

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL WILD EQUID CONFERENCE

A REPORT AND REVIEW

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The **Australian Brumby Research Unit (ABRU)** has done their fair share of round-ups, but this was a muster of an entirely different sort. They came from all over. From France, Sweden and Germany, from New Zealand and the USA. From capital cities and country towns across the continent of Australia, from just down the road in Alice Springs. Some were as young as fifteen, some were closer to 70. There were students, veterinarians, farriers and trimmers. There were teachers, trainers and a jillaroo. But no matter how diverse in age, nationality or occupation, they all shared one thing in common – a passion for horses.



The International Wild Equid Conference was held June 21-26, 2010, in Kings Canyon, Northern Territory. It was the first of its kind, an idea hatched by Brian Hampson to celebrate finishing four years of PhD research on the brumby foot, to share what he's learned and to offer people the chance to experience wild horses in their natural habitat at his favourite research site.

The conference took place in and around Kings Creek Station, a working cattle and camel property with accommodation facilities in the heart of outback Australia. The amenities were not what you'd expect at a typical conference. No fancy hotel rooms, lavish breakfast buffets or city lights shining through a high-rise window. Instead 44 guests slept in twin-share canvas tents on wooden platforms, had bacon and eggs from the barbeque each morning and were

surrounded by red sand and desert scrub for as far as the eye could see.

Helen Coop, a farmer from New Zealand, initially hoped the conference would be in a university setting, a logical choice given all the scientific presentations and lectures packed into the week. But it took no time at all to change Helen's mind. "With the red desert all around us," she said, "it couldn't be better. Being here at Kings Creek Station has elevated the conference to special, or to remarkable, really." Steven Petersen, guest speaker from Brigham Young University in Utah, USA, agreed: "Most conferences I go to, everyone scatters after the meetings are over. But at Kings Creek Station, there was a lot of interaction at the tent sites, people came together in ways that wouldn't have happened without a set-up like this. I think the bonding was a really important

part of the conference and made it a more positive experience for everyone.”

It wasn't just the venue that made the International Wild Equid Conference unique. It was also the range of activities. Brian, along with Magdalena Zabek, the spirited ABRU team member who played a key role in organizing the event, divided the conference into three main parts: brumby education, scientific presentations and outback adventure.

Brumby Education

For the first three mornings, attendees were transported by troop carriers and four-wheel-drives to a desert corral about ten minutes from Kings Creek Station. There, they observed Brian, Magdalena and a few lucky guests work with three brumbies that had been captured, with minimal handling, the day before the conference began. By the end of the third brumby handling clinic, each of the wild horses tolerated a saddle and the weight of a rider.



For Bonnie Vagg, an equine science student at Charles Sturt University in New South Wales, it was a great opportunity to see how different people handled the wild horses. “You might not necessarily agree with the way someone’s doing something, but everyone explained their actions and the reasons behind them.” Frances Dinn, also an equine science student at Charles Sturt University, had similar feelings. “My favourite thing was watching the different people handle the brumbies each morning . . . having Brian work with the

black mare on the first day, then having Jason Ransom come at it from his behavioural perspective, then seeing Viv Lawson with her background in Pat Parelli’s training techniques. Looking at how different people achieve similar end results with the same horses has been really interesting.”



This part of the conference was a drawing card for many of the attendees. Melanie Quick, a veterinarian, horse trainer and accomplished rider from Victoria, came to look at the brumby feet and to witness their movement up close. But mostly she wanted to observe how the horses, as wild animals, reacted to handling. “We’ve been given the chance to see what the clean slate looks like,” Mel said. “Domestic horses have all this baggage and you don’t know where it’s come from. With these brumbies, there’s no baggage – if they’ve got some problems with their training and handling, you just saw it happen 20 minutes ago.” Mel was fascinated by how malleable and cooperative the horses were.

Jo Shannon, a veterinarian and psychiatrist from Sydney, shared the same view. “I was absolutely amazed to see how quickly the brumbies got used to being with people because, in my experience, domesticated horses take ages to reach the same point. I thought there would be more fear with the brumbies, but there was less – possibly because their first contact with humans was actually quite gentle and maybe not as intrusive as I’d expected.”

In addition to observing the brumbies up close in the corral, the conference attendees also had opportunities to see the wild horses in their natural environment. Piling into troopies and four-wheel-drives, small groups of guests were taken further out in the desert to see bands of brumbies running free, wild camels grazing and even a few dingos along the way. "The ABRU team didn't just talk about the desert brumby," said Petra Buckley, a veterinarian, active horse rider and lecturer at Charles Sturt University in New South Wales. "They shared their knowledge in the actual setting, and they went out of their way to show us the little secrets – the waterholes and the tracks. I saw it as an invitation into their brumby world and it was fantastic to be a part of that."



The desert surrounding Kings Creek Station belongs to the Aboriginal people of Ukaka, and it's thanks to Brian, and his relationships with the traditional landowners, that the conference guests were permitted to be there. "We've been able to see the desert in a way you'd never experience it if you were travelling with your family or on a coach tour," said Helen Coop. "It's really a privilege." Kris Adrian, a natural hoof trimmer from Western Australia, couldn't agree more – being in the four-wheel-drive with Brian was a highlight. "That was what made the week for me," Kris said, "because it was something I just couldn't do if I'd come here on my own."

Some guests even had the chance to sit quietly in hides by a waterhole – during the day or long after dark – and

were rewarded as bands of wild horses came to drink, splash and roll in the mud. "Last night," Kris added, "being out at the waterhole and watching the brumbies under a full moon . . . it's something you just can't arrange for yourself. That was very special."



Scientific Presentations

Each night of the conference, the rustic outback dining hall was charged with energy as guests enjoyed a hearty meal and shared the experiences of their day. But once they had cleared their plates, it was time to settle down on picnic table benches and absorb the evening lectures.

Monday night, July 21st, ABRU team member Professor Chris Pollitt of the University of Queensland presented "*Central Australia: Natural history, exploration and settlement.*" Lisa Stewart, a student from New Zealand, thought this was a great way to kick off the conference. "Being in the outback," she said, "was a new experience for quite a few people, and there's a lot more to see here in the desert than just brumbies." Chris' lecture was followed by Brian Hampson's "*Central Australia brumby research activities and the reason for choosing the desert.*" Steven Petersen, guest speaker from Utah, USA, brought the evening to a close with his lecture on "*Mustang GPS tracking,*" offering people an interesting look at an entirely different population of wild horses.

Tuesday evening, Chris Pollitt spoke again, this time about "*The wild horse foot.*" His presentation was

followed by Brian Hampson's thesis research on "*Desert horse GPS tracking.*"



Wednesday night, Jason Ransom, guest speaker from the U.S. Geological Survey in Colorado, offered fascinating insight into "*Mustang behaviour*" based on his wild horse and burro research. Petra Buckley thought that having experts like Jason and Steven come from the United States greatly added to the conference. "It was fantastic to hear their views and experiences and research on mustangs and to see the similarities and differences to the Australian brumbies."

Thursday evening, ABRU team member and PhD student Melody de Latt delivered a short synopsis of her thesis topic, "*Insulin resistance in horses.*" And on Friday night, the last speaker of the conference was Dave Berman who presented "*Ecology of feral horses in Central Australia*" and addressed the impact of the wild brumbies on the environment and how to manage their population. For Kelly Crombie, an owner and trimmer from Victoria, this was a turning point. "I was one of those people who was vehemently against culling because I'd only heard the bad side of it," she said. "But I really valued Dave's opinion - he is clearly so passionate and loving towards horses. I am open to options now." Dave also entertained the group with his sense of humour and charming Australian bush poetry. Many guests agreed it was the perfect finale.

For Jess Wynne, an equine science student at Charles Sturt University in

New South Wales, hearing the speakers at night clarified what she saw in the field each day. The information, she believed, was given at just the right level - not too scientific so it was impossible to understand, but not too basic either. Frances Dinn appreciated the variety of presenters. Getting different perspectives from different lecturers meant she was exposed to a broad range of ideas and didn't risk leaving the conference with a one-sided viewpoint.

When you have almost fifty intelligent people in one place, there are bound to be differences of opinion. And there were. For Peter Strange, a "horse nut" from New South Wales, that's what made the trip worthwhile. "The highlight for me was the controversy that blew up around Chris Pollitt's take on the hoof function," he said. "I love that sort of debate and it's certainly given me some food for thought."



Fay Hatch, a critical care nurse and competitive rider from Alice Springs with a passion for horse nutrition, also acknowledged the twists and turns throughout the week. "I may not agree with everything that the lecturers have said, but I think being challenged is what we're here for." Helen Coop would have loved more time with each speaker and more opportunity to question. "Like any kind of travel," she said, "it's always a reconnoitre. You can't expect to get all the answers. So coming to a conference like this opens up an opportunity for yet more study, which is why I would come to another one."

Outback Adventure

As if the brumby education and scientific presentations weren't enough, Brian and Magdalena made sure that each guest experienced the environment surrounding Kings Creek Station in three novel ways: on quads, atop camels and from a helicopter. "They've made a big effort to accommodate us," said David Buckley who, along with six-year-old daughter, Tess, and eight-year-old son, Finn, joined his conference-attending wife, Petra, for a family holiday. "If you come all the way here, it's nice to have so many activities, plus the sight-seeing. We've done so much!"



For Tess, the highlight of her trip was riding a camel. For Finn, it was being in a helicopter and seeing his first shooting star. But if you think for a minute that these pleasures belonged only to the young, think again. Steven Petersen owns two quads back in Utah and uses them often. He went on the desert ride because it was pre-arranged for him but was surprised by how much he loved it. "Coming from a completely different country," Steven said, "everything has been new to me. It's been a total adventure from the day I got here."



Like Steven, Jo Shannon went on the camel ride because it was scheduled in advance. "If it hadn't been organized for me," said Jo, "I wouldn't have done it, but I'm so glad I did." And for many of the guests, seeing the desert from the air gave an entirely new perspective. "The helicopter was great," said Lisa Stewart "because we saw a birds-eye view of the landscape that the brumbies live in as well as the brumbies themselves."

The conference also included two major sight-seeing excursions. The first was to Kings Canyon, about 36 kilometres away, and the second was an all-day visit to Uluru (Ayers Rock) and Kata Tjuta (The Olgas). For many international and Australian attendees, it was their first experience in the Red Centre and they were grateful for the opportunity to see the iconic tourist sights. Jo Shannon explained: "To go to Ayers Rock and realize that it wasn't just a rock, that there was actually life within it . . . to go into Kings Canyon and experience that . . . to fly over the area in a helicopter was just, for me, a magical experience."



There's no doubt the days and nights were full. "It was really packed in," said Kelly Crombie, "but I'm glad it was. If we were left to book the activities at our leisure, we probably wouldn't have done it. We may have had to rush from time to time, but I think that made us fit more into a day. It was tough to stay up late at night and get up early in the morning, but I'm really glad we did. As it is, I feel like we're leaving too soon!"

The Big Take-Away

The brumbies, the desert, the science, the sights, the camels, quads and helicopters. When all is said and done, what are the attendees of the first International Wild Equid Conference taking away with them?



For many, it was the experience of meeting so many like-minded people. "There's such a diverse range of people at the conference and they're all doing such amazing work," said Ashley Kelly from Sydney. "For me, as a student about to graduate, it's a great opportunity to learn what everyone's doing, to get some contacts and to see where I might be able to go that I didn't even know existed before." Fay Hatch agreed. "The networking has been just phenomenal for me," she said. "It's been such a great opportunity to be with so many learned people in an environment like this for five days, and people make everything."

"We're not just learning from the lecturers at night," added Bonnie Vagg. "We're with such a fantastic bunch of people, they're all really friendly and it's easy to turn around, talk to someone different and find out a bit more about them." Kelly Crombie felt "overwhelmed" by the conference attendees – for her, meeting a lot of people who love horses the way she does was really special. And Petra Buckley was particularly pleased that the conference was open to everybody in the industry, not just veterinarians. "I think it can work really well to have scientific people and non-

scientific people together because a good scientist will also realize there's a lot of knowledge in a non-scientific world as well as a valuable and different perspective."

Finally, there was one aspect of the conference that wasn't on the schedule of events, but made a lasting impression on everyone. Ian Conway, owner of Kings Creek Station, shared his story about the neighbouring Aboriginal community of Ukaka and his quest to provide the children with an education and a way out of the impoverished third-world conditions in which they live. When Kelly Crombie first decided to attend the conference, she thought it would be a fun chance to learn about horses' feet, maybe chat to a few other people with similar interests. But this part of the week was life changing for her. "I am taking away so much more," Kelly said. "I never expected to meet and experience people as inspiring as the Conways." Steve Roberts, a veterinarian from New South Wales, agreed. "A big highlight for me," he said, "was seeing Ian Conway's passion for what he does. It's very moving and I hope I can contribute somehow to his efforts to help the Ukaka children."



To this end, Brian has taken the lead by donating \$3000 from conference fees to the "Conway's Kids" trust fund (<http://www.conwayskids.org.au>) and Magdalena followed suit by contributing almost \$1000 after three of her paintings were auctioned Friday night. Among the guests, there is already talk of making personal donations and sending clothes, blankets and books to the Ukaka children through Lyn Conway, Ian's wife. "Sadly, we

can't box up education, hope, healthcare or happiness," said Jason Ransom, guest speaker from Colorado, USA. "The situation continues to break my heart."



Heading Home

It's 4:00 a.m. Saturday morning. The stars are still bright in the sky as weary guests roll their luggage through the red dirt to the idling bus and make their way to a very early breakfast. Some have just emerged from their warm tents, wrapped in scarves and wearing beanies against the desert chill. Others have been awake all night, high on the experience of a brumby-watching vigil at the waterhole by the light of a full moon. As the conference comes to an end and the guests prepare to head home, could things have gone any better?

Sure. Some attendees would have preferred more science and formal presentations, less of the touristy stuff.

Susan Johnston is a freelance writer from Melbourne. She would like to thank the ABRU team for welcoming her – a non-horse person! – so warmly into the group and for introducing her, up close and personal, to the desert brumbies and the extraordinary people who love horses.

Magdalena Zabek is the "art-brain" of the ABRU. Her life revolves around horses. In addition to studying them in different environments – from the rich pastures of Queensland to the red deserts of Northern Territory – she loves to photograph them, paint them, train them and ride them in various disciplines.

Others wished for a slower pace, though some wanted more to do. Many had hoped for hands-on time with the horses, maybe a turn in the ring during the brumby handling clinics. Quite a few struggled with fatigue in the evening lectures and would have gladly traded them for breakfast talks. Some would have liked short presentations by the conference attendees themselves to learn what each was doing. Others just wanted a more specific packing list, a set of conference notes and a name badge.

But having said all that, did they get their money's worth? Absolutely. And would they recommend it to friends? Without a doubt. The response to the first-ever International Wild Equid Conference was overwhelmingly positive. Grateful to have had *this* experience in *this* place with *these* people, we are so glad we came.

