



In the second semester of 2011 the third year Bachelor of Environmental Management and Planning students taking the Professional Practice course (SOCl 314) were set an assignment to write a short, topical article of local interest. This related directly to the content of the course SOCl 314, which provides a critical study of issues in the provision of professional services in environmental planning, design, social sciences, tourism, sport and recreation. As part of the assessment the articles were subject to the LPR review processes.

The Canada Goose: half-baked or finally cooked? What will be the future for the 'king of game birds'?

By Tim Gale

Tim Gale has a Bachelor's degree in Environmental Management and Planning. His interests lie in wild animal management, and the issues surrounding the balance between stakeholders' needs and conservation values. He is an avid recreational hunter and has been professionally involved in biodiversity threat control. His achievements include the co-production of a top selling DVD entitled, 'The How To of Deer Hunting in New Zealand' that helps hunters to be safe and successful in their hunting, and he is currently a contributing editor for the NZ Rod & Rifle magazine.

Introduction:

This article looks at the effects of the change in legislation regarding Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*), which have become a problem in certain areas of both the North and South Islands. With the change in classification from a game bird to one of 'unprotected' status, geese now fall under no formal management strategy, nor are they the responsibility of any organisation. This effectively leaves the future of geese and the different stakeholders' interests up in the air. To some, geese are regarded as the 'king of game birds,' to others they are just another pest. Issues associated with the planning and implementation of management and control strategies affect a wide range of stakeholders and a multitude of interests. Key issues such as whose values and interests take priority, health and safety, costs associated with management, public perception, and the issue of who is responsible for final decision-making all need to be considered and addressed.

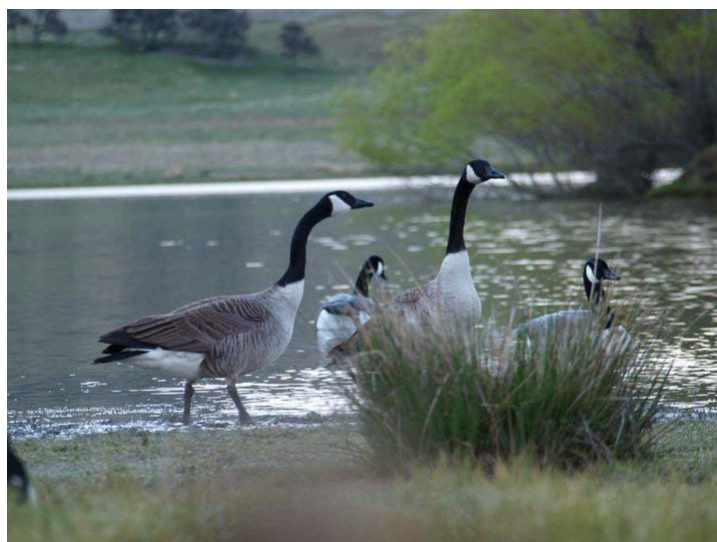


Figure 1: The 'king of game birds' or just another rabbit? Source: Tim Gale, 2010

The issue:

Rising Canada Geese numbers have been an issue in New Zealand for a number of years (Spurr & Coleman, 2005). Due to their feeding habits geese directly compete with livestock for pasture and crops, with native birds for resources, and their excrement adds to waterway pollution (Aubrey, 2011). Currently geese are most problematic on the South Island's Canterbury Plains, and in the high country, but rising numbers in the West Coast region of the South Island, and in the Central North Island, is giving cause for concern (Spurr & Coleman, 2005). On March 17, 2011, Conservation Minister Kate Wilkinson announced that the birds had been removed from Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Act 1953 and listed in Schedule 5 (Littlewood, 2011). Formerly, under schedule 1 which defines wildlife declared to be game, Fish & Game New Zealand both played a role in representing the interests of anglers and hunters, and provided coordination of the management, enhancement, and maintenance of sports fish and game. Fish and Game administered management with the annual game-bird licensing fee going toward control measures (Fish & Game, 2012; Piddick, 2011; Spurr & Coleman, 2005). Under the new regime - schedule 5 which defines wildlife that is not protected throughout New Zealand - goose shooting is a 'free for all' as hunters will no longer require a permit to shoot them. According to Littlewood (2011) "Ms. Wilkinson said her decision was a response to years of concern voiced by farmers and landowners."

With the change in classification from a game bird to an unprotected species, new issues arise surrounding the management of the geese. Previously, Fish & Game managed the numbers with control measures entirely funded by licence fees from anglers and hunters (Spurr & Coleman, 2005). The cost to Fish & Game of operating the management plan was approximately \$100,000 a year ((M. Webb, Fish & Game, pers.comm. 2005) in Spurr & Coleman, 2005, p. 7), \$20,000 a year for the central South Island alone (Graybill, 2011). Management costs included the cost of hiring aircraft, helicopters, petrol and ammunition. Adding staff wages to the equation would double the figure (Graybill, 2011). Under the new classification, the management of Canada Geese comes under no singular agency or organisation. As a consequence, several questions now need to be asked about the future of New Zealand's Canada Goose population: Who is going to manage the geese and how will this be done? Whose values will get priority in driving the management and to achieve what ends? Will it be to protect the environment, the waterways and the high-country, to satisfy the farmer by reducing the losses to his crops and finances, or will it be to provide opportunities for hunters, who on one hand want high numbers for their sport, but on the other hand provide the main form of goose control. Hunters also are concerned about the environmental issues.

Previous Management Strategy:

In 1995, a Canada Goose management strategy for the South Island was implemented by Fish & Game (Spurr & Coleman, 2005). This set target goose numbers in 20 management areas within five Fish & Game regions. These target levels added up to a total of 20,350 geese (Spurr & Coleman, 2005). Subsequent 5 year plans drafted for 32 management areas, in the years 2000 and 2005, set total upper target levels at 37,700 and 38,100 respectively and lower target levels of 23,150 and 23,350 (Spurr & Coleman, 2005). Fish & Game have not managed to maintain these lower target levels, with numbers said to be averaging about 35,000 for the past 18 years (see Fig. 1) (Graybill, 2011; Littlewood, 2011), and this has led to continued campaigning from Federated Farmers for the bird to be declared a pest: "It's not native, it spoils the environment and is even an air traffic hazard," said Donald Aubrey (2011), Federated Farmers former game and pest animal management spokesperson. Rising geese numbers and the campaigning by Federated Farmers has brought about the change in classification, taking geese off the game bird schedule and giving them unprotected status (Aubrey, 2011; Coe, 2011).

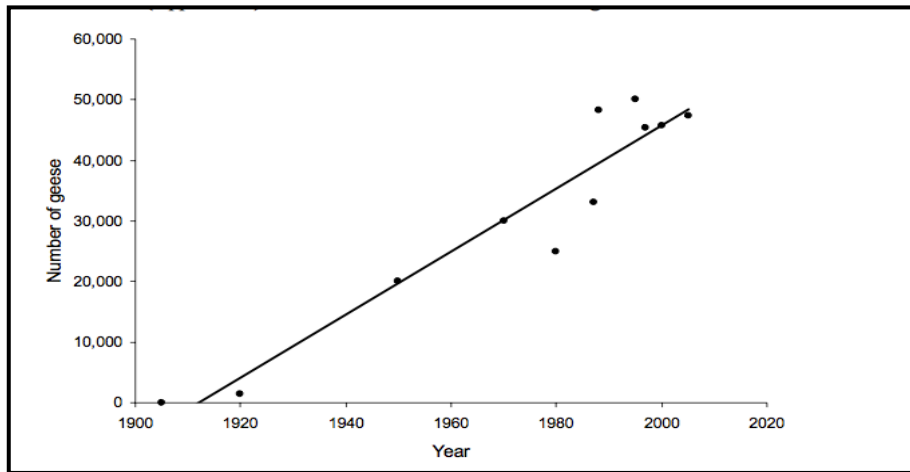


Figure 2: Canada goose population trend in New Zealand since establishment, based on qualitative anecdotal historical data (Spurr & Coleman, 2005)

Health and Safety:

Under the management of Fish & Game, the only firearms legally allowed for hunting geese were shotguns. With the change in classification, any calibre and type of weapon can now be lawfully used for control purposes. This has the potential to create dangerous situations for hunters. What is to stop a person with a high calibre rifle mistaking a goose decoy for the real thing and taking a shot at it, with the goose hunter concealed in his blind only meters away? On the other hand, geese cause a potential threat to aircraft movement around Christchurch airport. To tackle this potential threat aerial culls are undertaken (Parkes, 2011). Health and Safety standards were breached on a recent cull where landowners were reportedly not notified and an aerial cull was undertaken over private land (T. Lanauze, personal communication, March 10, 2011). This action could have resulted in personal injury or livestock injury due to the lack of notification. Fortunately, this was not the case, but it does highlight what may happen with no coordinating body responsible for control and management of the geese.

Cost of control:

With the change in law and Fish & Game losing control of managing geese, there is now no pressure or obligation for Fish & Game to control numbers. If farmers in the past were not prepared to contribute to control costs, with the sole funding coming from Fish & Game, will the fact that Canada Geese are now classified as 'unprotected' mean farmers will undertake large scale culls? Farmers already struggle to find the funds to control rabbits, gorse and broom on their properties. One has to ask where they are going to find the money and if they have the motivation to undertake goose control (The Fishing Website, 2011).

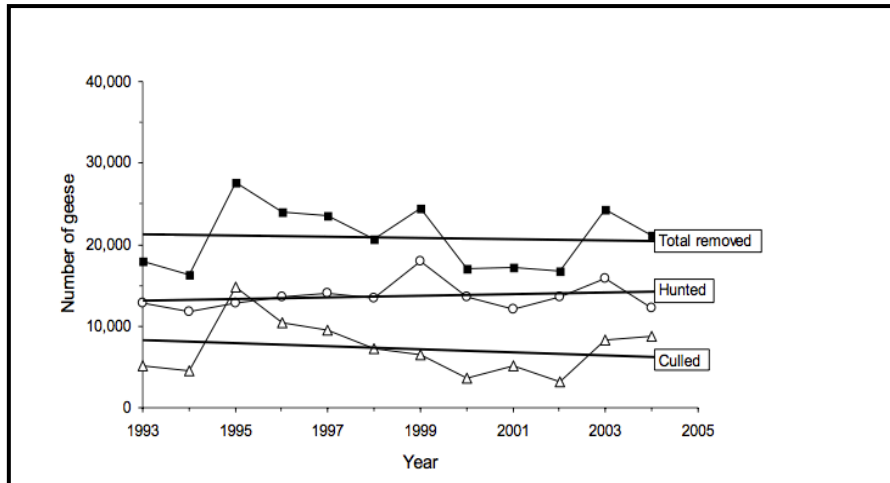


Figure 3: South Island Canada goose numbers hunted, culled, and hunted plus culled (total removed), 1993-1994 (Spurr & Coleman, 2005)

One outcome forecast is that the responsibility of control would be left to regional councils, territorial authorities and the Department of Conservation (DoC) (Graybill, 2011; Littlewood, 2011). DoC is already struggling to meet current control operations to protect threatened species and habitats. An article published in Scoop Independent News (2011) states that “this follows budget cuts of \$54 million over 4 years and future budget cuts in natural heritage management of \$9.3 million per year.” As it is, DoC is under-financed, understaffed and ill-equipped to maintain control of pests in their high conservation value areas. This raises the question of where DoC is going to find the extra funds for goose control (The Fishing Website, 2011). Another outcome is that control costs will fall on ratepayers when landowners and airfields realise the full extent of the costs and ask regional councils and territorial authorities for support (Fensome, 2011).

Stakeholders:

In managing the Canada Goose population, issues are going to arise when aiming to keep different stakeholders happy. Stakeholders include, but are not limited to, hunters, farmers, local Iwi, DoC, Fish & Game, airport authorities, wildlife and bird sanctuaries, birdwatchers, animal right activists, fishermen, waterway users and the general public. In a press release, Donald Aubrey of Federated Farmers (2011) stated, “The key is to act in a cost effective and collective way to manage numbers with the objective of reducing the bird’s overall population in the long term.” The prioritising of values and interests in the ‘collective management objectives’ is a real issue and whether a collective decision can be reached that will satisfy all stakeholders. Will ‘they’ (the new management structure, whoever that may be) be any more successful in undertaking control? There could be a conflict of interest if bird numbers become too low, or vice versa, but will the only deciding factor be an economic one determined solely by farmers? Who should really decide on the correct numbers? With no official organisation responsible for management who will stop conflicts or step in when these conflicts occur? Is the ‘king of game birds’ destined to become just another rabbit?

From a planning perspective:

From a planner’s perspective, we have to take into consideration the different values and perceptions related to geese. For the farmer they are an economic nightmare, with the current goose populations of approximately 32,000 consuming feed equivalent to a 1200 cow dairy herd (Littlewood, 2011). For the waterfowl hunter, Canada Geese are seen as the ‘king of game birds’ and the intention to cull the numbers dramatically poses a substantial threat to the sport of many hunters. What is to happen? Will there be a feast or famine for hunters? If a new control regime proposed to cut the goose numbers to an all time low is implemented, will there be enough quality hunting opportunities available to the goose hunter, or will the opposite scenario take place where

no control occurs and the numbers increase even further (T. Lanauze, personal communication, September 10, 2011)? Then there are the views of other environmentalists aside from hunters, the general public, fisherman and waterway users, local Iwi and others whose opinions at some stage will need to be heard. To address these issues there will need to be a coordinated approach by all interested stakeholders in an attempt to consider, give weight to and attempt to satisfy different needs. A collaborative approach will be needed to build on the gains of previous control efforts to manage the effect of nomadic geese populations across a wide range of land tenures and circumstances (K. Timpson, personal communication, September 12, 2011).



Figure 4: How many is too many? Who decides? (David Coates/Detroit News/AP) Google Images September 13, 2011

Conclusion:

The population of Canada Geese, although arguably remaining stable for the past 18 years, is seen as too high, and a serious threat to farmer's livelihoods, the quality of water bodies, and high country land and pastures. With the change in classification from a game bird to an unprotected species, the future regarding the management of geese is uncertain. With control now no longer being solely administered by Fish & Game, opportunities have been opened up for different agencies to promote and push their ideals relating to how geese should be managed. Health and safety, control costs, various stakeholders' values and interests, public perception and responsibility for Canada Goose control are all issues that need to be addressed if there is to be unified and effective management regime implemented in the future. Will the future of the 'king of game birds' be cooked, or will it be only half-baked?

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