reduce numbers, we have the bizarre situation in NSW where feral horses have been protected under 'Wild Horse Heritage Legislation'. In Victoria, we have had calls from the pro-brumby lobby for the maintenance of a 'sustainable population' of horses on the Bogong High Plains. Propositions such as these have no basis in science, undermine statutory plans of management and threaten National Heritage values. However, they have popular appeal, traction and, now, in the case of NSW, are backed by legislation.

So, we may ask ourselves, how did we get here? We can perhaps explore that question by looking at the way the issue of feral horses in the Alps has been differentially framed: the story as told by science on the one hand, and the stories of the pro-brumby lobby on the other. Science has told its story on the basis of evidence, rationality, history and authority: livestock and the Alps do not mix. The pro-brumby lobby have told a different story—one of the companions to the heroic settler, the free-range iconic animal.

We know a lot about the impacts of livestock on alpine environments because of the best part of a century's worth of science devoted to the issue. Large, hard-hoofed, non-native animals (ungulates) are entirely foreign to Australia's alpine environments; they easily disturb alpine ecosystems. Like sheep and cattle, feral horses are free-range. They graze selectively, in preferred communities on preferred plants. They leave considerable evidence of their activities—dung, tracks, dust baths, damaged streams. Their impacts are especially acute in alpine wetlands and short herbfields. The evidence for these impacts is compelling and well-documented.

The brumby lobby has framed their story very differently, combining the legacy of the heroic settler and the romance of the hard-working, now free-running, animal. This has proved to be a very effective marketing strategy, based primarily on emotion, as it was for the mountain cattlemen before them. The emotional hooks of the story are strong—Banjo, the Light Horse, free-running animals, passionate devotion to animal liberation and welfare. Framed thus, scientific evidence is irrelevant.

Feral horse, Lower Snowy, October 2018.
Source: Richard Swain.

And so we need a counteracting story. This is the rationale for this Conference and ensuing action. One that is, of course, evidence-based, authoritative and compelling, but is also emotionally engaging. One that sells the beauty of the Alps, and contrasts this with the damage done by the beast, and—importantly—the damage the beast will do to itself if there is no action to control numbers. Our story must also be a story of passion and devotion: why we have invested time and energy in gathering quality evidence; the legitimacy of science; and how it helps us know what we stand to lose if feral horses and other alien species are not controlled.

And so, a few ideas:

Science can, and should, be activist. Alec Costin took on the alpine grazing industry in the Kosciuszko area in the 1950s and 1960s and, with the help of the Australian Academy of Science, won.

Terminology is vital—these animals are *feral* horses. We should never refer to them as 'wild horses' or 'brumbies'. Science has a duty to call out nonsense terms and ideas.

Hold governments and agencies to account. The governments of NSW, the ACT, Victoria and past federal governments have set strong precedents, based on sound scientific evidence, for protecting the natural values of Australia's alpine parks by banning livestock grazing. The conservation gains that thus ensued are already being eroded and will continue to worsen if feral horse numbers are not reduced drastically in the very near future.

Follow the money. Plans to accommodate feral horses in today's alpine parks will not only threaten natural values, but will come at a considerable cost to the public purse. We need to start controlling horses now so that we can also deal with another emerging and rapidly growing threat to the Alps—feral deer.

Include art in the framing of science. The environmental history of the Alps is a cracker story. The creation of the Kosciuszko National Park is a ripping, gripping yarn—just ask Alec Costin, who is here with us today! We have a veritable gallery of images thanks to artists like Colin Totterdell. The men and women who have told the rich scientific story of the Alps should be celebrated. These are all compelling emotional hooks and should be used to build a social licence to act.

The Alps are not one long horse paddock, the plaything of a loud, single-interest group. They are part of Australia's exceptional network of protected areas. The natural and scientific values are their defining values—values for all Australians. The Alps are to be cherished as a small cold and wet island with unique natural heritage values in an otherwise vast, hot, dry continent, and should be managed to protect such values.