

Waltraud Pix

Friends of Mt Majura (FoMM) Coordinator

To:

The Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment

**Comment regarding
Managing Rabbits in Canberra Nature Park.
A Report to the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment.**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. I fully support the recommendations outlined in the report to adequately resource a strategic rabbit control program using *Primary* and *Maintenance* control and I hope that they will be implemented. I am deeply convinced that efforts to restore and maintain the conservation values of Canberra Nature Park (CNP) will be only sustainable if the Government implements efficient and ongoing measures to control rabbits and generally grazing pressure in CNP.

The direct and indirect damages to native vegetation and other conservation values are well known and documented. Furthermore Parkcare volunteers involved in restoring grassy woodland at Mts Ainslie / Majura have clear evidence that high rabbit abundance not only impacts on the natural regeneration of native vegetation but on active restoration of woodlands such as planting and direct seeding, as detailed below.

Impact on natural regeneration: A survey of trees in a grassy woodland site at the lower slopes of Mt Majura revealed a lack of tree recruitment ([Survey of trees](#) conducted by students, Dr. Phillip Gibbons, Fenner School of the Environment, ANU and Parkcare volunteers on Mount Majura, 8 April 2008). The lack of shrub regeneration as well as the presence of typical rabbit browse lines was evident during an inspection walk at the same area in May 2009 with expert Dr. Brian Cooke. Prior to the *Primary* control of rabbits in 2009 this site had a high rabbit abundance (2.5 warrens / ha; some of the warrens with > 20 active entrances).

Impact on active restoration: Volunteers found that tree and shrub seedlings planted in winter 2008 at a decommissioned land-fill site within the Ainslie Nature reserve required continuous high vigilance and a high level of protection from ringbarking and defoliation by abundant rabbits which was partly achieved by implementing (costly) heavy duty wire netting; the occurred loss of seedlings at this site was almost entirely attributed to rabbit grazing damage.

I would like to take the opportunity to comment on the rabbit control on Mts Ainslie / Majura. To my knowledge this was the first large scale and more systematic control of rabbits in CNP.

The report states (p5) that “at present *Primary* and two sequences of *Maintenance* control have been implemented and monitored strategically on Ainslie/Majura”.

In my view this was not the case. In theory Ainslie / Majura had a *Primary* control in 2009 but this was inadequate as it did not cover the full area of the reserves as large parts of the steeper slopes including drainage lines with high rabbit abundance were not included. In summer 2008/2009 volunteers monitored rabbit warrens at the lower western slopes of Mts Ainslie / Majura and the Watson Woodland. Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) staff were unable to complete monitoring of the steeper parts of the mountains as originally planned due to other duties and subsequent control in 2009 was performed mainly on the lower slopes.

In 2010 PCS carried out *Maintenance* control on Mt Ainslie / Majura. However since the *Primary* control in 2009 had not been thorough on the upper slopes this *Maintenance* control was inadequate. In summer 2009/10 volunteers conducted a second monitoring session that covered most of Mts Ainslie / Majura and found a high abundance of rabbits in areas that were not covered by the initial monitoring and control, indicating rabbits of previously uncontrolled areas had most likely reinvaded primary controlled area. Another issue was the lack of accurate documentation of work (in particular feedback from contractors) which will be crucial to judge the efficiency of control measures and to improve control measures in the future.

To summarize, Ainslie / Majura had a partial *Primary* control in 2009 and inadequate *Maintenance* control in 2010 rather than the *Primary* and two *Maintenance* controls indicated in the report.

In discussions with PCS, volunteers made detailed recommendations to increase the efficacy of a rabbit control program by including quality control measures, feedback from contractors and by equipping PCS staff with GIS skills and software (most of the GIS work for the Mts Ainslie / Majura control was done by volunteers). Furthermore we proposed to measure efficacy by comparing the number of active entrances (rather than the number of recorded warrens) per spatial unit during consecutive monitoring and control sessions.

Volunteers - and PCS staff - have invested a significant amount of time to control rabbits at Mts Ainslie / Majura. Recent weather conditions favour rabbit breeding and numbers are increasing. The lack of resources to perform effective *Maintenance* control means that our investment will be wasted; in a few years we will be back at the starting point.

I think these observations and considerations stress the need outlined in the recommendations of the report, namely

- to adequate resource a rabbit control program (rather than the current on-off approach),
- to develop a rabbit management strategy (rather than ad-hoc approach),
- to fund a dedicated specialist ranger who overviews and implements a strategic rabbit control program,
- to secure the achievements of an initial costly *Primary* control program, and
- to protect the investment in skills and knowledge and enthusiasm of staff, contractors and volunteers.

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Rabbit grazing damage (Photograph Waltraud Pix).
Defoliated and ringbarked Eucalyptus seedling.
Mount Ainslie planting site, 19. 06. 2010.

A map that shows the Mts Ainslie / Majura 2009/10 monitoring data and photographs that show the impact caused by rabbits are available at the Friends of Mount Majura Website <http://majura.org/rabbits/>.

Attached
Mts Ainslie Majura 2008-09 and 2009-10 rabbit monitoring statistics