

How to get people to accept lethal control of invasive species

Insights from recent social research in Australia

NSW Vertebrate Pest Management Symposium 2023

19 October 2023

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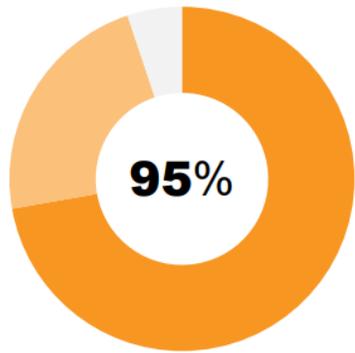
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NATURE IS PART OF OUR NATIONAL PRIDE & IDENTITY – AND CRITICAL TO OUR HEALTH AND ECONOMY. YET 1/3RD OF AUSTRALIANS LACK A DEEP CONNECTION

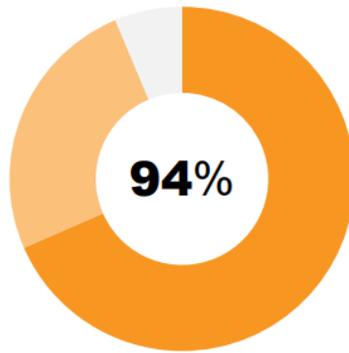
ENGAGEMENT WITH NATURE

FUTURE GENERATIONS



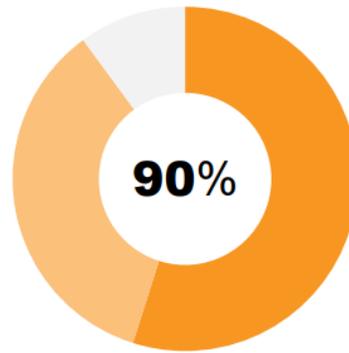
AGREE THAT
It's important to protect
nature for future
generations to enjoy

NATIONAL PRIDE



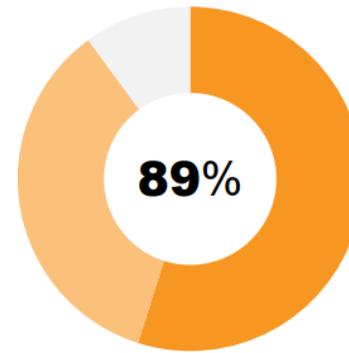
AGREE THAT
Australia has some of the
best landscapes in the
world with plants and
animals found nowhere
else

CRITICAL TO HEALTH & WELLBEING



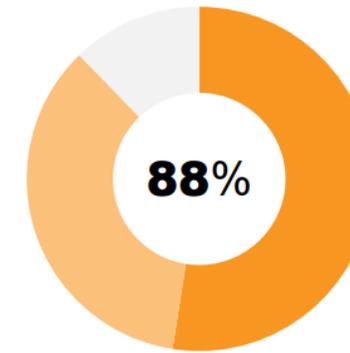
AGREE THAT
Human health &
wellbeing depends upon
a healthy & thriving
natural environment

CRITICAL TO THE ECONOMY



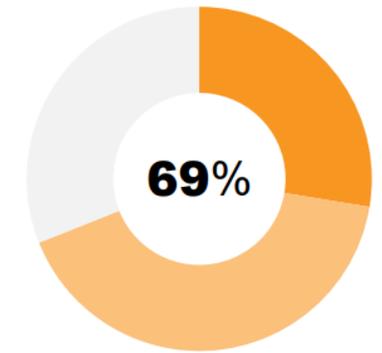
AGREE THAT
A healthy natural
environment is critical to
the Australian economy

PART OF OUR IDENTITY

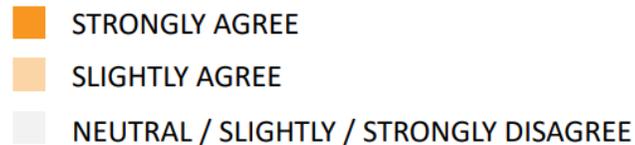


AGREE THAT
Caring for our land and
nature is part of what it
means to be Australian

DEEPLY CONNECTED



AGREE THAT
I feel deeply connected to
Nature in Australia



PEOPLE CARE ABOUT EXTINCTION, HOWEVER THEY AREN'T AWARE OF THE EXTENT OF THE CRISIS

NATURE BELIEFS



78%
(T2B)

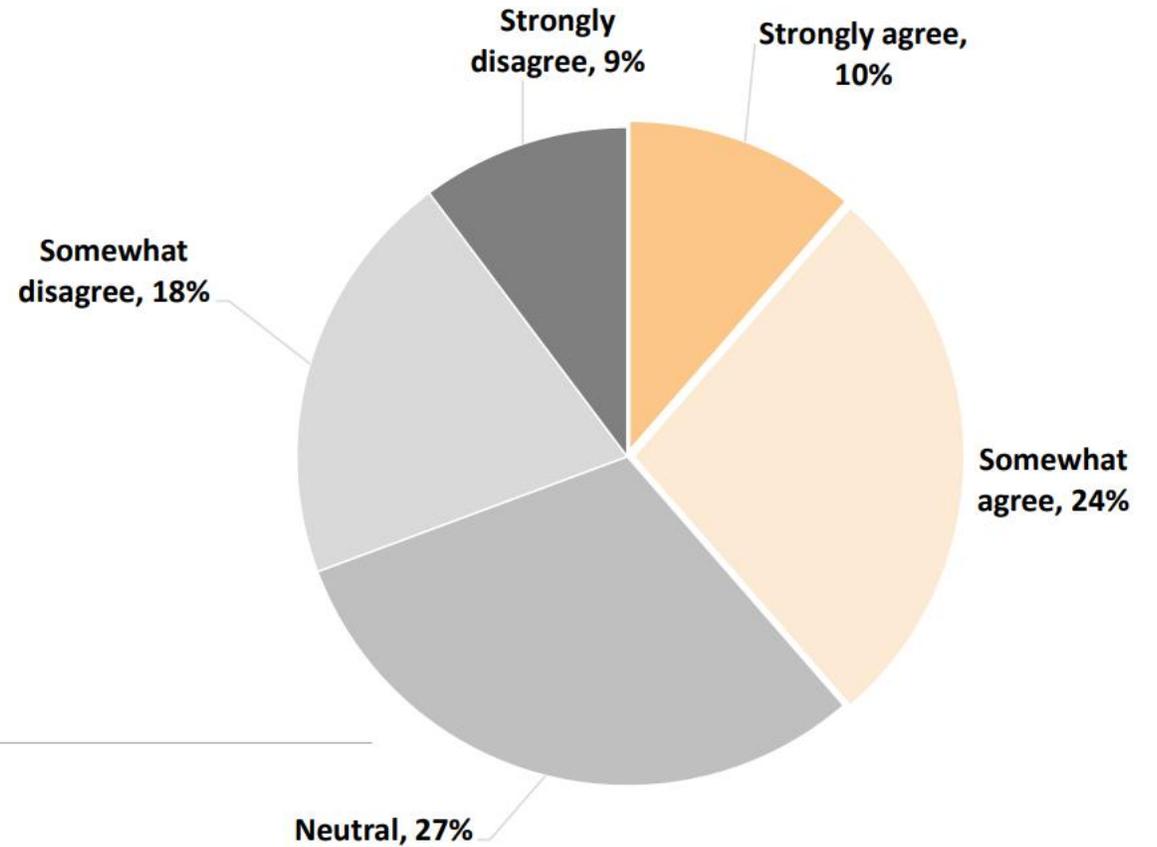
Care about the **extinction of plants and animals**



BUT ONLY

34%

Agree that Australia is in an **extinction crisis**



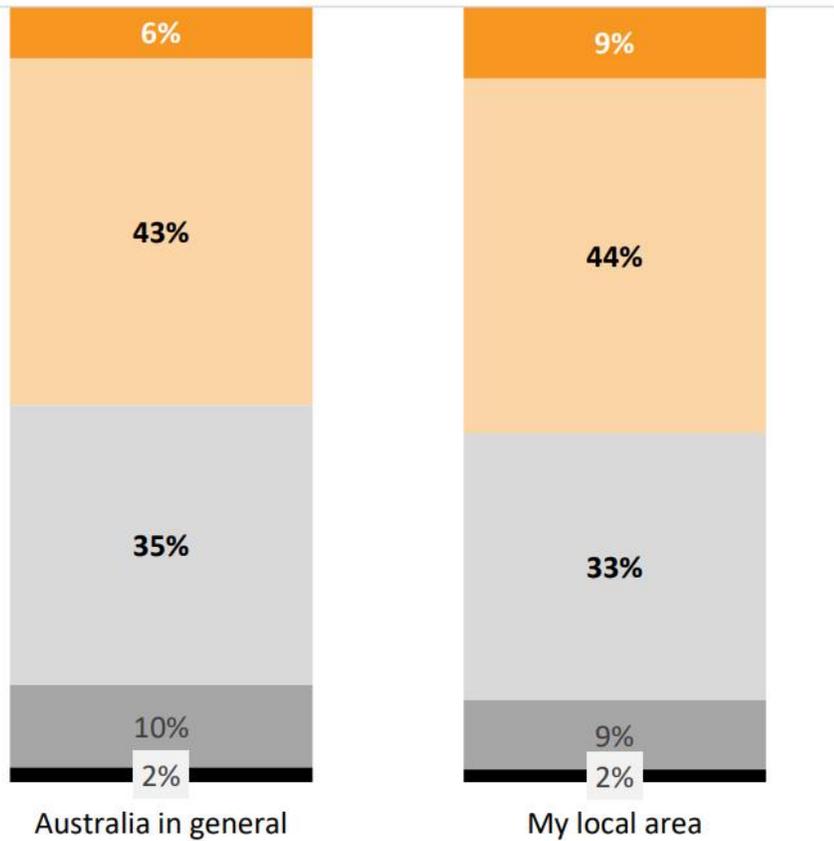
Insights thanks to Australian Conservation Foundation

HOWEVER, MOST THINK AUSTRALIAN NATURE IS IN A GOOD OR FAIR STATE THIS COULD MAKE IT CHALLENGING TO MOTIVATE CONCERN & ACTION

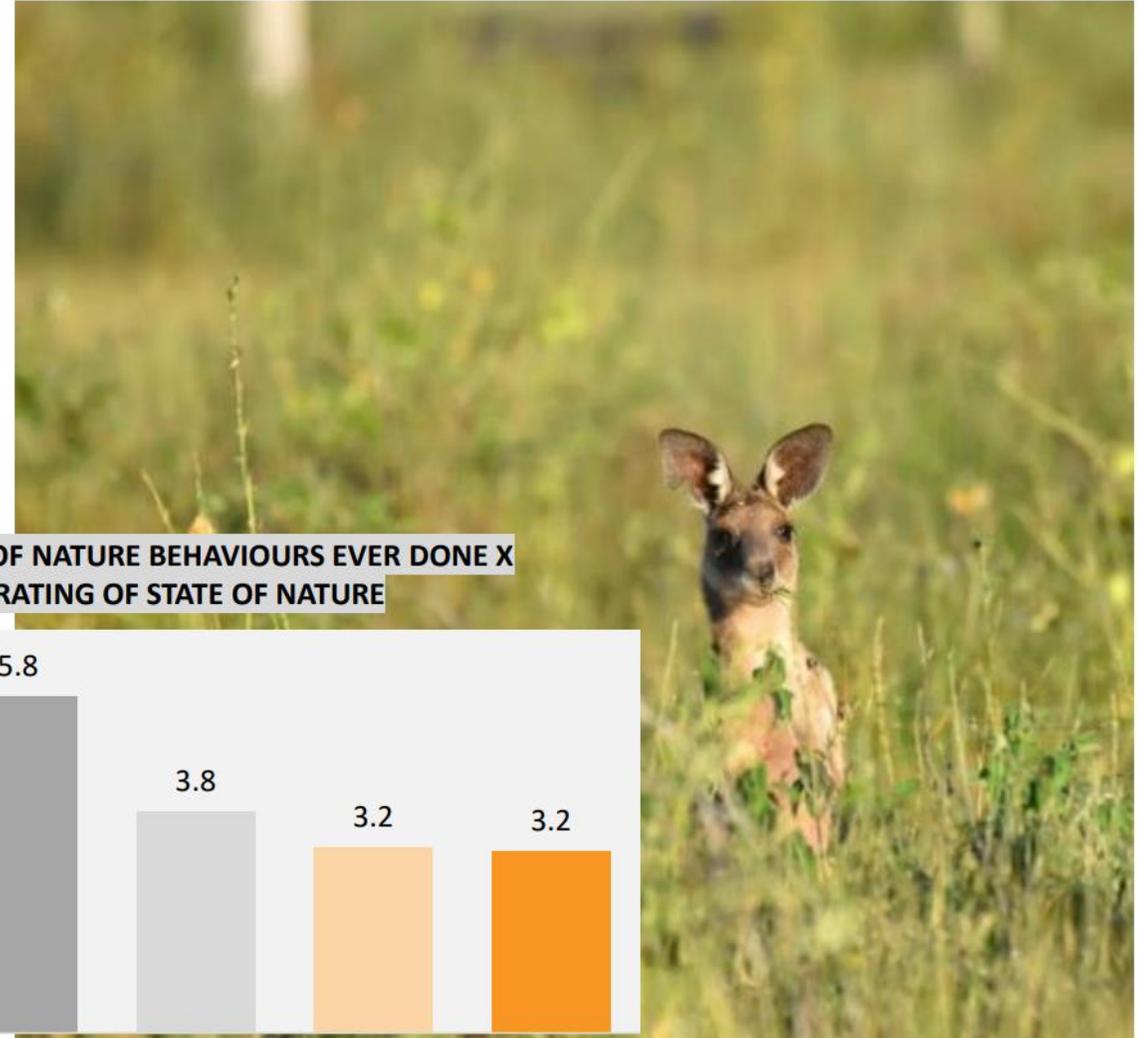
STATE OF NATURE

How would you rate the state / health of nature in the following areas?

Excellent Good Fair Poor Terrible



NUMBER OF NATURE BEHAVIOURS EVER DONE X RATING OF STATE OF NATURE



Methodology and Research Base

Phase one: Invasive species

Quantitative polling questions



- Four question units in the Essential Report, fortnightly online omnibus survey.
- Conducted online from **31st August–7th September 2022** to **n=1,091 respondents**.
- The sample population is nationally representative of 18+ aged Australian residents.

Qualitative focus groups



- Two online over-time focus groups over the course of several days.
- The groups were facilitated via text-based discussion boards.
- Fieldwork from **27th–30th September 2022**, with a sample of **n=31 participants**.
- Participants were from regional and urban areas in Australia

Phase Two: Specific campaign or animal focused

Qualitative focus groups



- Three online over-time focus groups (Text based discussion board) and four live online focus groups (via zoom) over the course of several days.
- Fieldwork from **2nd-22nd November 2022**, with a sample of **n=81 participants**.
- The groups were segmented based on the priorities for the special animal campaign.

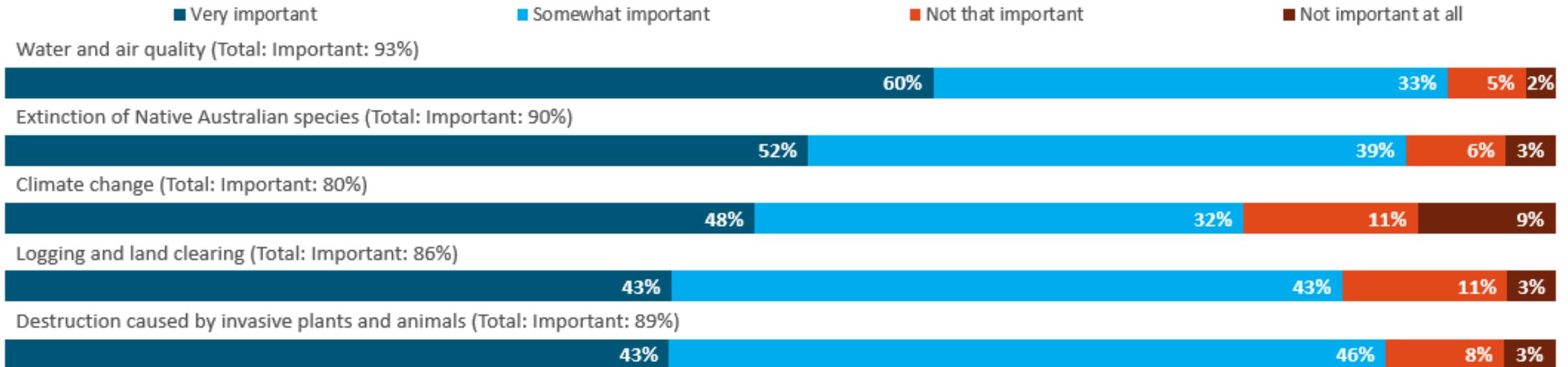
Quantitative polling questions



- 4 question units in the Essential Report, a fortnightly online omnibus survey.
- Conducted online from **23rd-27th November 2022** to **n=1,042 respondents**.
- The sample population is nationally representative of 18+ aged Australian residents.

Perceptions on environmental issues

How important is it that Australia takes action on the following environmental issues? Base: All participants (n=1,042)



Younger Millennial + Gen Z Perception Gap

'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
Invasive species are one of the most significant threats to our environment

Column %	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+
Strongly agree	20%	21%	20%	13%	19%	28%
Somewhat agree	35%	36%	35%	30%	41%	35%
Neither agree, nor disagree	32%	29%	35%	41%	29%	27%
Somewhat disagree	9%	11%	8%	12%	9%	8%
Strongly disagree	3%	4%	2%	3%	3%	2%
Strongly agree + Somewhat agree	56%	57%	54%	43%	60%	62%
Somewhat disagree + Strongly disagree	12%	14%	11%	16%	11%	10%

Regionality and political affiliation

'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
Invasive species are one of the most significant threats to our environment

Column %	Capital	Non-Capital Labor	Coalition	Greens	Minor/Ind
Strongly agree	19%	22%	23%	23%	21%
Somewhat agree	34%	37%	35%	34%	44%
Neither agree, nor disagree	33%	29%	30%	30%	25%
Somewhat disagree	11%	7%	10%	10%	7%
Strongly disagree	3%	4%	3%	3%	3%
Strongly agree + Somewhat agree	54%	60%	58%	57%	65%
Somewhat disagree + Strongly disagree	13%	11%	12%	13%	10%

Perception of vertebrate pest control

To what extent do you support or oppose the humane culling of the following invasive species? Base: All participants (n=1,091)

TOTAL: Support	TOTAL	Gender		Age			Oppose
		Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	
Feral cats	52%	62%	43%	30%	53%	71%	20
Feral deer	37%	44%	31%	25%	36%	50%	27
Feral horses	34%	41%	26%	22%	34%	43%	33
Base (n)	1091	530	561	341	365	385	

Invasive vs feral ?

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **Invasive species** are one of the most significant threats to our environment.

Invasive Species	TOTAL
Strongly agree	20%
Somewhat agree	35%
Neither agree, nor disagree	32%
Somewhat disagree	9%
Strongly disagree	3%
TOTAL: Agree	56%
TOTAL: Disagree	12%
Base (n)	1070

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? **Feral animals** are one of the most significant threats to our environment.

Feral Animals	TOTAL
Strongly agree	13%
Somewhat agree	32%
Neither agree, nor disagree	32%
Somewhat disagree	17%
Strongly disagree	7%
TOTAL: Agree	45%
TOTAL: Disagree	23%
Base (n)	1091

Exploring with focus groups (qualitative)

Invasive species evokes images of a destructive pest and is most commonly associated with animals

A large threat to our native animals is the cane toad, which is spreading at an alarming rate and, due to their poison, can cause the death of our native animals if they try to eat them. There is also a large number of noxious weeds spreading throughout our bush.

(Female, WA, Regional, Pet owner)

Invasive species - rabbits, foxes, cane toads, Indian minor birds all have a habit of over running regions and spreading far and wide. The extent of the threat to Australia is significant and only getting greater as we have failed to control these pests. The threat they pose is to our native species and ultimately to our produce.

(Male, ACT, Urban, No pets)

Feral animals are seen to have a similar environmental impact, but are commonly associated with domesticated animals

I think of animals that have gone wild over time. I believe they pose a similar threat to invasive species in that they also attack native animals and plants. They are different from invasive species in that they are animals that were once domesticated however over time have become feral and attack native animals to survive in the wild.

(Male, SA, Urban, Cat owner)

Management tools

In order to protect native animals and plants from invasive species such as feral animals and weeds steps need to be taken. Which of the following methods would you be comfortable with? Base: All participants (n=1,042)

Weed killers



Shooting



Baiting



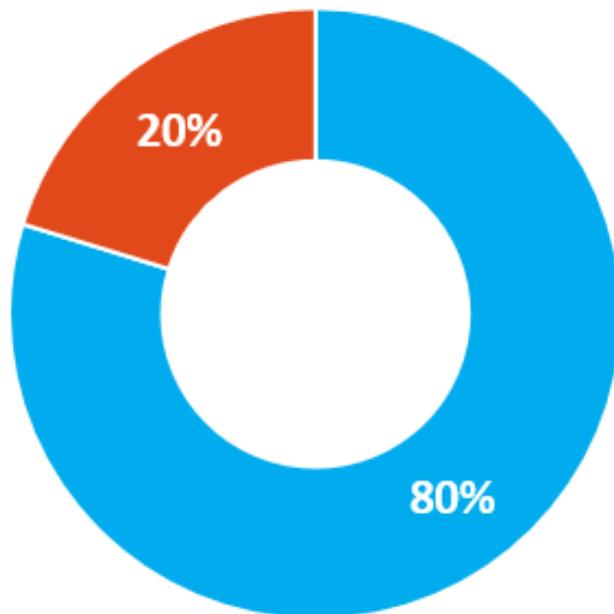
- I'm comfortable in the right circumstances
- I'm comfortable as a last resort
- I would need to hear a convincing argument before I was comfortable
- I'm not comfortable

 Quantitative data from the Essential Report

Framing action as a choice

Which of the following statements do you most agree with?

Base: All participants (n=1,042)



- Australian native plants and animals have greater cultural importance than introduced species
- Introduced invasive species should be treated the same as Australian native animals and plants

When the choice between natives and invasives is established with a participant from their initial engagement with the issue, they are more likely to show support for management and become an advocate for the cause.

Once established, some participants are seen to use this argument and rhetoric to convince others and justify their view point.

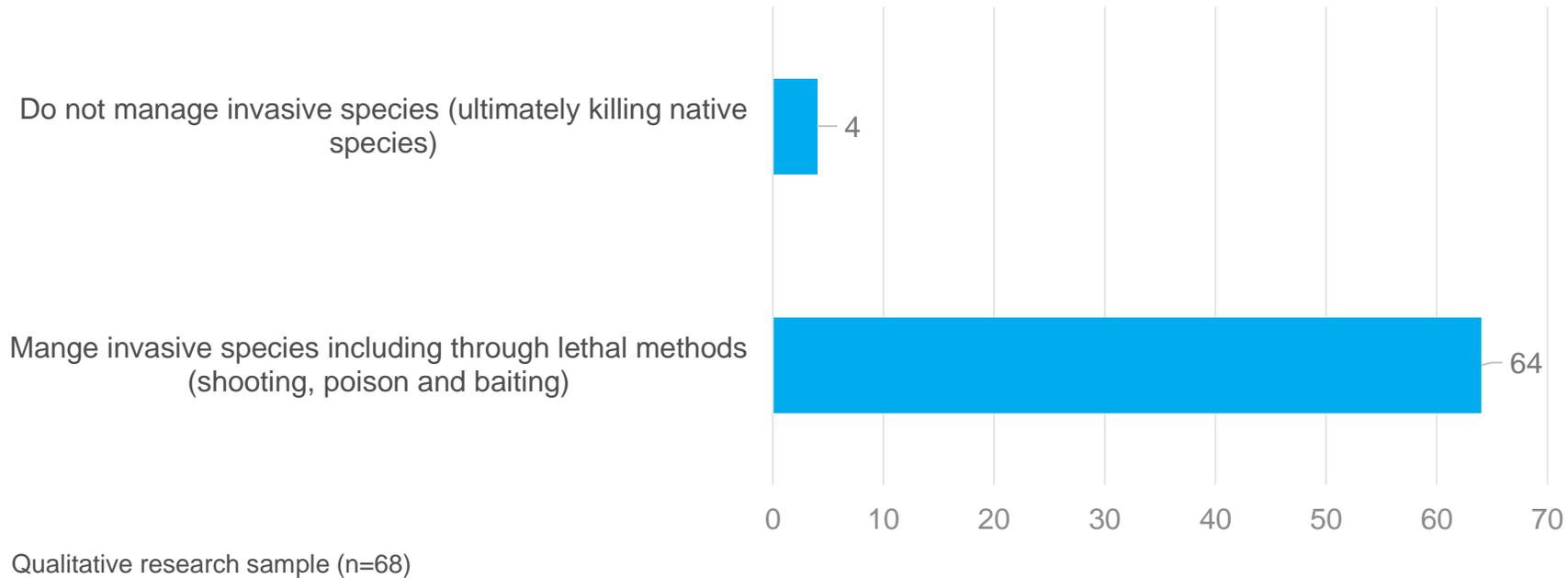
When it's an actual feral animal that we are never going to be able to tame or house train or anything, unfortunately I would rather see something like that die a slow death than one of something that I love die, being ripped apart by a feral animal.

(Female, VIC, Urban, Cat Owner)

When presented with the choice of protecting native or invasive species, native are the priority



When presented with the choice, Australians will choose the lives of native animals over invasive species. In all online overtime focus groups, once engaged in the issue participants were asked to make this choice, with 90% of respondents prioritising native species.



Once engaged in the issue, support for lethal action is almost unanimous, with most viewing management as a 'necessary evil'

- Participants believe drastic measures are necessary to protect Australia's flora and fauna. They therefore think lethal action plays a role in the suite of measures. This is true across both regional and urban participants, with no significant differences in support levels.
- Women and younger people are more likely to be unsure of the issue at first: once engaged there is not difference in support for lethal management
- Participants caveat, however, that cruelty and unintended side-effects need to be minimised.

I don't like the idea of shooting, however if it helps to save our native wildlife then it may be a necessary evil if there is no other alternative

(Female, WA, Regional, Pet owner)

I think lethal action is necessary and unavoidable if we want to properly protect our native wildlife however it must be done humanely.

(Female, NSW, Urban, No Pets)



Communication recommendations

Visuals are highly effective in displaying the spread and impact of invasive species



To most, the impact and spread of invasive species is not visible, meaning it can be difficult for Australians to grasp the extent of the damage inflicted, particularly by weeds or non-carnivorous animals.

The use of visuals, such as videos and images are effective in showing the reality of the crisis.



Image A – Image presented in the phase two horses group

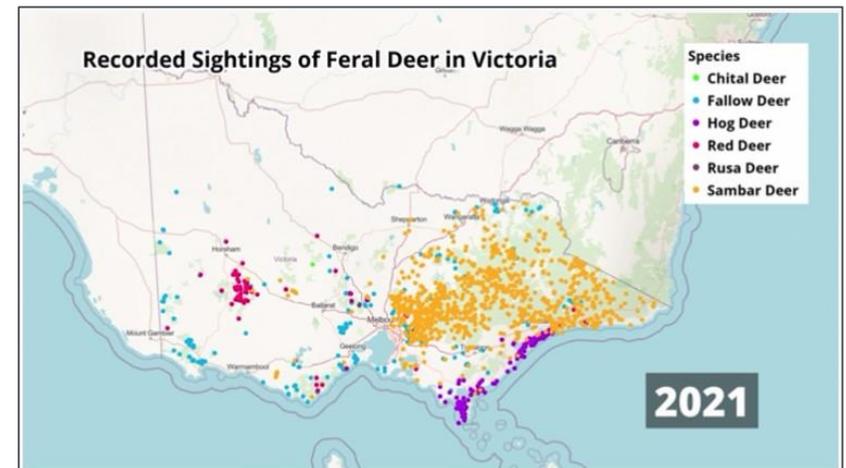


Image B – screenshot of video presented in the phase two deer group

[In response to the image A]

I was aware of the situation but I had not seen such damaging footage until today. I love horses but foremost I love Australia and our natural environment and as an invasive species, it is cruel, but they have to be culled.

(Female, WA, Urban, Pet owner)

[In response to image B]

It seems the last few years have quite significantly affected the population. This increases my concern and urgency to control this.

(Non-binary, VIC, Urban, Phase 2 deer group)

Once engaged in the choice between natives and invasives participants are unlikely to accept opposition messages



After discussing the significant impacts that invasive species have on the Australian environment and native species, strong opposition messages have little to no impact on participants views. This includes the use of strong language of inhumane deaths and graphic images.

The impacts of invasive species on Australia's native flora and fauna should be at the forefront of lethal management campaigns to counteract the oppositions arguments.

I understand the perspective however, the risk of invasive species is greater than these issues. The same arguments can be made about the predatory attacks these animals have on native wildlife. So, I disagree with this argument.

(Female, QLD, Urban, Pet Owner)

This doesn't change my opinion one bit. We don't see how cruel and brutal cats are to the poor native animals they catch, play with and torture till they are ready to kill them.... And besides, our rare, unique native animals are far more important. They are irreplaceable. There will always be cats , foxes, deer, horses etc. but our native animals are only found here. We have an obligation to protect them and their habitats.

(Male, NSW, Regional, No pets)

Stimulus used in focus group

No matter how you deliver it and the controls in place, the culling of animals is inevitably cruel.
Aerial shootings deaths are slow, painful and brutal.

Majestic animals like brumbies and deer are shot dead in front of their families, leaving their babies to starve.

Indiscriminate poisoning of cats is just as bad, with no way of discriminating between feral and domestic animals.

The risks of painful, inhumane death for innocent animals are just too great. We can't have this type of suffering on our hands.



Showing empathy and acknowledging that lethal management is a 'sad reality' can cement support



Imbuing messaging on invasive species lethal management with empathy through acknowledging the sadness and discomfort of readers is highly effective at cementing participants support in the campaign.

Framing needs to:

- **Appear empathetic** – this shows participants that those undertaking lethal action care about wildlife and that it is a necessary step to save native species.
- **Acknowledge the difficulty** – this is often missing when discussing this issue and is important in making readers feel heard.
- **Suggest all other options have been explored** – emphasising that alternatives have been reviewed acknowledges the difficult choice.

Examples of empathetic framing:

No one likes killing Animals. But to truly care for Australia's unique environment sometimes we need to do things that we shouldn't have to do. The sad reality is that we need an urgent intervention to preserve Australian native plants and animals. That means the culling of a large number of animals. It means shooting and baiting with lethal poisons.

We wish there was another way, but if we care about our unique ecosystem and what makes our country extraordinary, we need to act now.

Placing blame on the invasive animals can lead to backlash



When discussing invasive animals and their impact on the environment and our native species, participants are quick to reject commentary that blames the animal for their actions, suggesting that they are acting on instinct. This can lead to participants defending and aligning with the plight of invasive species.

Entering the conversation with emotional intelligence by acknowledging that the animals themselves are not at fault, but they do not belong in the Australian ecosystem is more effective in establishing engagement. This sentiment removes judgement from the animals and instead returns the argument to be about the choice between invasive species and native species.

Effective framing:

Even when cats seem to be 'playing' with wildlife, they can be causing injury and stress to other animals.

It's not the cat's fault.

When presented with an opportunity, they act on instinct. We can't change the behaviour of cats but we can support better choices by cat owners.

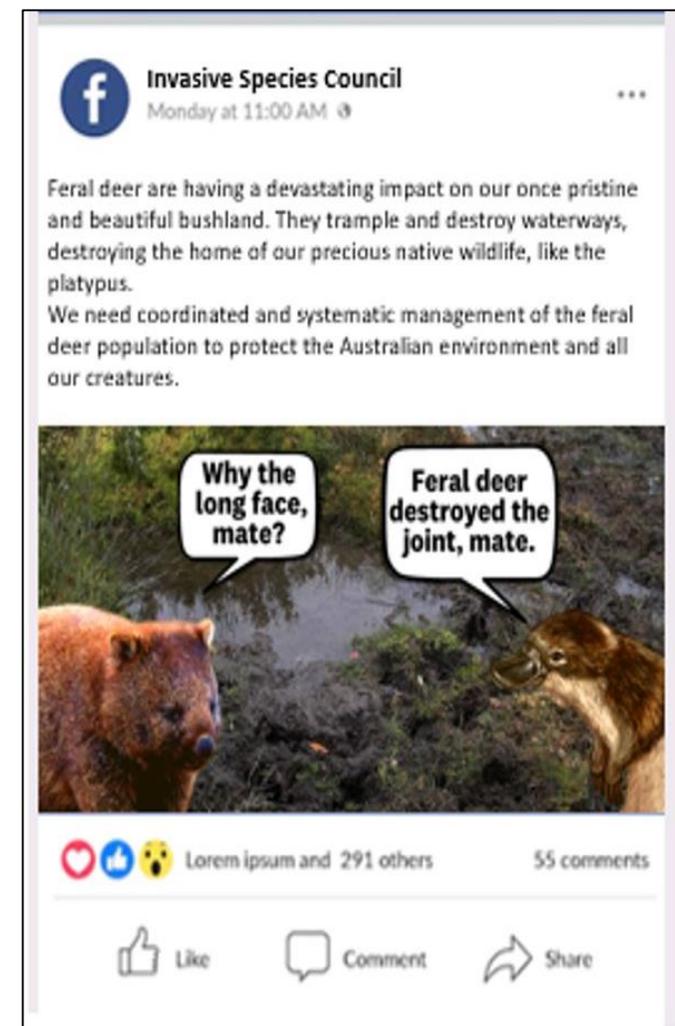
Message framing that doesn't cut through



Biosecurity - strongly associated with Border Force and quarantine compliance, disconnected from invasive species

Economic arguments - can appear cold and removed from the emotional reality of the topic

Humour - appears out of touch with the seriousness of the issue





1. Build a common point of values connection

Australians strongly connect to the idea that native species are of greater importance than introduced species. This should be used as the basis for the conversation about managing invasive species numbers.



2. Anchor your proposition with facts

Anchoring the need for invasive species management through strong facts about their impact on animals and the environment is key.



Every year cats kill more than 2 billion animals
They are the leading cause of mammal extinctions in Australia and their populations have grown significantly in recent years.



3. Provide clear choices between invasive & native species

At its core, the management of invasive species boils down to two choices:

- Manage invasives by reducing population numbers, or
- Ultimately kill native species by not taking action on invasives.



4. Sell the outcome, not the method

Although Australians may feel uncomfortable with different management methods or the death of invasive species, they make the choice to protect native animals as this is more important to them.



5. Have an emotionally safe conversation

The idea of killing invasive species is a difficult conversation for many Australians, however, they will make the choice to do so for the safety of our native species and environment.



‘We can have abundant native wildlife, or feral cats, but we can’t have both. The sad reality is we need to tackle the millions of feral cats in Australia if we are to stop our native animals from disappearing’

Messaging Highlights

- **Emphasise skilled and trained teams, support of voices like CSIRO and RSPCA**
- **Acknowledge alternatives have been considered, but proven ineffective**
- **Frame invasive species management as a choice between action and inaction**
- **Engage early in the choice between natives and invasives**
- **Highlight extinction of native species, preferably cute or iconic, above the destruction caused by invasives**
- **Use visuals to highlight the impact and spread of invasive species**
- **Show empathy and acknowledge that lethal management is a ‘sad reality’ to overcome barriers around the sadness of killing animals**
- **Don’t blame the animal for their actions**
- **Consider elevating the voices of women or young people to connect more broadly**

Baiting

Most Australians initially show concern for the use of baiting

Three key factors increase support:

- **Highlighting the desired outcome** from the use of baiting through success stories, such as animals being reintroduced.
- Emphasising that baiting is conducted in **a targeted manner**.
- Emphasising **that the use of baiting is a choice** between a invasive species death through baiting, or a native animal death.



5 key elements for successful communication on invasive species



1.

Build a common
point of values
connection



2.

Anchor your
proposition
with facts



3.

Provide clear
choices between
invasive and
native species



4.

Sell the
outcome not
the method



5.

Have an
emotionally safe
conversation



invasive
species council

invasives.org.au

Acknowledgement:
Big thank you to the team
at **Essential Media** for their
hard work on this:

Peter Lewis
Hannah Barnett
Jane Garcia
Mayank Gurani

**And to the ISC
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