

New plan for the control of Himalayan thar

Introduction

The Minister of Conservation has recently released a new national plan for the control of Himalayan Thar. The plan was prepared under the Wild Animal Control Act 1977 and finalises a draft which was publicly released for comment in 1992 and attracted 126 submissions.

The new plan covers the management of thar over all land throughout New Zealand but has an emphasis on the mountainous country of the central South Island where breeding populations of wild, free-ranging thar live. The plan has an initial term of five years and the Minister acknowledges that it is to some degree experimental because our knowledge of thar and their impact on the environment is incomplete. For this reason, where choices have had to be made about managing the impacts of thar, the decisions have been balanced in favour of protecting nature conservation values.

The plan has as its main objective the protection of defined conservation values through the sustained control of thar within their feral range below defined limits. The plan applies to all land irrespective of tenure, provided the plan is consistent with any other legislation such as the Natural Parks Act, applying to that land.

Background

The management of Himalayan thar has been a particularly contentious issue over the last 20 years. Thar were first introduced to New Zealand from a captive herd held at Woburn Park, England. The Department of Tourist and Health Resorts liberated two groups of thar near Mount Cook in 1904 and 1909. Since their release thar have thrived and progressively expanded their range until today they occupy 6976 square kilometres of the central Southern Alps and lateral ranges between the Rakaia and Hokitika Rivers in the north and Haast Pass in the south.

The thar population is believed to have peaked at around 60,000 animals in the early 1970s before the introduction of helicopter hunting rapidly reduced the population by 90 per cent. In 1983 the Minister of Forests imposed a moratorium on commercial hunting for thar over half their range. Excluded from the moratorium was private land, pastoral lease land and the Westland and Mount Cook National



A bull thar. Photo: Gordon Roberts

Parks. The moratorium did not affect recreational hunters or hunting guides. Since 1983 the thar population is estimated to have increased to 12,000 animals.

Reappraisal of the causes, rates and significance of erosion in the Southern Alps has resulted in the primary concerns about the impacts of thar being focused on the wellbeing of the indigenous plant and animal species, rather than soil and water values. Some of the plant species that conservationists have concerns about are endemic to the area now inhabited by thar.

The living and feeding preferences of thar are for the shelter and security of rock bluff systems and their feeding is concentrated on the adjacent sub-alpine shrublands and alpine grasslands. Recent studies have shown that thar feed most intensively on tall snow tussocks and other alpine grass species. These grasses constitute over half of the thar diet while the next largest component is made up of woody shrub species and herbs.

Thar are social animals and their habit of camping and feeding on small areas has in the past, when populations and family groups were large, caused severe damage to alpine and subalpine communities and the virtual elimination of palatable herb species. One herb species which has attracted particular attention in the central

Southern Alps is the handsome, evergreen, yellow-flowered *Ranunculus godleyanus*. This is a plant that grows up to 60 cm in height and is quite rare. It is regarded as vulnerable to thar browsing, although its recovery in recent years suggests that since thar numbers have been reduced, there is now little likelihood of the species becoming extinct.

The plan

In his preface to the plan the Minister addressed the contentious issue of the possible eradication of thar. This course of action has been proposed by many conservationists on the basis that a one-off cost, even if it was large, would deal with the problem once and for all and would be the cheapest option in the long run. Assessments by animal ecologists have, however, consistently concluded that, even with the most currently effective technology of helicopter hunting, eradication would at best be very expensive (\$20 million plus) and uncertain of outcome. The Minister has therefore concluded that until thar eradication in the wild is more financially affordable and certain then the plan must, for the meantime, be based on what is tolerable.

The plan has the following objectives to achieve the protection of conservation