Comment to VEAC to support the Draft Central West Investigation Draft concerning deer hunting within the Mount Cole State Forest.

Plus include a

GAME MANAGEMENT PLAN for

Limited Sambar Deer hunting in this park.

by

South West Victoria Deer Advisory Group

The SouthWest Victorian Deer Advisory Group would support the opening of deer hunting within the Mount Cole forest as listed in the VEAC draft Proposal but only for a limited time each year. With the suggestions of other activities
being restricted or forbidden in other parks in the area may increase visitor numbers to the Mount Cole State Forest and with that create a safety concern to visitors at some months of the year. Deer hunting should only be allowed during the months of May, June and July when visitor numbers would be at its lowest.

With this submission the SWVDAG would like to show how limited balloted deer hunting could be included as a management tool in this forest.

**Introduction.**

The Mount Cole State Park located in Central Highlands Region of Victoria, approximately 200 km by road northwest of Melbourne and 500 km East from Adelaide.

Within this park lives a historical herd of Sambar deer (Cervus unicolor). The original deer were held in a enclosure that included much of Mount Ercildoune beside the Ercildoune homestead near Ballarat when owned by Sir Samuel Wilson in 1872; Mr Wilson was a great supporter of the acclimatisation scheme and would have been involved with bringing these deer and other deer from other lands including Ceylon by the tall ships.

Due to the increase of humans and development in the area forced the deer to the sanctuary of the forests of Mount Cole, the Pyrenees Ranges and some ventured through to the Grampians. In coming year’s the Sambar were forced from their home in the Grampians by the herd of Red deer that had been liberated and established in the area, also the animals that settled in the Pyrenees Ranges found it was not a suitable habitat with only a hand full remaining between Elmhurst and Avoca.

Since their liberation some 135 years later remain a small herd of around 120 animals in total live in and around Mount Cole, Mount Buangor and Mount Langi Ghiran.
At this time Mount Cole is classified, as a Sanctuary to protect the deer and Game species may not be hunted at any time, however pest animals have been permitted to be hunted.

**Goals.**

*Commercial goals.*

To attract extra visitation to the area during quiet times and creating extra income for local business’s.

This could be measured by surveys to business properties with comparing with past years income.

*Conservation goals.*

To lesser the impact on native vegetation across the State Forest by controlling numbers of the exotic Sambar deer living in the Mount Cole State Forest without eradication of this species.

Results could be measured by the way of vegetation plots and small mammal trapping looking for any increase or decrease in both.

Allowing herd management of this historical Sambar herd for the future.

While hunters permitted to hunt in this area; they could help to control pest animals in the forest such as the large wild pig population and some goats.

Currently the pig population in Mount Cole is destroying native vegetation in areas in extreme ways.

Balloted hunters while having access to Mount Cole could strive to eliminate the Fallow deer herd that have been released in recent years into the area.

This would decrease the need for funding for vermin/pest animal control of the area.

*Other goals relating to the area.*

To achieve a self funding program that will for fill other goals relating to this program.
Measurement of this would be the amount of volunteer hours given by hunting groups such as Australian Deer Ass., Sporting Shooters Ass and the South West Victorian Deer Advisory Group and cash amount collected by hunter ballot fees would cover admin costs.

Looking at other programs such as this, it would be expected around 1000 ballot applications would be received at a charge of $15 making around $15,000 for funding this program.

**Game management goals.**

To achieve a sustainable huntable herd of Sambar deer, accessible to hunters for a limited time of perhaps 3 months during each per year.

Balloted hunts with harvesting returns and surveys from hunters. Also track counts monitored all year round would show animal movements and used to estimate game and vermin numbers.

**Harvesting group description:**

Harvesting of Sambar deer would be by recreational hunters licenced to hunt deer, they would also have to be a current member of a recognized hunting group that includes an insurance policy with their membership.

By being a member of such a group would also ensure that they already have a code of conduct.

Although any amount of hunters with these requirements can apply for the ballot only an allocated amount of hunting permits will be issued.

These permits would vary from year to year depending on numbers of deer or deer sign available in designated areas. Also this could vary due to each season (drought etc.) conditions changing movements of animals.

As listed under Landowner/manager goals, a ballot fee of $15 per application would be required and it would be anticipated with around 1000 applications as per the Blonde Bay Hog deer (Axis porcinus) program in Gippsland the Mount Cole harvest would receive $15,000 towards funding.
**Species of interest:**

Species of interest to this plan are Sambar deer.

Sambar deer (Cervus unicolour) belong to the group of Ceridae, which is distinguished by the possession in males of branching antlers and also by possession of upper canines for at least part of their life. Antlers are cast and re-grown every year, with the males growing larger antlers each year. Sambar stags stand at the shoulders around 127cm and weigh from 200 to 225 kg. Hinds stand at about 115 cm and weigh around 150kg (Harrison & Slee). The Sambar deer-breeding season occurs any time of year but mainly August/September in the Mount Cole area.

Sambar deer were introduced into Australia during the mid–nineteenth century. The health of the Mount Cole herd is believed to be of good condition with reasonable antler growth; but more recent photographs within the last 10 years have shown improved antler formations.

Legal status of the Victorian Sambar deer is, that they are an exotic animal and are considered undesirable in some areas. Deer are noted with the *Wildlife Act 1975 (Vic)* listing them as “Wildlife” despite their exotic status and it requires their protection and conservation for sustainable use.

Currently hunting is available on private land around Mount Cole but poaching within the park occurs. If balloted hunting and a management plan adopted and interest given to the Sambar deer, it is felt, poaching would reduce dramatically as in other places where deer are managed.

Sambar hunters require no data returns at this time, with no information on animals currently taken from the area.

Perceived impact on State Forests is that the deer are causing erosion due to the numbers of animals with their hoofed feet on the delicate environment and impact on native vegetation from over browsing causing loses of fodder and habitat for native animals but Sambar being a non herd animal finds this not being the case.
No erosion impact is seen due to numbers of deer within the Mount Cole State Forests where animals are found and no vegetation studies concerning deer impact have been undertaken at Mount Cole.

Only estimates of Sambar deer numbers have come from the local group, the South West Victorian Deer Advisory Group, this submission estimates a number of 120 within and around the area.

The value of this herd of Sambar deer is in two ways, firstly historical being a herd that has lived within the area for around 135 years and secondly being the only recognized Sambar deer herd of this sub species in huntable numbers in Western Victoria.

**Monitoring techniques:**

Monitoring of this project would be in three sections:

1. Deer monitoring both from the designated hunting areas, also within the remainder of the State Forest, which would be done on a volunteer basis by hunting groups.

2. Monitoring of native flora and fauna within these areas, will be achieved by Parks Victoria staff and Honours students.

3. Balloting hunting arrangements and compiling yearly information would be made up from people of both DSE and the hunting groups.

Surveying of deer for relative abundance would be conducted by the use of 10 designated 1 Km road sections within the Forest. Although this will not give exact numbers of deer it will show increase or decrease in species.

These surveys would be conducted several times during the year. This survey would also give information on hunting areas that need to be closed for a particular year due to no animals in the area and perhaps allowing extra hunters into an area due to increases of animals.

Due to thickness of bush in some areas spotlight counts would be impossible so animal tracks on road surfaces would be more appropriate. Information from hunter’s data returns such as animals taken, animals seen etc. Complete
with a tag system would also give vital information to be used to estimate absolute abundance.

Monitoring of native flora and fauna by DSE is a current yearly activity and has been participated for many years; flora studies by exclusion zones where areas of approx 5 meter square are fenced to exclude different animals from different areas. The past information could be used to compare with future data, also small mammal traps have been used to note increase or decrease of small natives in different areas and this too would be vital information for the future of this project.

Compiling information from hunting by all parties would be finalised yearly.

Example of road track count data sheets

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<th>Track name</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Fawns</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Creek</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weather Condi. Fine, no rain for 7 days

**Harvest Strategy:**

Harvest would be by the way of hunting with rifles, working on a ballot system over 3 months that would allow two hunters in each allocated hunting area for a total of five days. Regulations in Victoria give a ruling of .270 calibre or larger for the use of hunting Sambar deer.
This would be Monday to Friday for two reasons, firstly allowing two days for animals to quieten down before the next hunter group are to enter and secondly to have less impact as far as interfering with tourists visiting the State Forest.

The balloted three month season would be suggested as May, June & July, when tourism visitor numbers are at its lowest in the area. If extra visitation due to change of status of the park causes increases by other uses the months of May June and July being the winter months would make it safer to all concerned.

With a total of four hunting areas (2 hunters per area) available over the three-months season would allow around 96 hunters per hunt of five days each. This would vary from year to year pending availability of huntable animals thus hunting areas.

Animal Check Stations would be available at Ararat, Beaufort and Ballarat, towns that surround the Mount Cole State Forest maned by volunteers of the South West Deer Advisory Group or other appointed people, hunters would book in by phone to present animals taken. These animals would be recorded with data taken such as sex, weight, condition etc. And jaw bones retained for ageing and future reference.

Animal take would be monitored by these check stations and hunting will be ceased in these areas if the required number of animals were taken before the end of season.

Final

To allow limited hunting and a deer management plan would be a win win situation, with deer hunters having access to hunt and also having a vermin pest animal program incorporated controlling pigs, goats and foxes in the Mount Cole Forest protecting native vegetation.

References
Forest Notes; Mount Cole State Forest, DSE June 2004

Introduction to Deer of Australia, Arthur Bentley 1978.

Australian Hunter, Col Allison.

Australian Deer,


The Australian Deer Hunters Handbook, Harrison & Slee.

Victorian Hunting Guide. Dep of Sustainability & Environment 2008

- Pigs & foxes photographed in Mount Cole State Forest