

Why do brumbies evoke such passion? It's all down to the high country's cultural myth-makers

By Pete Minard for [The Conversation](#)

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Brumby activists and environmentalists seem fundamentally unable to understand one another, despite having a lot in common. They share a love of the high country but are divided over the value or threat of wild horses.

Their mutual incomprehension has been fuelled by historically contested ideas about wildness, and the proper ways in which people should interact with and control the natural world.

Wild horses first appeared in Australia soon after colonisation, as horses escaped or were abandoned. According to historian Eric Rolls, brumbies may have originally got their name from the horses that Private James Brumby abandoned in 1804 when he was transferred from New South Wales to Tasmania. Alternatively, the 19th-century pastoralist E. M. Curr suggested that "brumby" may be a corruption of booramby, a Bidjara word for "wild".

Whatever the origin of the word, pastoral expansion spread brumbies to all corners of Australia during the 19th century.

Settled colonial farmers hated brumbies, viewing them as symbols of the waste and destruction caused by the pastoral industry that the settlers were rapidly displacing. Brumbies also destroyed fences and competed with stock for grass.

Brumbies were destroyed en masse as pests, which also allowed farmers to make a profit from their hides and manes. Sometimes brumbies were even rendered for hog feed. In 1870, the Queanbeyan Age reported that wild horses were "hated and shot by all". Five years later, it predicted that as Australia's population increased, pastoralists would lose control of the fine country "where now the wild horse holds almost undisputed sway" to industrious settled farmers.

By the turn of the 20th century, when Banjo Paterson was writing about his pastoralist friends in the Snowy Mountains, the decline of both pastoralism and wild horses was well underway. Paterson's work is full of a self-conscious nostalgia for a wilder, freer Australia that he knew was under threat.

In Images of Australia, Paterson wrote of remembering the transition from free-roaming pastoralism to fenced farming as the moment when "the few remaining mobs of wild horses were run down and impounded". His idea of the Snowy Mountains as a special place reflecting a disappearing Australia, and of brumbies embodying this specialness, has become culturally important for high country locals.



Brumbies and war

The high country bush legend has been used to argue that the mountain country produced excellent mounted fighting forces during the first world war. Snowy Mountain men certainly enlisted in the Australian Light Horse Regiment and some of them may have supplied their own horses, which could conceivably have come from brumby stock.

But there was no wholesale supply of brumbies for war service. Australia did provide many horses during WWI, but they were Walers, a distinctive Australian breed that was well suited to carrying troops in hot and dry conditions. Australian breeders tasked with supplying horses for the war effort regarded brumby stallions as mongrels that should not be allowed to pollute their bloodlines. The president of the National Agricultural Association of Queensland, Ernest Baynes, went as far as to say that the only way to make brumbies useful for the war effort would be to slaughter and export them “to the countries in which people eat horse, and are glad to get it”.



After the second world war, the historian, children’s novelist and high country local Elynne Mitchell further popularised brumbies through her series of Silver Brumby novels. Her work, along with the resurgence of Paterson’s popularity and the inaccurate memorialisation of the Light Horse Brigade, led to the further romanticisation of brumbies and the forgetting of farmers’ earlier antagonistic and utilitarian views of wild horses.

The romantic brumby became a symbol of local identity, of the high country’s way of life and of resistance to state control.

Gradually increasing government control of the high country led to a decline in cattle grazing in alpine areas, more tourism, scientific study, and the end of licensed brumby running in 1982. This process alienated locals who could no longer experience nature as a working landscape. Instead, state control privileged visitors who passively admired the landscape and scientists who rightly worried about the environmental degradation caused by horses.

Successive governments centralised the control of land, and could not see the local brumby culture. This blindness has led people such as fifth-generation local Leisa Caldwell to feel that the “mountain community has been kicked in the guts over and over. They’ve had their cattle taken, their towns flooded for the Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme and their history destroyed. The last bit of history to show they even existed is the brumbies. If they go, what’s left?”

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