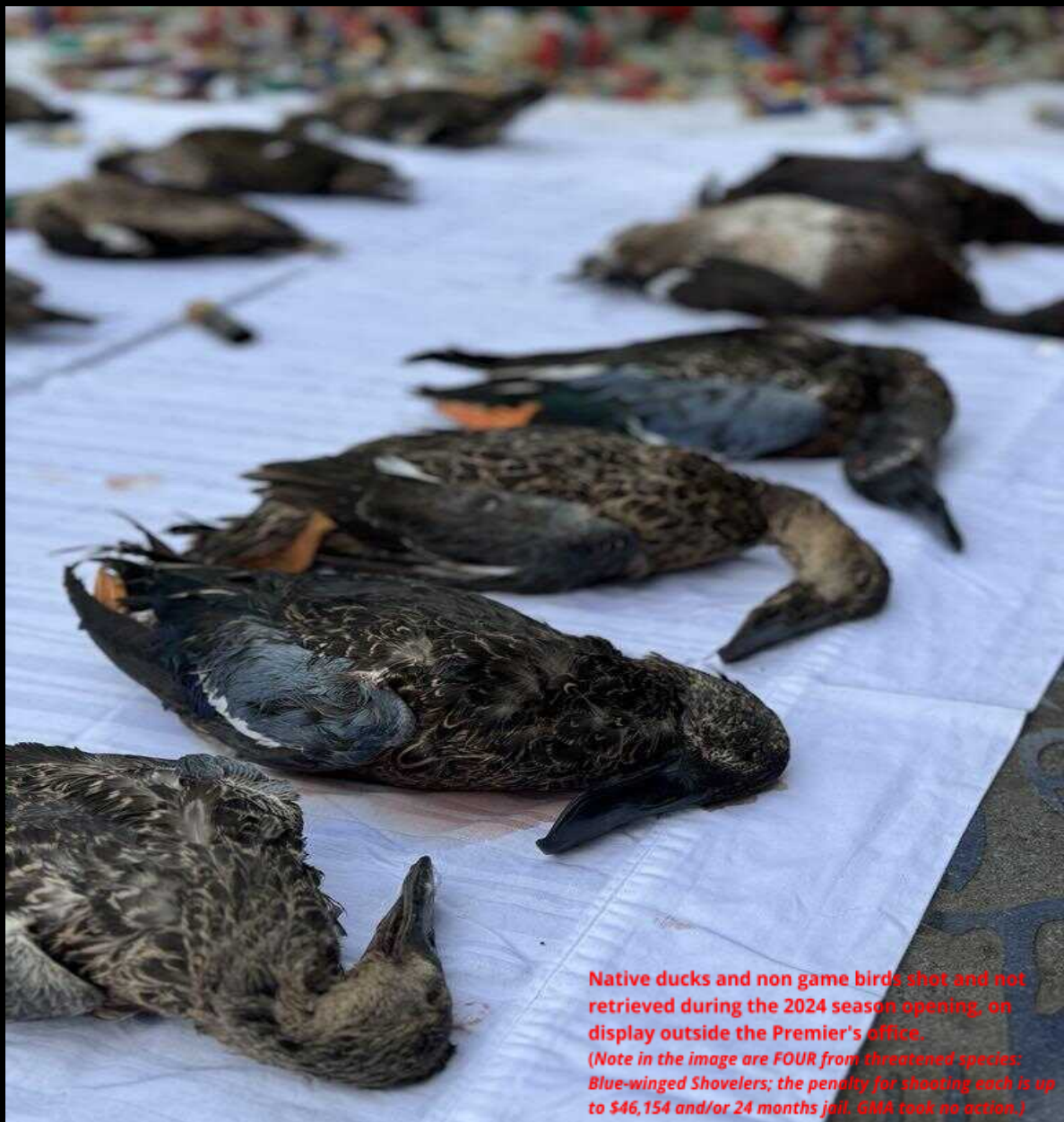




2024 Duck Season Compliance:

Duck Shooter Offences ignored by GMA

A Summary Report from Geelong Duck Rescue



Contents	Page
Acknowledgements	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
1. Introduction	4
1.1 Role of Duck Rescuers	4
1.2 Role of the Game Management Authority (GMA)	4
1.3 Purpose of this report	5
1.4 Previous Concerns about GMA	5
2. Methodology	6
3. Results	8
3.1 A widespread problem	8
3.2 Statistics from our survey	11
3.3 Scaling up	13
4. Discussion	15
4.1 Persistent concerns since Pegasus	15
4.2 Inquiry into Recreational Native Bird Hunting	16
4.3 GMA's selective enforcement of legislation	17
4.4 Disproportionate fines	18
4.5 Common duck shooter offences the GMA should police	19
4.6 Impact of environmental breaches	21
4.7 Identifying shooters and holding them responsible	22
4.8 Shooting on Closed and Protected Lakes	23
4.9 Impact on Wildlife and Visitors	23
4.10 Public Safety and Adequate Warning Signs	23
4.11 Protected Wetlands and the Legal Framework	24
4.12 GMA's environmental advice to hunters	25
4.13 Retaining Rescuers	26
4.14 A political promise - 2022	27
4.15 A common myth about State Game Reserves	27
4.16 Nothing to see here?	28
5. Conclusion and Call for Action	28
Disclaimer	31
Appendices	32
Illegal Shooter Activity Report Form 2024	32
Individual Shooters' Camp Reports	

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters on which we live and work, and we pay our respects to their Elders past and present. Victorian Traditional Owners maintain that their sovereignty has never been ceded, and Aboriginal Victorians have long called for a treaty.

We recognise and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, valuing their unique ability to care for Country and their deep spiritual connection to it. We honour their knowledge and wisdom, which has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We also acknowledge their distress at the ongoing destruction and pollution of significant cultural heritage, as well as the ignorance and disrespect towards the lands and waters.

This report aims to contribute to positive change but also to show that the manner in which we treat the environment and wildlife is crucial for fostering a better future.



Image 2: Aboriginal scar tree in natural state at Lake Yando; many others have been desecrated.

Source: Paul Haw (Custodian of Yung Balug Museum, Boort)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite claims from shooters about their proud environmental stewardship, the evidence in this report, which has been collected by volunteers from around 20 wetlands and 129 locations (including 107 shooters' camps), says otherwise. It consistently reveals a different reality about the illegal environmental practices of duck shooters and the failure of the Game Management Authority (GMA) to accept the environmental mandate in its governing legislation.

Gross violations of environmental laws were found in 91 per cent of campsites, with the mean number of violations being three per campsite. The most common and repugnant breach was unburied toilet waste: soiled toilet paper and human faeces. The most dangerous was the failure to extinguish campfires. Common breaches of distance requirements meant that campsites and toilets were too close to the water shoreline, risking contamination of the water body. Illegal removal of timber for firewood was commonplace. Offences against Indigenous heritage and scar trees should have imposed the most serious fines.

We estimate that many millions of revenue dollars have been lost each year due to the failure to monitor and enforce compliance with environmental rules at wetlands.

The data underpinning this report was collected by duck rescuers and wildlife volunteers during the 2024 duck shooting season. The selection of the 20 wetlands for study was made on the basis that they were some of the more popular wetlands, where GMA was regularly present. The evidence of destruction and disregard for the law revealed patterns of behaviour by shooters during the duck shooting season, which starkly contrast with the season's compliance report released by GMA. Our evidence demonstrates that the illegal practices are not isolated incidents but rather a *widespread*, collective problem that demands urgent attention.

This season highlighted double standards employed by the GMA, turning a "blind eye" to hunter behaviours yet targeting and harassing rescuers. The GMA's efforts appeared to centre around chasing volunteer wildlife rescuers and issuing specious fines and Banning Notices, with little time or attention being given to monitoring the actions of those out on the wetland with guns shooting ducks.

We question the intent and ability of the GMA to monitor duck shooting seasons effectively. Following the stern warnings of the 2017 Pegasus Economics report on the GMA, the 2013 dissolution of a similar game regulator in NSW, the findings of a recent Parliamentary Inquiry, and the clear bias and lack of environmental concern displayed by GMA in the 2024 duck shooting season, we respectfully call for an urgent independent review of the GMA.

We also call for the Victorian government to reconsider its decision to continue duck shooting, based on the findings of this report and the issues we highlight (refer in particular to our section 5 below).

1 Introduction

1.1 Role of wildlife rescuers

The recreational shooting of native waterbirds has long been a contentious issue in Victoria. With the activity outlawed across two-thirds of Australia - in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and the A.C.T. - Victoria has become a battleground between wildlife rescuers intent on saving the lives of wounded waterbirds who are the inevitable victims of the recreational duck shooting season, and duck shooters who all claim to be law-abiding except for the 'few' rogues. By providing concrete evidence of illegal shooter activity, duck rescuers highlight the lack of effective regulation of this annual slaughter.

Every year we display the lifeless bodies of native waterbirds outside the Premier's office; each bird has been shot then abandoned illegally. But this report explores the shooters' conduct around campsites and for the first time, we document their environmental breaches.

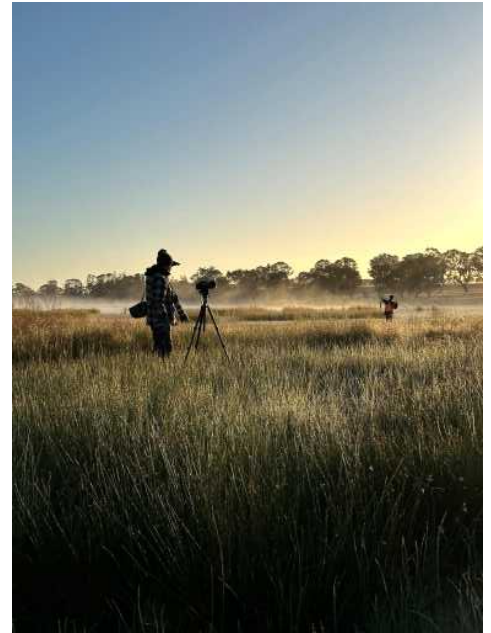


Image 3: Wildlife photographer and wildlife rescuer at Lake Yallakar.

1.2 Role of the Game Management Authority (GMA)

The Game Management Authority (GMA) is the body authorised to conduct compliance monitoring (with occasional help from others such as DEECA and Vic Pol). Despite their conflicted role of both promoting and monitoring shooting, GMA claims it can effectively cover sufficient wetlands and conduct enough compliance checks to detect and deter serious wrongdoing. However, with approximately 20,000 wetlands and a limited number of officers, there are serious questions about its ability to do so. Also, anecdotal reports suggest shooters know they are "safe" from compliance action for the remainder of the day, once a GMA patrol has visited and left the wetland.

The GMA Act 2014 imposes a number of environmental obligations on GMA that are relevant to this report, including:

- *to promote sustainability and responsibility in game hunting in Victoria (s5(a));*
- *to promote and monitor compliance with ... any relevant law in relation to game hunting (s6(c));*
- *to investigate compliance with ... any relevant law in relation to game hunting s6(d);*
- *to develop operational plans and procedures addressing the conservation of wildlife habitats (s6(e)(iv));*

- to work with public land managers to improve the management of public land and facilities on public land where hunting is permitted (s6(f));
- to monitor, conduct research and analyse the environmental, social and economic impacts of game hunting and game management (s6(h)); and
- to make recommendations to relevant Ministers in relation to ... the management of public and private land as it relates to game and their habitat (s6(i)(iv)).

1.3 Purpose of this Report

This report aims to highlight the environmental impact caused by duck shooters camping at wetlands and their flagrant disregard for laws protecting the wetland ecosystems. In addition, it highlights the discrepancies in compliance management, reporting and follow-up, and the bias and double standards of the GMA.

In the five years ending in 2022-23, [GMA issued](#) an average of 3.6 Banning Notices (orders to leave the wetlands) each year. But in 2023-24, GMA issued 22 such notices to duck rescuers - an increase of 500%. Given that rescuers had not changed their approach, this indicates a considerable change in GMA policy which we believe deserves investigation.

1.4 Previous concerns about GMA

In 2017 the GMA engaged [Pegasus Economics to review their capacity and capability](#) to perform their compliance and enforcement duties. The results were damning:

“The GMA's inability to ensure compliance with the hunting laws has seriously undermined its credibility as an independent and effective regulator and raises questions about the integrity and sustainability of the regulatory regime.” (Page v)

Further:

“... the game hunting laws are widely perceived by internal and external stakeholders to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to effectively enforce in the field. As a small statutory body, the GMA is vulnerable to capture by the interests that it is seeking to regulate.... The GMA is not currently perceived by all of its stakeholders as independent or impartial in its administration of the game hunting laws.” (Page v)

Subsequent actions by government and GMA are discussed below in 4.1.

2 Methodology

When rescuers became aware of the scope of the environmental destruction by shooters and GMA officers' lack of attention to reports of this behaviour this season, they formulated a plan to try and determine and document the extent of the destruction and the actions taken to address the issue across the areas of 20 wetlands, including the ones which are known to be significant sites of cultural importance to First Nations people. A further factor was that these areas were identified as having a more regular GMA presence, therefore compliance actions could, and should, be regularly undertaken.

During the 2024 season, volunteers visited these 20 popular duck-shooting wetlands, documenting shooters' camp locations, their toilet sites (e.g. Image 5), their litter and their campfires, and measuring distances to see if they complied with prescribed rules.

Much of this work was undertaken on weekdays once shooters had left their camps. Our survey was continuous, taking place during every week of the season. Care was taken to determine if the offences appeared to be recent. (We note that the GMA's 2016 [audit of State Game Reserves](#) reported firewood had been illegally cut, but the implication was that this had been done by non-hunters.)

Rescuers had a volunteer at the surveyed wetlands full time for the entire season. No visitors to the area were observed except duck shooters, rescuers, authorised officers and 1 local resident and his family. Whilst at other times of year, campsites could potentially be attributed to other hunters, fishers, bird watchers or non-hunting campers, this is unlikely during the duck shooting season due to the noise and disruption caused by gunfire.



Image 4: Environmental disregard at its best. A whole tree cut down for firewood at Woolshed Swamp.



Image 5: A common sight during duck shooting season. Unburied human faeces less than 10m from the water at Lake Lyndger.

Additionally, many of the campsites were reported to contain one or more of the following: an area of plucked feathers from shot ducks, an area where duck body parts and entrails were buried or left behind, shotgun shells and wadding and/or an area where holes had been dug of the size usual for bird parts , but left open and empty, presumably due to low bird numbers and an unsuccessful shoot. (See images below)



Image 6: Discarded body parts of non-buried bird at Lake Boort. An offence which the GMA seems to ignore while checking shooters' licences.



Image 7: Wildlife Photographer collecting evidence at Lake Dollanoke. The Victorian wetlands are covered with shotgun shells and wadding.



Image 8: Plucked feathers from shot ducks at Lake Yallakar. This is what wildlife enthusiasts and bird watchers are confronted with when setting foot onto wetlands after the duck shooting season finishes.

In all, 107 shooters' camps were visited , and a total of 129 locations were inspected, including campsites, timber-felling sites and toilet sites. The data presented in this report is aggregated for the purposes of clearly demonstrating our findings, however individual records for each campsite and location have been maintained and are attached in the Appendix of this report.

It is important to bear in mind that our data is an under-estimate of shooter offences because we did not know the number of shooters at each camp, or the number of times that campsite was re-used by shooting parties during the season. Hence we have very conservatively assumed only one shooter at each campsite and only one use for the campsite. (In some cases we noted up to eight shooters per campsite.) It is important to note that each shooter associated with an offending campsite or toilet site is guilty of the offence.

3 Results

3.1 A widespread problem

The evidence showed that over 90 percent (Fig. 1) of shooters' camps were in breach of environmental laws. Relevant laws include the *Wildlife (State Game Reserves) Act 2014* and the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*.

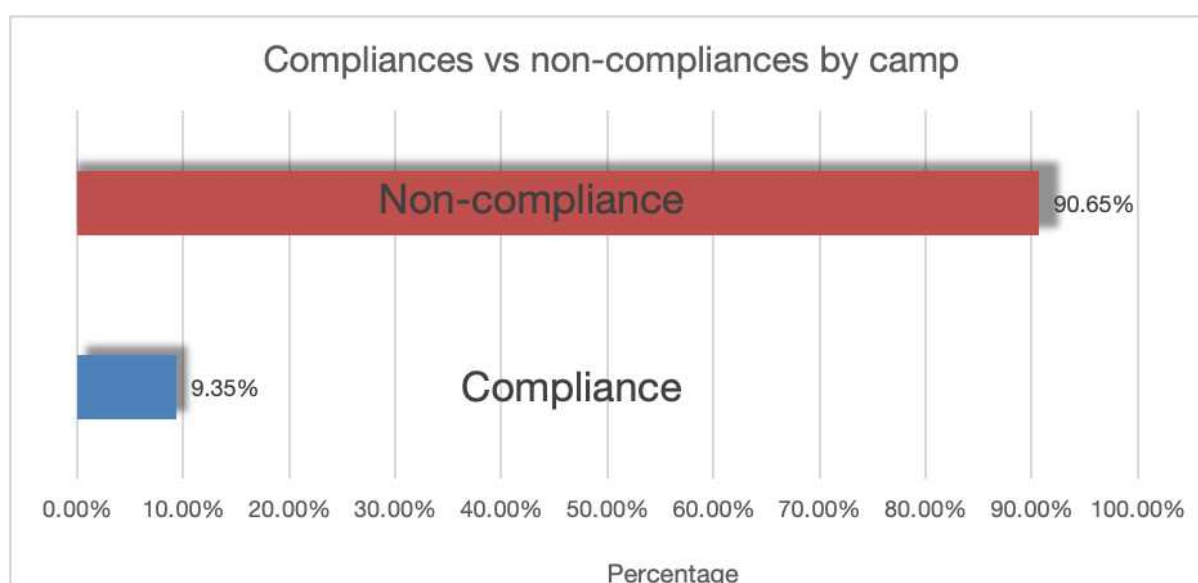


Fig.1: Overview of extent of non compliance.

The most common (Fig. 2) offences were:

- Camping too close to the water (less than the prescribed 20m) - 10 penalty units)
- Toilets too close to the water (less than the prescribed 50m) - 10 penalty units
- Failure to dispose of human faeces in prescribed manner - 10 penalty units
- Littering - 10 penalty units
- Taking firewood illegally - 10 penalty units
- Campfire offences - 15 penalty units
- Destroying Scar Trees (of Indigenous significance) - range of 600 -1,800 penalty units for an individual; up to 10,000 penalty units for a body corporate (s27, *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*)

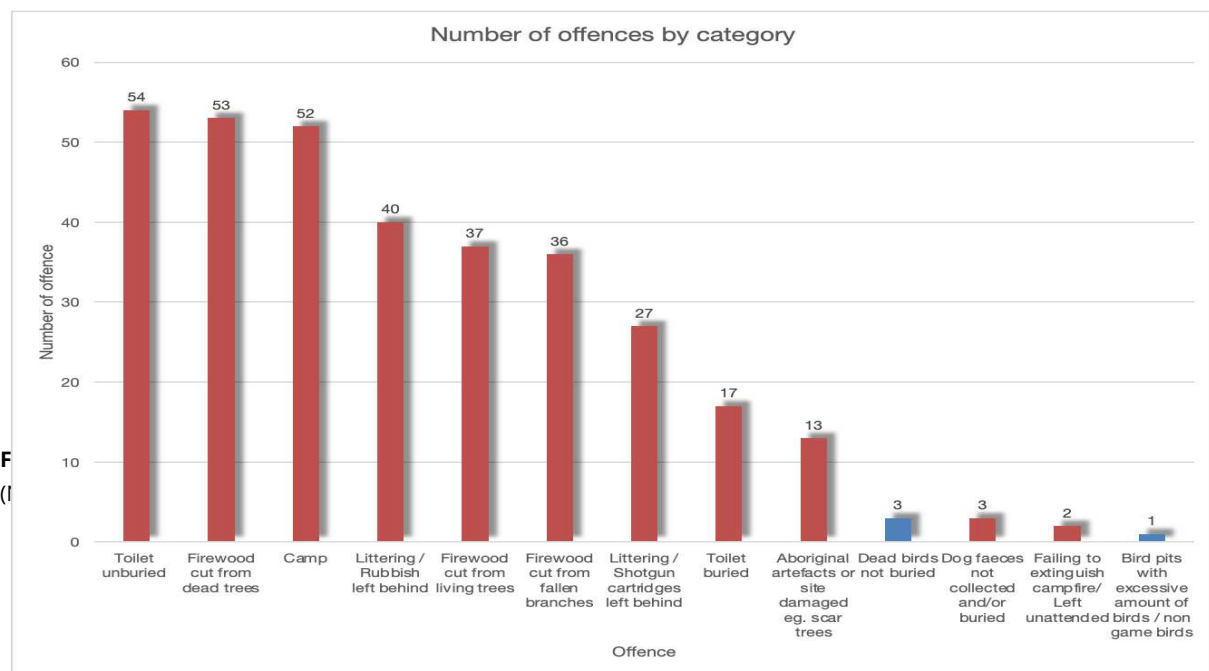


Fig. 2: Shooter offences observed in this survey - 2024 duck shooting season

Columns in blue relate to hunting offences: Abandoned game birds - 20 penalty units (s 54 of *Wildlife (Game) Interim Regulations 2023*) /Protected species - see 4.3 below.

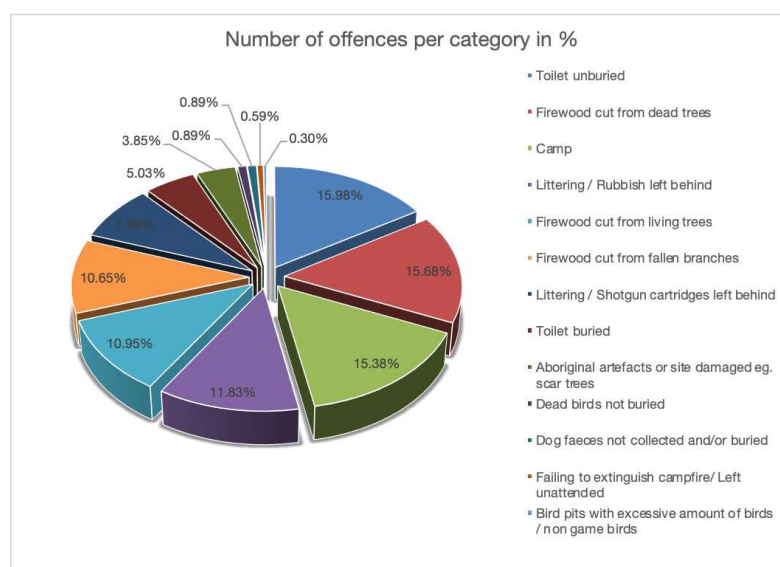


Fig. 2.1: Shooter offences in per cent by category.

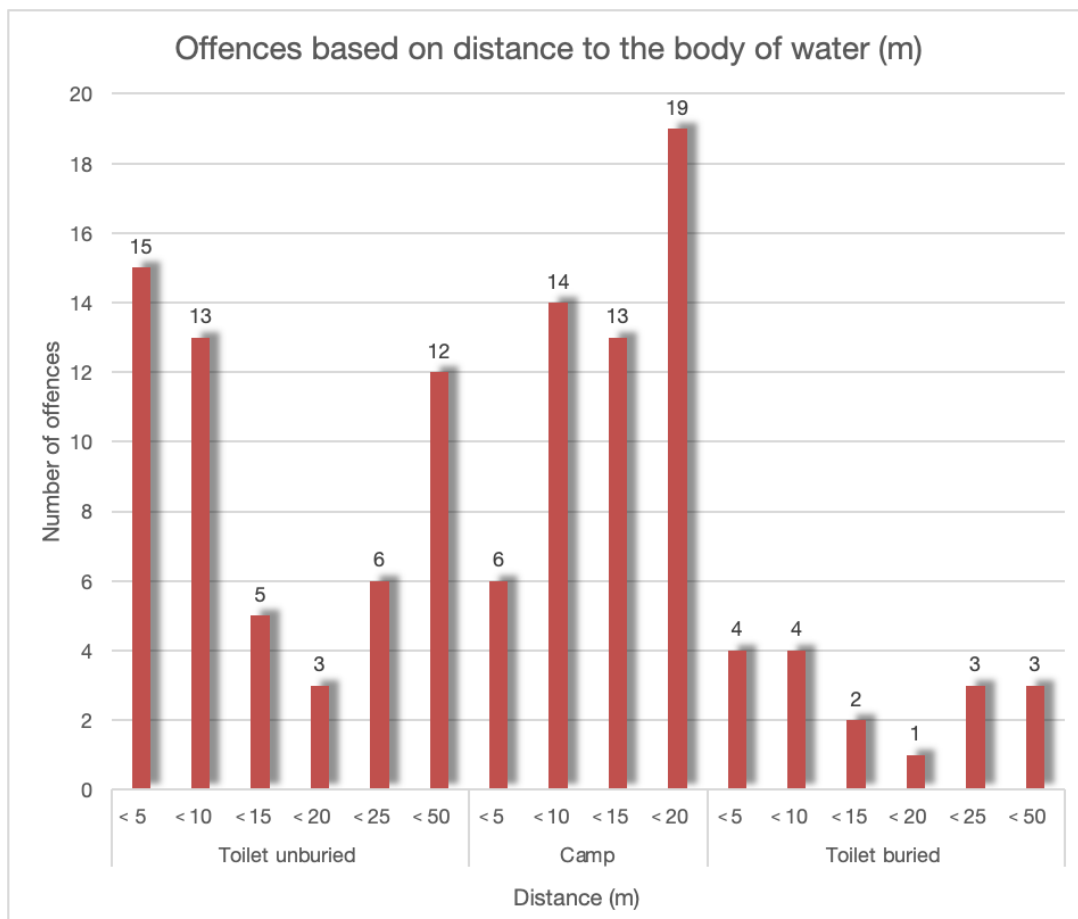


Fig. 3: Shooters offences based on distance to the body of water.



Image 9 and 10: A sacred scar tree desecrated with human faeces and toilet paper at Lake Yando.



Image 11: This semi-buried toilet at Lake Lyndger is less than 5m away from the water body, just one example of far too many.

3.2 Statistics from our sample survey

- 97 camps from a total of 107 campsites (91 per cent) did not comply with the law (Fig.1) . This is a conservative figure as it does not include the number of offences outside of a camp e.g. if a tree had been cut nearby, but we were unable to associate it with the closest camp.
- 25 camps committed a minimum of 1 offence (Fig.4).
- 72 camps committed 2 or more offences (Fig.4).
- Shockingly, 27 camps had 4 or more offences (Fig.4).

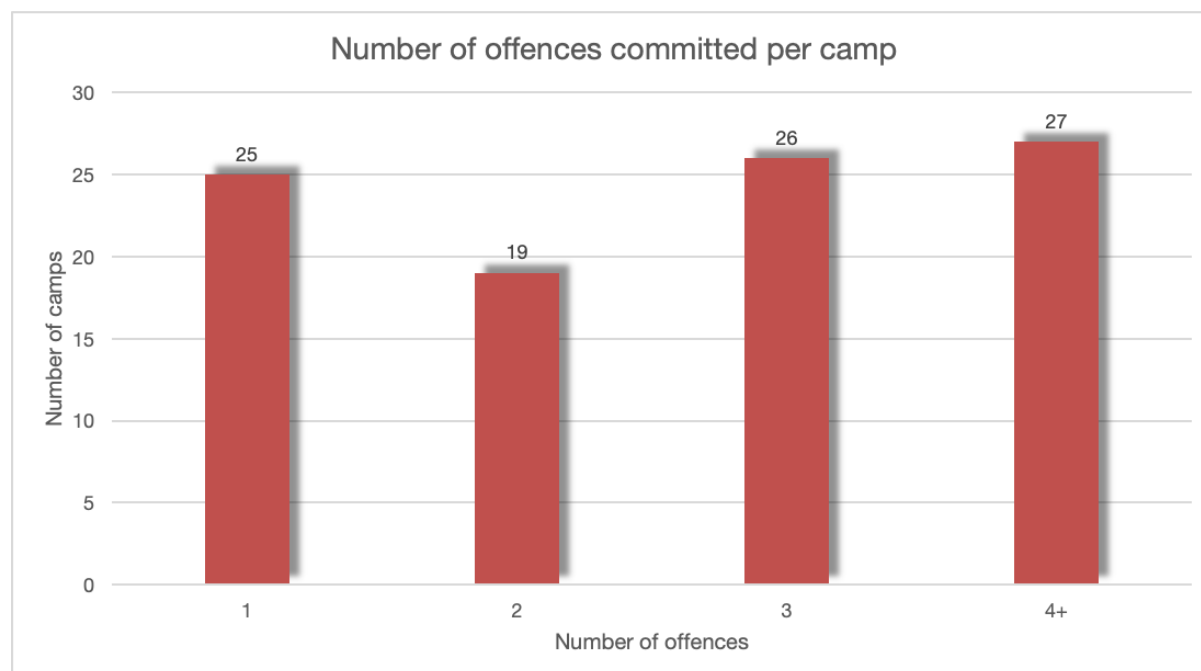


Fig. 4: Number of offences committed per camp.

- At least 64 living trees showed recent evidence that they had been either cut down, broken or had branches cut off for firewood/kindling.
- At least 90 dead trees were either fully or partly cut down for firewood.
- At least 11 scar trees were damaged for firewood and 2 scar trees were found with human faeces and toilet paper around them. But in reality the number of scar tree offences is likely much higher, as many wildlife rescuers have not yet received training to identify scar trees, cooking mounds or burial sites etc.

For all the offences identified, the total penalty units would conservatively add to 11,000 potential penalty units (at the time of these offences, 1 penalty unit = \$192.32) which represents a potential lost revenue of more than two million dollars. (Fig.5)

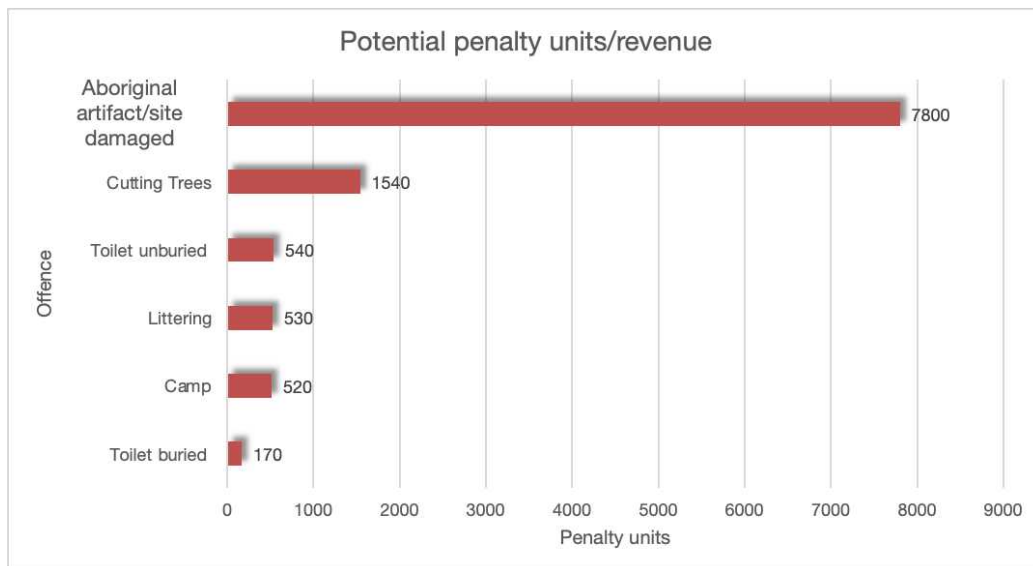


Fig. 5: Potential penalty units and revenue.

The above is a clear under-estimate because camps are re-used by subsequent parties of shooters during the season. If the camp is in an illegal location, it will be a breach for every shooter who subsequently uses it. GMA data suggests that on average, a duck shooter spends 4 days at the wetlands, consistent with 1-2 shooting trips.

These findings are in stark contrast to GMA's vindictive targeting of rescuers. GMA's time-consuming and biased focus on rescuers in 2024 resulted in claims that there were only 26 offences committed by shooters whilst GMA issued rescuers with 22 Banning Notices and a potential 22 infringements at \$1154 for each fine. GMA's compliance results clearly don't reflect the reality of actual non-compliance with the law.

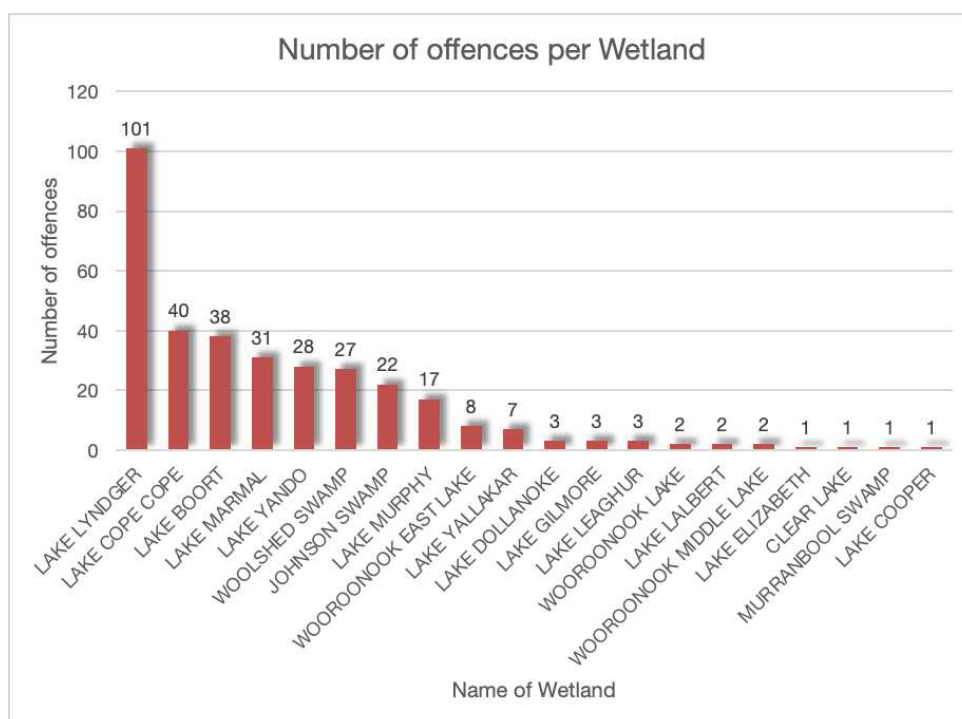


Fig. 6: Number of offences committed per Wetland.

3.3 Scaling up

This report is a sample from the 2024 recreational duck shooting season. The reality is that there is an unknown number of locations where duck shooting is permitted; estimates from authorities place it at 20,000 locations and the recent Inquiry confirmed that duck shooting is permitted on public land covering one-seventh of the state's total area. In addition, according to GMA's harvest reports, most ducks are shot on private land. Victoria has 200 State Game Reserves and a further 41 Specified Hunting Areas (SHAs) which are the most popular public sites for duck shooters.

In 2023, GMA reported that an estimated 14,118 duck shooters took part in the season. It is generally understood that the majority camp out. Licensed duck shooters across these thousands of locations are monitored by GMA's team of authorised officers. According to a 2024 pre-season radio interview with Graeme Ford (GMA's CEO), the team swells to 130, with seconded officers from other organisations for the first five days of shooting; the team then juggles monitoring duck shooter compliance with other compliance activities for the remainder of the season. Some of the additional recruitment comes from Parks Victoria, an environmental agency.

Considering the extent of offences detected by rescuers and ignored by compliance officers at this handful of locations, the question remains, what is happening and going undetected across the remainder of the state?

According to the data collected, 91 per cent of camps had one or more offences. The penalty applies to each individual at the offending camp. Taking a conservative estimate that 75 percent of active duck shooters camped out at SGRs and SHAs last year, only considering the "cheaper" penalty rate of 10 units, and using the average number of offences (2.6) per camp, it is clear that almost \$50m of potential revenue has been lost due to non-enforcement of penalties for these widespread environmental offences. But this is not simply a revenue issue; it's an issue of public health and environmental damage.



Image 12: Another senseless kill. Grey Teal shot and not retrieved by duck shooter, found by rescuer at Lake Marmal. One of far too many.

Case study: Estimate of Revenue Lost from non-enforcement of shooters' environment offences

Number of active duck shooters (*based on 2023 season*): 14,118

One penalty unit in 2023-24: \$192.31

Assume:

- At least 75% of active duck shooters (10589) camped at SGRs and SHA's.
- 91 per cent of camps were non-complying (*as found in this survey*).
- Minimum of 10 penalty units per offence (*an under-estimate to simplify the calculation*)
- Average of 2.6 offences per campsite/shooter (*this is an under-estimate; camps with >4 offences were rounded to 4 offences*)

Estimate of lost revenue in 2024 season:

10,589 (75% of active duck shooters) x .91 (Non-compliance of camps) x 10 (minimum penalty units) x 2.6 (average offences per camp) x \$192.31 (1 penalty unit) = **\$48m**



Image 13: A shooter caught acting illegally by a wildlife rescuer. The GMA has all the evidence. After countless inquiries we haven't received any information as to whether the offender was fined.



Image 13.1: "Nothing to see here". This shooter believed it is legal to cut trees and had no clue what a scar tree is.

4 Discussion

4.1 Persistent concerns since Pegasus

In 1.4 we noted the damning assessment of GMA's capabilities, according to the 2017 report by Pegasus Economics. The report found that:

“Non-compliant behaviours and unsanctioned breaches of the game hunting laws are widespread and commonplace”. (Page vii)

“The GMA's current position exposes the Minister and the Board to considerable policy and regulatory risk and if not addressed will contribute to continued non-compliance with the game hunting laws and the erosion of the hunting community's social licence.” (Page vi)

Seven years later, the widespread environmental breaches documented by our survey further suggest that duck shooters' behaviour is not consistent with community standards. Critically, the key recommendation from Pegasus - to strip GMA of its regulatory functions and confine it to an advisory and promotional role - was rejected by the Andrews government as a state election approached. Instead, the GMA's budget was boosted, which enabled it to expand its field of influence through controversial new surveys and research projects supposedly ensuring “sustainability”. GMA has not addressed its environmental responsibilities (outlined in 1.2 above).

The GMA has reported on its progress in responding to other Pegasus recommendations. In 2022 it claimed to have implemented the recommendation that it *“review the priority it attaches in its compliance and enforcement activities to protestor management.”* Its ACTION TAKEN states: *“Victoria Police is the lead agency to manage protestor compliance activities. Victoria Police has committed to being more active in protestor compliance, allowing the GMA and its partner regulatory agencies to focus on hunter compliance.”*

However, this contradicts rescuers' observations, experiences and the statistics of the 2024 season. The only times Victoria Police were on site to *“manage protestor compliance activities”* was on the opening weekend at Johnson Swamp and on 3 occasions in Geelong. During the rest of the season rescuers didn't see the police at all. On the contrary, the GMA officers were disproportionately focused on monitoring and pursuing rescuers this season, instead of focusing on the offences of the duck shooters; countless examples of this were witnessed by the rescuers throughout the entire season.

4.2 Inquiry into Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements

In 2023 the government initiated a Parliamentary Inquiry into native bird hunting in Victoria, which resulted in 8 recommendations. The first and most important recommendation was a ban on the recreational shooting of native waterbirds and native quail, which the Premier rejected. There were also 17 significant findings to which the government has not responded. For example:

FINDING 11: *The majority of the Game Management Authority's compliance and enforcement resources are deployed ensuring public safety at a limited number of locations where hunters and rescuers are both in attendance. This comes at the expense of the Game Management Authority's other compliance priorities including ensuring sustainable hunting, the humane treatment of game animals and minimising impacts on non-game and protected species.*

FINDING 12: *Victoria's land available for recreational native bird hunting is geographically vast and dispersed. This makes it improbable for the Game Management Authority to enforce compliance with hunting regulations with the resources they have.*

The Inquiry was exhaustive, involving extensive research and public consultations. Hunters claimed they were conservationists who looked after the environment, and much was made of two privately owned wetlands rehabilitated by hunting group Field & Game Australia (FGA). However an answer to a Question on Notice revealed those wetlands were largely funded by taxpayers (through VicRoads offsets and other grants) and a philanthropic trust.¹

The results of our survey suggest that most duck shooters have little regard for the environment or the law, and in most cases the GMA fails to enforce the law among shooters. This confirms the Inquiry's comments about the impossibility of adequately enforcing the law at so many thousands of shooting sites around the state. It also confirms the Pegasus' concerns that the GMA is conflicted and at risk of being "captured" by hunters.

The Inquiry also detailed the adverse effects of duck shooting on native waterbird populations and broader ecosystems. Species at risk include various species of ducks and other waterfowl that have been declining in number due to habitat loss, while facing additional pressure from hunting.

1

https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/49c45a/contentassets/6a021b71ad4c42e8bd354b277560faf7/reply-qon_4.-attach2-finances-for-fgas-environmental-projects.pdf

The Inquiry's recommendation to ban native bird hunting was *"driven by the considerable environmental evidence of long-term decline in native bird populations, and a worsening outlook as our climate continues to change."* The Committee was also *"acutely aware of the animal welfare issues associated with native bird hunting, as well as the amenity loss of large areas of public land to the overwhelming majority of the Victorian public during the hunting season."*

Despite this comprehensive and costly Parliamentary Inquiry, which generated the highest-ever number of public submissions to an Inquiry, Premier Jacinta Allan made a 'captain's call' to proceed with another duck and quail hunting season in 2024.

Premier Allan's choice to ignore these expert recommendations has sparked widespread outrage and raised critical questions about government priorities and commitment to environmental protection.

Many see the continuation of duck hunting as a waste of taxpayers' money and time. This controversy has resulted in there being greater than usual attention, interest and scrutiny around the 2024 duck and quail seasons. There is ongoing pressure on the Allan Government to justify its decision to ignore the Inquiry, and to demonstrate that the issues of shooter non-compliance, environmental damage and waterbird decline can be "managed". However it appears that the main "management" activity that GMA's authorised officers undertook was to focus on curtailing the activities of rescuers who document and provide evidence of shooters committing offences; the officers ignored shooter offences being committed around them.

4.3 GMA's selective enforcement of legislation

In 2024, GMA issued 22 Banning Notices against rescuers, most of whom also received fines of \$1,154. Some of these notices were for a so-called "public safety" offence, namely being closer than 25m to the water shoreline. But shooters rarely operate so far from the water, so the "public safety" argument is merely a ruse to keep rescuers away from the wetland.

However, many shooters committed a similar offence, namely camping within 20m of the water, often for days at a time, without being banned, fined or even cautioned by GMA officers. The camping distance rule appears to be for protection of water quality and delicate shoreline vegetation. The differential enforcement of these offences seems to indicate a bias in GMA enforcement policy.

There is no transparency re the personal hunting/shooting involvement of authorised officers or GMA management. There is an obvious conflict of interest if a duck-shooting officer approaches a duck rescuer. The excessive aggression and intimidation shown to rescuers this year seemed a vindictive approach at the hands of particular GMA officers.

In relation to Findings 11 and 12 from the Parliamentary Inquiry (see 4.2 above), duck rescuers frequently report that GMA fails to police the following common hunting offences:

- Shooting before or after legal times
- Continuing to shoot without retrieving downed birds first
- Failure to dispatch wounded birds in a timely manner
- Shooting non-game species:
 - Threatened species: 240 penalty units and/or 24 months jail ;
 - Protected species: 50 penalty units and/or 6 months jail.
 - Refer sections 41 and 43 respectively of *Wildlife Act 1975*.

GMA's failure to act on environmental offences is discussed further in 4.5 below. In view of the obligations listed in 1.2 above, GMA cannot simply turn a blind eye to environmental offences and "pass the buck" to other agencies.

By failing to report on the environmental impact of duck shooting camping offences, GMA presents the government's decision-makers, the media, and members of the public with an inaccurate and biased view of the situation.

4.4 Disproportionate fines

The fine for exceeding the speed limit by 24 kph in Victoria is \$385 plus 3 demerit points. In contrast, the fine for a non-hunter being within 25m of the shoreline of a body of water at an SGR or SHA during restricted hours is \$1,154. A fine of this magnitude for an offence which poses no risk to anybody (as opposed to speeding, which is dangerous) is clearly disproportionate to the gravity of the offence. This draconian measure was introduced by former Minister Peter Walsh (currently Victorian Nationals leader), a member of FGA with a personal history of duck shooting.

With the hunting regulatory regime currently up for review, and given the obvious conflict of interest from the former Minister, it is timely for today's Labor government to repeal this draconian relic from the former Coalition government.

4.5 Complementary evidence of offences: oral reports from rescuers

Complementing the data collected from our survey, we have oral and visual evidence from rescuers who have observed the following recurrent offences over the years, and GMA's inaction:

- Ignoring Regulations: Camping within 20m of the water, violating regulations designed to protect these sensitive wetland areas.
- Public Defecation: Unburied human faeces and used toilet paper deposited within 50m of the water (most of the time within 5-15m), raising concerns about contamination of water and spread of disease, and shocking impact on non-hunter visitors and tourists.
- Tree Damage: The cutting of dead trees, live trees and fallen branches for firewood, causing long-term damage to the environment and the loss of habitat for native wildlife and insects.
- Damaging Aboriginal Cultural Heritage: Destruction of culturally significant scar trees - cut for firewood - and desecration of culturally significant sites around scar trees when used for toileting.
- Recurrent Littering - with empty shotgun shells, shotgun wadding, bird feathers and parts, and other waste.
- Public Safety Offences:
 - Taking unlicensed family members out onto wetlands to shoot, or observe shooting, at times when restrictions apply.
 - Camping with non-licensed family members within 25m of the water shoreline.
 - These "public safety" offences carry penalties of 60 penalty units and potential Banning Notices (s58C and 58G of the *Wildlife Act 1975*), yet to the best of our knowledge, GMA has never issued a Banning Notice to a duck shooter or their companions.

CASE STUDY: Toilet Hygiene

This year wildlife rescuers again found a discarded, self made-toilet filled with human waste by the water's edge / at Lake Murphy - and in a number of places plastic bags full of human waste were left behind at shooter campsites around Woolshed Swamp and Lake Lyndger.

If shooters were genuinely committed to protecting the environment, they would not only clean up after themselves but also take the initiative to pick up any additional waste left behind by their peers. A mere 15-minute cleanup effort by each group could drastically improve the condition of these sites. However, the reality is that these cleanups are left to others (such as volunteer wildlife rescuers) who are genuinely dedicated to preserving the environment, thereby highlighting a significant gap between duck shooter rhetoric and action.



Image 14: Two of many plastic bags with human faeces left behind at a shooters' camp at Lake Lyndger.



Image 15: A self-made toilet and a plastic bag with human faeces left behind at Lake Murphys.

4.6 Impact of Environmental Breaches

The widespread disregard for basic environmental responsibility not only tarnishes the natural beauty of these areas but also poses hazards to wildlife and other visitors.

The cutting of scar trees for firewood causes long-term damage to both the environment and cultural heritage sites, and also shows profound disrespect for Indigenous culture and protected sites.

The degradation of wetlands due to duck shooting activities has wide environmental implications:

- **Ecological Damage:** Cutting down trees, improper sanitation practices and leaving rubbish behind can severely impact the wetland ecosystem, affecting both plant and animal species.
- **Water Quality:** Human waste near water bodies can lead to contamination, posing health risks to wildlife and potentially affecting downstream water quality.
- **Biodiversity Loss:** Wetlands are critical habitats for many species, and degradation can lead to a loss of biodiversity.



Image 17: A common sight at shooters' camps. Plastic bottles, beer cans, shotgun shells and other non-compostable rubbish, and even bird parts, burned in campfires.



Image 16: Thousands of shotgun shells and wadding collected by wildlife rescuers over the years.



Image 18: These images show only a tiny fraction of what the so-called "conservationist" shooters leave behind in the wetlands.

Many signs in these areas are riddled with shotgun pellet holes, further demonstrating the lack of respect that duck shooters hold for regulations and the environment.



Image 19: Despite regular target training at SGR signs and other rather important road signs, shooters still can't avoid causing a high injury rate to game and non-game birds. The Marshes, Kerang



Images 20, 21: The attitude of shooters is clearly reflected on these signs. Lake Cope (Browns Lake)



Note: Ironically in 2018 Parks Victoria installed 300 new signs at SGR “to promote responsible hunting effort”. Clearly a waste of tax payers money.

4.7 Identifying and Holding Shooters Accountable

If members of the public can easily identify offences committed by duck shooters, then GMA officers supposedly trained in compliance monitoring should also be able to do so. In most cases, shooters’ camps display evidence of environmental breaches, right in front of the eyes of the officers, such as fire pits, cut firewood, unburied toilets and camping within 20m of the body of water. A common offence is to leave the fire still warm but unattended, while going out to shoot ducks. This is illegal and dangerous, but its appeal is that it saves having to start the fire from scratch later in the day.

This evidence can and should be used to hold shooters accountable for non-compliance with environmental regulations. If regulatory bodies like the GMA were to act on the evidence provided, they could issue fines on the spot. The presence of fire pits, for example, could indicate unauthorised tree cutting and other infractions, warranting further investigation and potential penalties. The footage taken by the bodycam of the officers during licence and hunter bag checks gives further evidence of the identity of campers who could therefore be linked to the offences.

4.8 Shooting on closed and protected Lakes

This report has demonstrated that GMA does not have the capacity or desire to patrol and monitor the public waterways and private properties where shooting is permitted during the season. This raises the additional question of what is happening on closed wetlands, especially considering that an unusually high number of wetland closures occurred this year. There were 34 wetlands closed this season; what proportion of their time did GMA spend policing these? Also what happens when the season legally ends? And how are these locations monitored?

During the 2024 duck season, volunteer rescuers found evidence of recent illegal shooting at Lake Connewarre, which was closed to shooters. After the season ended on 5 June 2024, rescuers again found evidence of active shooting at Johnson Swamp on 7 June. The lack of authorised officers patrolling at these closed locations and post-season is alarming.

4.9 The Impact on Wildlife and Visitors

The environmental damage caused by duck shooters extends beyond mere litter. Shallow bird pits which are easily accessible to predators like foxes, and unburied human excrement, present a gruesome sight for bird watchers and other nature enthusiasts. These pits, along with the scattered remains of hunted birds, create an unwelcoming and disturbing environment. Visitors seeking to enjoy the wetlands are confronted with scenes of environmental degradation and disrespect for wildlife, undermining their experience and appreciation of these natural areas.

Additionally, shooters often burn rubbish in their campfires, including plastic bottles, cans, and shotgun shells. This not only pollutes the air but also leaves behind toxic residue that can harm the ecosystem.

The condition of access roads, heavily damaged and rutted from regular use by duck shooters during a wet time of year further deters more environmentally conscious visitors and locals who do not have the necessary off-road vehicles to navigate them.

4.10 Public Safety and Adequate Warning Signs

Several wetlands in Victoria, such as Johnson Swamp near Kerang, allow duck shooting and have public roads running through them, yet they often lack adequate signage. There are no signs to inform the unsuspecting public, who might be kayaking, walking, dog walking, birdwatching, camping, or engaging in photography, that these areas are off-limits during certain hours of the duck shooting season. This absence of warning

puts them at risk of incurring significant fines for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or even being in danger of getting shot by hunters.

If the government truly cares about public safety and amenity, it is essential to install clear signage that specifies the dates and times when shooting is allowed, as well as the potential risks and fines. This is especially important for international or interstate visitors who may be unfamiliar with local regulations.

4.11 Protected Wetlands and Legal Framework

The Ramsar Convention is an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands. A number of wetlands in Victoria are listed under the Ramsar Convention and are protected by national and international laws aimed at conserving wetlands of international importance. The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)* mandates stringent protections for these areas. Despite these protections, there has been continued degradation of these wetlands, particularly during the duck shooting season. This indicates a failure on the part of authorities to enforce these protections effectively during the duck shooting season.

The Ramsar Convention allows for “wise use” of natural resources, but hunting is permitted on some Ramsar sites. The widespread disregard for the law and the environment (as outlined in this report) suggests that native bird hunting on Victoria’s Ramsar wetlands is not consistent with “wise use”.

At Labor’s State Conference in May 2024, a motion to oppose duck hunting at Ramsar wetlands was blocked from the agenda by militant pro-guns unions. Yet the 2019 State Conference had overwhelmingly voted for a review of duck hunting policy. That review became the parliamentary Inquiry in 2023; unfortunately its report was ignored by Premier Allan in 2024 - apparently to appease pro-guns unions.

CASE STUDY:

Johnson Swamp, Kerang - part of the Kerang Wetlands Ramsar site

This case study illustrates the GMA’s selective and unfair targeting of rescuers while ignoring illegal behaviour of shooters.

Volunteers observed multiple instances of environmental degradation by shooters at Johnson Swamp, Kerang, during the 2024 duck shooting season. These observations include:

- 1. Illegal Tree Cutting:** Countless trees cut down for firewood.

2. **Improper Sanitation:** Countless unburied toilets found between bushes and Pyramid Creek, within 5-10 metres of the water.

3. **Camping Distance Offences:** Shooters' camps were all within 20m of the water, due to the geographical position of Pyramid Creek and the body of water of the swamp itself.

(For more information and evidence see reports 51-61)

Due to the specific geography, rescuers sought and received advice from GMA about a suitable location for Base Camp (a place for rescuers to take refreshments and respite). However despite adhering to that advice, which was consistent with "public safety", authorised officers apprehended rescuers at Base Camp the following day, claiming they were too close to the water.

The draconian penalties of Banning Notices were imposed on rescuers. No action was taken in relation to the multiple shooter offences listed above.

This case study illustrates the concerns of Pegasus: GMA is "too comfortable" with shooters. We contend this was an unfair and serious misuse of power.

4.12 GMA's environmental advice to hunters

GMA's Hunting Manual is available on their website.²

On page 11 there are two headings:

"Caring for the Environment" and "Reducing Environmental Impact While Camping."

It lists a few rules such as camping 20m from the water's edge and taking your litter home, but there is no mention of toilet requirements. It appears to give incorrect advice on firewood, namely that it's OK to collect dead firewood from the ground. Significantly, there is no mention of penalties for breaching environmental laws.

An FOI request has revealed that at an April 2020 Board meeting, a GMA Executive said of GMA's educational material:

"...it is unknown whether hunters read, understand or put this information into practice."

² https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/499096/Game-Hunting-in-Victoria-2nd-edition.pdf

The same appears to apply to the GMA's RESPECT program which has been in operation since 2017. Among other things, it asks hunters to RESPECT the environment (p.10 of the Hunting Manual).

GMA has also produced a manual for first-time hunters. It says nothing at all about camping or toileting or firewood or fire management.³ Although it does state that fires should be extinguished when leaving the campsite, it does not provide the additional information that this should be done with water (not soil) until cool to the touch - as per Parks Victoria advice - nor does it mention any penalties for non-compliance.

There are no rules about the appropriate location of a campfire in relation to the water's edge; this was confirmed by the Environment Minister in a recent email. GMA should make recommendations to relevant Ministers to clarify the legislation on this. Campfires are commonly placed between the campsite and the water. Yet there is a significant environmental impact from a campfire. It is the gathering place for the group, where eating, drinking and littering tend to occur, as well as the burning of rubbish, plastic, cartridges etc.

4.13 Retaining Rescuers

As no government has ever provided veterinary assistance to wounded waterbirds, it is important that volunteer rescuers can continue their work at the wetlands. The government's proposed Waterfowl Wounding Reduction Action Plan will take years to reduce wounding (if at all) and at best will reduce it to 10 per cent (as in Denmark); this represents approximately 32,000 wounded ducks annually in Victoria - a shocking level of cruelty, unacceptable to the taxpayers who are unwillingly funding the destruction of our native waterbirds.

However the current profligate use of Banning Notices seems to treat the very presence of rescuers as a "hindrance" to duck shooters. The GMA's assessment is highly subjective, and the rescuer has no defence when charged out in the wetlands. Rescuers report that the tactics used by GMA's authorised officers this year were unprofessional, heavy-handed, brutal, unfair and unjustified.

In the current review of hunting policy and regulations, it is essential that these rules (and the relevant parts of the *Wildlife Act 1975*) be amended to clarify the provisions and avoid the current unfair exploitation of ambiguous terms and apparent loopholes in the legislation. For example, we need a clear definition of the 'water shoreline'. One rescuer was arrested for being too close to a puddle.

³ https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/578905/New-hunter-brochure-final-artwork-for-email-180717.pdf

But as a basic principle, if a shooter cannot distinguish between a duck and a rescuer in a fluoro vest, then the shooter should not have a game licence. The draconian exclusions of non-hunters from the wetlands that are imposed for a quarter of the year are not a “proportional response” to the risk, especially once the first few days of shooting have passed. These provisions have been promoted as “public safety” measures but they were inserted by former Minister Peter Walsh (a duck shooter and member of FGA) to penalise rescuers; they should be rolled back.

The proposed new exclusion until 11am for the opening days of the season is even less defensible, and from a legal perspective, provisions of an Act cannot be overridden by a regulation.

Rescuers have a right to be on the wetlands, searching for downed ducks.

4.14 A political promise - 2022 state election

Peter Walsh, Leader of the Nationals in Victoria and Deputy Leader of the State Coalition, promoted the following policy prior to the 2022 election:

“If elected to government on November 26, we will transfer management of State Game Reserves (SGRs) from Parks Victoria to the Game Management Authority (GMA) where the GMA are better suited to managing an SGR for the benefit of the environment and the Victorian community.”

Based on the findings of our survey, it seems inappropriate to place greater environmental responsibilities with the GMA.

4.15 A common myth about State Game Reserves (SGRs)

Hunting groups often claim that when shooters started paying licence fees in the 1950s, the revenue purchased the system of SGRs. There seems to be a misplaced sense of “ownership” by hunters - despite the fact that there is so much evidence of environmental abuse there.

However to dispel this myth about hunter licence fees, we quote from the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) 2008 River Red Gum Investigation report (p.8):

“The number of state game reserves and areas purchased with game licence fees was often overstated ... Some small areas were purchased for addition to Crown land, while others

were existing Crown land reserves prior to reservation as state game reserves. For example, Johnson's Swamp (467 hectares) consists of 459 hectares of former timber and water reserve (reserved in 1882) and eight hectares of purchased freehold. This area was gazetted as a state game reserve in 1984."

4.16 Nothing to see here?

We note that the Parliamentary Inquiry visited two private wetlands (owned by FGA) and were apparently impressed by these "showpieces" of conservation (achieved with taxpayer support). The shocking state of the thousands of public wetlands seems to have gone unnoticed.

Former Coalition Minister Peter Walsh was a duck shooter. Labor's various Environment Ministers have not been duck shooters, but clearly have not taken the time or trouble to visit wetlands to see the damage done by duck shooters. They have simply trusted the assurances from the GMA.

It is arguable that GMA officers are so accustomed to the environmental breaches of duck shooters that they see nothing unusual or unacceptable in these practices. They are clearly out of step with community standards.

5 Conclusion and Call for Action

We question the intent and ability of the GMA to monitor duck shooting seasons effectively. Its approach to compliance displays selective attention to breaches, with bias in favour of hunters and strongly (at times ruthlessly) against duck rescuers.

If GMA had succeeded in completely banishing all rescuers from the wetlands, none of the shocking breaches recorded in this report would have been exposed.

Following the stern warnings of the 2017 Pegasus Economics report on the GMA, the 2013 dissolution of a similar game regulator in NSW, and the clear bias and lack of environmental concern displayed by GMA in the 2024 duck shooting season, we respectfully **call for an urgent independent review of the GMA.**

We also call for the Victorian government **to urgently reconsider its decision, and finally make the only right call - to ban duck shooting:**

- The Parliamentary Inquiry was constantly told that hunters are "conservationists". Our evidence shows that to be a myth.

- The Inquiry also drew attention to the impossibility of regulating shooters at thousands of wetlands across the state. Our survey adds further weight to that finding.
- Contrary to a prevalent myth that hunting licence fees paid for the purchase of State Game Reserves, that revenue only added minor areas to existing public land (VEAC 2008 *River Red Gum Investigation report*, p.8).
- With a diminishing number of active duck shooters, it is time to review the number of SGRs and vast swathes of other public land available to duck shooters. Regional residents - weary of the din and disruption of duck seasons - were falsely promised that land use (for duck shooting) would be part of the current review of hunting policy and regulations. This proved to be a misleading assertion. But if shooters were confined to a smaller number of areas, authorities would have a better chance of monitoring their behaviour. [Refer Finding 12 of the Inquiry's report.]
- The disgraceful environmental practices of duck shooters, as evidenced in our study, show that duck shooting is not a "wise use" of the natural resources of Ramsar wetlands. Duck shooting should therefore be banned on our Ramsar wetlands.

The discrepancies between the GMA's "compliance" reports and the findings of our study highlights a critical need for more accurate and unbiased reporting on the environmental impact of duck shooting. The evidence of widespread non-compliance and environmental degradation demands immediate action to protect Victoria's wetlands and uphold the legal protections supposedly in place.

Based on the findings of this report, the Parliamentary Inquiry and the Pegasus Report, until duck shooting is banned in Victoria we make the following further recommendations:

1. Include the findings of this report in any future decision making processes regarding the future of recreational duck shooting in Victoria.
2. The Government must respond to the 17 Findings of the Inquiry's report. In particular, Findings 10, 11 and 12 illustrate the extraordinary cost of compliance operations if they are to be effective.
3. Increase Monitoring: Implement more frequent and thorough monitoring of wetlands, including campsites, to ensure compliance with environmental protections.
4. Implement stricter enforcement of existing regulations, holding shooters accountable for their actions.

5. GMA to work with Parks Victoria and any other relevant agencies to devise an environmental monitoring, enforcement and education program for duck shooters.
6. Disclose how many of GMA's authorised officers are recreational shooters. Consider the issues of bias and conflict of interest when allocating duties and as a consideration for employing future officers.
7. To protect cultural heritage, permanently close wetlands known to contain significant Indigenous cultural sites.
8. Permanently close Ramsar wetlands to duck and quail shooting to ensure the protection of significant habitat and feeding sites for threatened and endangered species, especially migratory birds, and to protect these unique sites for ecotourism.
9. Community Engagement: Educate and engage the local community and duck shooters about the importance of wetlands and the laws protecting them.
10. Educate existing and newly licensed duck shooters and GMA's team of authorised officers on the identification of Aboriginal heritage sites.
11. Respect and clarify rescuers' rights to rescue by removing ambiguity in the legislation and rolling back the draconian limitations and penalties they currently face (a legacy of Victoria's former Coalition government). Clarification and transparency of regulations and the definitions within e.g. where is the boundary of the body of water.
12. New regulations specifically targeted at hunters in terms of littering, bird pits and discarded feathers, as well as campfire rules. Shooters should be required to take all their waste home. Recreational divers, for example, are asked to: "Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but bubbles." Bird parts and plucked feathers should either be taken home for disposal or properly buried out of sight of visitors, at least 50m from the water. Likewise for toilets and other detritus. Shooters should: "Leave nothing but footprints and extinguished campfires."

The continued degradation of wetlands in Victoria, particularly during the duck shooting season, highlights a critical enforcement gap. Protecting these valuable ecosystems is essential for maintaining biodiversity and ecological health.

Government Ministers and regulatory bodies must take the findings of this report into account. By addressing the issues raised, we can try to REDUCE the damage to our wetlands. The damage will only STOP when Victoria permanently bans duck shooting, in line with other major states.

NOTE:

All photographs in this report were taken by volunteer wildlife rescuers and they have been reproduced with their permission.

DISCLAIMER

The information presented in this report is based on observations and data collected from various sources, including duck rescuers and other wildlife rescuers. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information, the report is based on observations and does not guarantee the complete accuracy of all details and acknowledges that some information may be subject to change.

This report is intended for informational purposes only and should not be construed as legal advice. The recommendations provided are based on current understanding and best practices for wetland conservation and management. Stakeholders, including authorities and the local community, are encouraged to seek professional advice and conduct further research to ensure they understand the issues and can address them effectively.

The authors of this report are not liable for any actions taken based on the information provided herein. Readers are urged to consult relevant legal and environmental experts before making decisions related to wetland conservation and management.

We hope this publication may be of assistance to you, however Geelong Duck Rescue and its volunteers do not guarantee that the publication is without flaw of any kind or is wholly appropriate for your particular purposes and therefore disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence which may arise from you relying on any information in this publication.

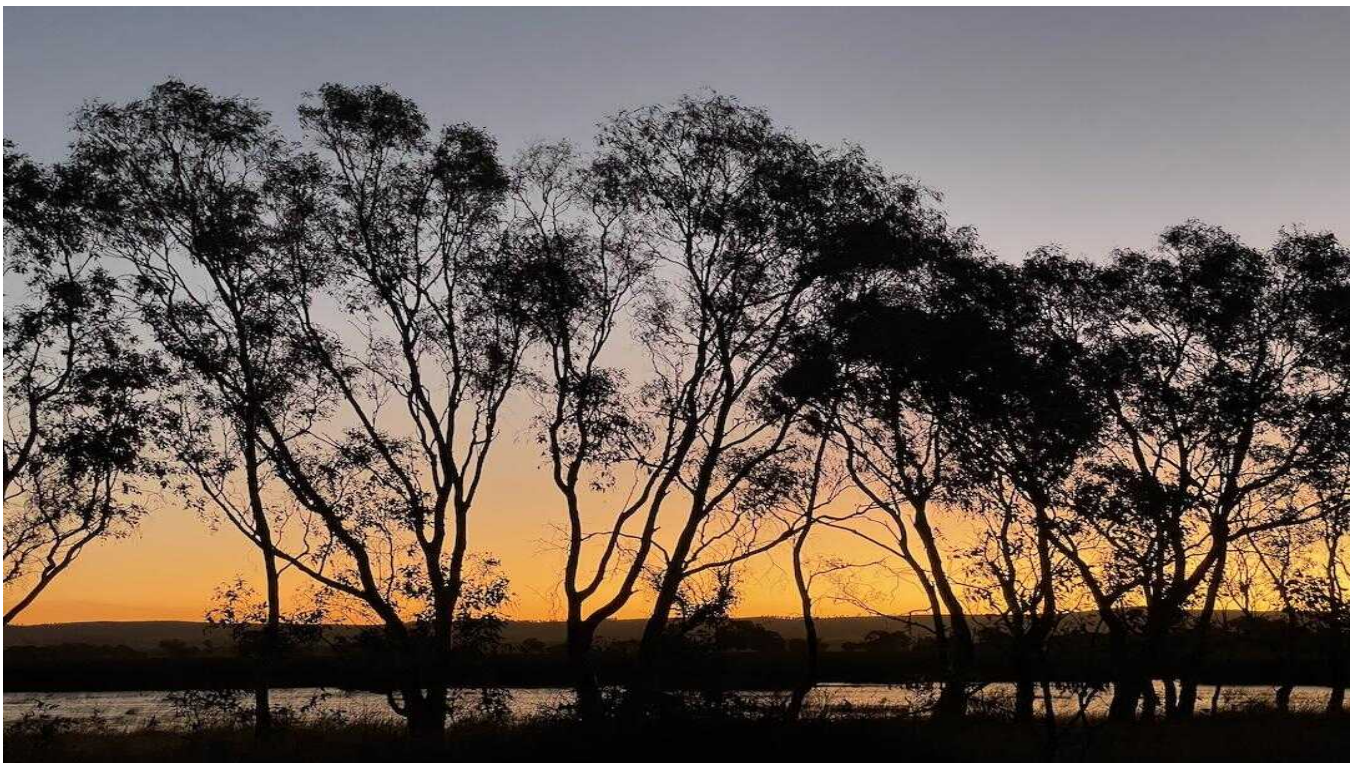


Image 22: A peaceful and idyllic sunset. No sounds of shotguns. The season has ended. Lake Yando.

Illegal Shooter Activity Report Form 2024

Illegal Shooter Activity Report Form 2024

Please fill out a separate form for each camp/incident. Read Wildlife Regulation 2014 below for clarification of offences.

Report number

Date

Day

Month

Year



Time

Hour Minutes

PM



Wetland

Witness name

Camps and hunting areas

- ☐ Active Camp
- ☐ Inactive Camp
- ☐ State Game Reserve
- ☐ Specified Hunting Area (Non SGR)
- ☐ Others

Breach witnessed / Too close to body of water

	<5m	<10m	<15m	<20m	<25m	<50m	>50m
Camp	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Family camp	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Family members (Non hunters)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Toilet buried	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Toilet unburied	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Bird pits	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Camp fire	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Other breaches

- ☐ Littering / Rubbish left behind (10 Penalty Units)
- ☐ Littering / Shotgun cartridges left behind (10 Penalty Units)
- ☐ Firewood cut from living trees (20 Penalty Units)
- ☐ Firewood cut from dead trees (20 Penalty Units)
- ☐ Firewood cut from fallen branches (20 Penalty Units)
- ☐ Aboriginal artefacts or site damaged eg. scar trees (600 Penalty Units)
- ☐ Non hunting dogs (please specify breed in comments)
- ☐ Dog faeces not collected and/or buried (10 Penalty Units)
- ☐ Dead birds not buried
- ☐ Failing to extinguish campfire/ Left unattended (20 Penalty Units)
- ☐ Bird pits with excessive amount of birds / non game birds (please specify in comments)
- ☐ Inappropriate hunter behaviour eg. mooning, threats, shooting above your head.
- ☐ Others (please write in comments below)

Comments

Please note anything which might be of importance.

For better image quality please click link below each image.



Browse Files

Drag and drop files here

Video evidence

Please upload video to google drive first and then insert link to video in here.
IMPORTANT Please only upload videos which show incident out of the ordinary Eg.
Cut or human faeces around scar trees, excessive amount of wood cut,

LOCATION OF FINDING - Please insert the " DROP PIN" location in here

Please use your Google Maps or other maps with the option to drop a pin at the location/ shooter camp where breach was witness and copy and paste the GPS coordinates in here.

WILDLIFE REGULATIONS (State Game Reserve) 2014

- Camping

(Wildlife (SGR) Regulations 2014 – Part 8 Division 45

A person must not set up camp less than 20 metres from swamp/lake/river/waterway.

Penalty: 10 penalty units

- Dogs (Faeces)

(Wildlife (SGR) Regulations 2014 – Part 4 Division 2

<https://www.gma.vic.gov.au/hunting/duck/hunting-methods/hunting-game-birds-and-deer-with-dogs-in-victoria>

All dog faeces must be collected and/or buried.

Penalty: 10 penalty units

- Feeding animals restricted

(1) A person must not, in a reserve, feed, offer food to
or offer any object as food to an animal. (Ducks)

Penalty: 15 penalty units

- Camp fires

(Wildlife (SGR) Regulations 2014 – Part 8 Division 47

A person who is in charge of a fire in a reserve must extinguish that fire before leaving the fire.

Penalty: 20 penalty units.

- Firewood

(Wildlife (SGR) Regulations 2014 – Part 6 Division 30

A person must not, in a reserve, cut, fell, pick, remove, uproot or damage any tree, plant or other flora.

Penalty: 20 penalty units

Scar Trees / Cooking Mounts / Etc

Under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006:

Part 3—Protection of Aboriginal
cultural heritage

Division 1—Protection from harm

27 Harming Aboriginal cultural heritage unlawful

Harming Aboriginal cultural heritage; and at the time of the act or omission the person was negligent as to whether the act or omission was likely to harm Aboriginal cultural heritage

Under the Wrongs Act 1958 - "negligence" means failure to exercise reasonable care.

Penalty: 600 penalty units

- Litter

(Wildlife (SGR) Regulations 2014 – Part 8 Division 46

A person who camps in a reserve must maintain site free of litter & clear all litter prior to vacating the site.

Penalty: 10 penalty units

A person who camps in a reserve must, before vacating the site, clear from the site all litter and personal equipment for which the person is responsible.

Penalty: 10 penalty units

- Toilet

(Wildlife (SGR) Regulations 2014 – Part 8 Division 49

Faeces must be buried at least 50 metres from any and water.

Penalty: 10 penalty units

For more information

https://content.legislation.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/799f5430-3d6c-3e0a-8d79-5a88cf5fb8c9_14-190sr004.docx

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