

# Where are the rabbits?

Tim Bloomfield, notes from the presentation at the Victorian Rabbit Management Conference

*You can just as well ask; why are rabbits on my place.*

## **Mapping rabbit infestations and their impact.**

There are three requirements for effective mapping of rabbit warrens and rabbit impact.

**First requirement: have a philosophy to guide your actions.** A reason to get out of bed, to keep you walking across those paddocks in the boiling heat or freezing cold. If all you intend to do is to get rid of rabbits you'll get tired. We need a grander vision, be it for the land, plants, animals, birds and the next generation of farmers, conservationists and naturalists.

Try this, for size: - The landscape is the way it is because of the decisions that have been made, if we want the landscape to be different, we can make different decisions.

It must be asked. Are the rabbits running the place? Is the rabbit in charge of your landscape? What grows, prospers and spreads in your park or paddock or roadside is it what rabbits don't eat. Are the only trees left senescent, have the shrubs no progeny, the herbs, and native flowers sparse or missing.

*It is now considered essential to hold rabbits well below 0.5 rabbits per hectare to enable the regeneration of natural woodlands. (Cooke 2012).*

*And in just two years of heavy grazing by rabbits, the rabbits can change a quality perennial pasture into annual grasses and weeds (Croft 2002.)*

*There is an increasingly cohesive picture confirming that 150 years of rabbit grazing has helped modify and simplify natural ecosystems of southern Australia. Biodiversity has been greatly reduced. Even though rabbits were not uniquely or even primarily responsible for this environmental degradation (Tiver and Andrew 1997), they can, nonetheless, maintain ecosystems in a degraded state, and ecosystem recovery has proved impossible unless they are removed (Cooke 2012; Sinclair 2005).*

Removed. The best way, the scientifically valid and proven in the paddock way to remove rabbit impact is to remove their access to harbour. Get rid of the home of the rabbit, the burrow, the woody weeds and warrens.

**Second requirement: have a plan based on the key to beating the rabbit is to find all the burrows and destroy all the burrows.**

Your plan needs information.

That's your job, whether you are farmer, council environment officer, lifestyle landholder, parks, water authority or an everyday landscape changers. Every burrow must be found; all above ground harbour used by rabbits must be identified and recorded.

The record is a GPS point, a cross on a map, a verifiable point in the landscape on your place that you can return too. This is where you send the rabbit baiter; dozer; excavator; fumigator; and implosion operator to do their jobs.

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When you are out looking for rabbit warrens. You have time to look at the land and ask some questions. Consider the landscape that the warren is in, as you record its position.

Why is the warren there, is it because of the soil type, rocks, slope, aspect, drainage, pasture, access to water, the neighbour, is it Parks fault?

Why has a warren got 15 holes and the next warren, over the fence has 150 holes. The strongest predictor of invasion of rabbits into your land is the closeness and size of your neighbour's warrens to your boundary. A fence is an arbitrary division of the landscape. Rabbits care not of boundaries. We must be the same.

## **Third requirement: - recruit all your neighbours to the cause.**

All the adjoining landholders must be fully involved in the mapping and recording of rabbit harbour, burrows and warrens. Record every warren, GPS every rabbit hole in the earth across the entire area of your group, alliance, friends of, rabbit action group or Landcare network that you are ever going to work on. This information is essential. Get all the data. Lay it on a table, get everyone at a meeting and ask how we can get the commitment for the resources needed to manage these rabbits for the long term.

Now you can plan the attack. Decide the type of equipment, person power needed, and apply the simple proven McPhee recipe (see appendices) for success on rabbits.

Do this: Take pictures of the degraded landscape now, during your work and after, these mapped GPS photo points will show that you can stop the impact of rabbits and change the landscape.

Make the difference that will last 100- even 400 years or more.

Know this: The effective removal of rabbits, by burrow destruction shows immediate and long lasting results. This has been done before. The Rabbit Buster (1996-2001) was demonstrably Victoria's most successful large landscape scale burrow removal effort, with a greater than 10:1 return for every dollar invested

*Warren ripping programmes have been very successful in reducing rabbit numbers by ~83% for up to 15 years. Ten to 15 years after the completion of the warren ripping programs the mean numbers of warren entrances per ha were reduced by 91% (Steve McPhee pers comms., 2015)*

Fourth. Here is your bonus requirement.

## **Fourthly be more determined and persistent than the rabbits and the bureaucrats.**

Demand commitment from the community and government. Commitment is better than a promise of dollars, it lasts longer.

*As much as we need new ways to kill rabbits most of all we need a new will and that is up to you.*

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## References

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## Useful Reading

**Managing Vertebrate Pests: Rabbits.** Williams, K., Parer, I., Coman, B., Burley, J., and Braysher, M. (1995). 'Bureau of Resource Sciences and CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research. (Australian Government Publishing Service: Canberra.)

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**A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There** Aldo Leopold (1949) Oxford University Press

David Peacock and Ian Abbott (2013). **The role of quoll (*Dasyurus*) predation in the outcome of pre-1900 introductions of rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) to the mainland and islands of Australia.** *Australian Journal of Zoology*, **61**, 206–280

### **Appendix 1 Steve (Mongrel) McPhee: - Recipe for successful rabbit control**

**There is a well-defined recipe proven by research (+1960s) for the management of rabbits, which includes;**

1. Baiting prior to ripping to reduce rabbit numbers to lessen the potential of rabbits re-opening warrens
2. Followed by the removal of rabbit harbour, destruction of warrens and removal of surface harbour
3. Followed by maintenance of ripped warrens through fumigation or re-ripping re-opened entrances.

**Research has shown that to deviate from this basic recipe reduces the efficacy of the rabbit management program. (*ie. you will fail*).**