

FACT SHEET: KANGAROOS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

ARE KANGAROOS IN PLAGUE POPULATIONS?

Government figures show that between 2001 and 2006 populations crashed across the country by 50-70%¹. The Murray Darling Report talks about kangaroo density in relation to extinction where populations below 2 kangaroos per sq.km are quasi-extinct. However IN MOST OF S.A. AND N.S.W. WHERE THE COMMERCIAL INDUSTRY EXISTS, KANGAROOS HAVE ALREADY BEEN DECIMATED TO DANGEROUS LEVELS OF JUST 2 OR LESS KANGAROOS PER SQ. KM PUTTING THEM AT GREAT RISK OF EXTINCTION IF THE KILLING CONTINUES, which it is². Killing 10-15% of a declining population during a severe drought is catapulting macropod species into an irreversible crisis.

Kangaroos are regionally extinct in areas of WA, SA, Western NSW and Vic. The average age of a red kangaroo is 2 years in New South Wales when they could live to an average age of 25. There were an estimated 200 million at the time of the first settlers. The official 2007 estimate is 24 million kangaroos. In 2007, 3.8 million were killed commercially (combining non-commercial killing, recreational hunting, government "culls," road kills, illegal killing and uncounted joey deaths the total is closer to 7 million). There are 5 times as many sheep and more cows but nobody ever says there are plagues of sheep!

IS THE KANGAROO INDUSTRY SUSTAINABLE?

A \$200 million kangaroo killing industry is growing at 7 per cent a year. In NSW there is evidence that up to 80% of all kangaroos taken are females. Killing such a high proportion of females is unsustainable and can lead to precipitous population declines according to a population model published in Kangaroo Keepers edited by H J Lavery. It's also unsustainable for the industry to target the biggest kangaroos, who are the breeding stock for strong, healthy populations thereby weakening the gene pool.

Combined with global warming impacts there could be serious consequences for kangaroos, especially red kangaroos. Many tourists complain of not seeing a single kangaroo on their outback tours. It would be more profitable to let kangaroos flourish and encourage eco-tourism for the \$85 billion tourism industry.

ARE KANGAROOS PESTS?

A six year study by Dr Steven McLeod at the University of New South Wales, determined: "There was no evidence of a competitive effect of red kangaroos on sheep in terms of body mass, wool growth, reproductive output of sheep or the growth and survivorship of lambs. In fact, Red Kangaroos consistently avoid areas used by sheep."

A 4yr study of Grey Kangaroos in Western Australia by CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation) found that 95% wheat crops are never visited by kangaroos who rarely wander more than 400 metres from their home range in the bush³. Also kangaroos have virtually no impact on the country's crops, despite claims by farmers to the contrary.

Dr Graham Arnold, former senior principle research scientist, CSIRO, Division of Wildlife and Ecology, who studied the impact of kangaroos on croplands, stated in 1998: "Most kangaroos did not like to eat farm crops and would only thrive if given access to their natural foods... Unless the community manages remnant vegetation to minimise degradation and enhance the regeneration of native plants, kangaroos and some other

native species will disappear from much of Western Australia over the next 100 years.”

Gordon Grigg, author of *Commercial Harvesting of Kangaroos in Australia*, stated that kangaroos’ grazing requirements may have been over-estimated by as much as 500 per cent. A CSIRO study showed that kangaroos do not compete with sheep for food⁴.

DO KANGAROOS BENEFIT THE ENVIRONMENT?

Kangaroos lessen the possibility of bushfires by eating dry grass that ignites easily. There are many species who depend on them. Their soft padded feet and long tail are integral to the ecological health of the land, as regenerators of native grasses. Kangaroos have been living harmoniously with their environment for at least 16 million years and they are perfectly suited to their natural habitat. Any seedling that falls into the long-tapering footprint of the kangaroo is buried into the hole left by the toenail. Covered and with moisture concentrated at one point, the germinated seedling has a chance of survival. Their tail drags along behind them while they are grazing, pressing the ground, rolling seeds into the earth. Kangaroos play an undeniable role in biological diversity and ecological integrity⁵. Their urine and faeces is a natural fertilizer (not excessively high in nitrogen which pollutes ground and surface water like livestock waste), essential to the health of the land and biodiversity.

Government statistics show that kangaroos only exert 1-8% of grazing pressure on land⁶ and in fact help the land by co-existing with livestock. Unlike livestock they do not produce greenhouse gases (methane, nitrous oxide), drink massive quantities of water, cause soil erosion, loss of soil nutrients and soil ecosystems leading to deserts. Nor do they destroy wildlife like the livestock industry does by shooting, deforestation and habitat destruction. In fact kangaroos help the environment.

KANGAROO FARMS TO SAVE THE PLANET?

Since climate change has become a daily subject, it has been suggested that Australians could eat kangaroos instead of environmentally damaging animals such as cows, sheep etc. However kangaroos are not herd animals. They are highly nervous and suffer from post-capture myopathy if caught. They can not be inspected, drenched or rounded up. Kangaroos could never replace more than a tiny fraction of the livestock Australians consume. Qld Dept of Primary Industries states that a kangaroo only produces 10 kg of useable meat, 3 kg of which is prime cuts the rest is pet food. Furthermore, the total maximum potential supply of kangaroo meat is 57,000 tonnes a year compared to the yield of 1.7 million tonnes of beef. The entire kangaroo population would need to be killed many times over each year to replace sheep and cattle.

HEALTH THREATS OF KANGAROO MEAT

Kangaroos are shot in the bush at night and gutted on the dirt. Dangling from hooks in an open truck, they are driven many hours on dusty, unsealed roads to chillers which may not be cool enough until the chillers are filled and taken to the processing plants. Their meat has to be undercooked or it will be tough and inedible. Kangaroos can harbour a wide range of fungal and viral diseases, dangerous bacterial infections (toxoplasmosis, e.coli, streptococcus, staphylococcus and salmonella) along with parasites including abdominal and muscular parasites which can cause long-term illness.

IS THE KANGAROO SLAUGHTER ETHICAL?

The National Code of Practice for the Humane Shooting of Kangaroos and Wallabies

permits joeys to be pulled out of the pouch and bashed to death or decapitated. The young of no other species is allowed to be killed in such a brutal way. The Code does not cover the young at foot joey orphaned when the mother is shot. A million of these joeys are tragically left to die of starvation, hypothermia or predation every year as he needs his mother's milk every three hours up to 18 months of age.

A kangaroo shooter only needs a valid firearms licence, a TAFE certificate for safe food handling and to show he can hit a target at 80m, although shooting over 200m is more common. The National Kangaroo Campaign, Australia state: "The Code is voluntary and no provision exists in it for permits/licences to be suspended in the event of failure to adhere to the Code."

Most shooting happens at night with no observation by an independent body. The government and industry claim that their shooters kill humanely by a single head shot but statistics are taken from chillers where shooters do not bring body-shot animals. There is no monitoring of kangaroo numbers which have been body shot. Many kangaroos are shot in the face and run off with their mouth or face blown off to die in extreme pain of infection and starvation.

AUSTRALIA'S APPALLING CONSERVATION RECORD

Of 53 species of kangaroos, 29 are now threatened and 6 extinct. Australia has the worst record of extinctions of any country having exterminated one third of its wildlife in just 200 years. The commercial killing of kangaroos is the largest land-based wildlife slaughter on earth, kills more unweaned young than any other country and is as shameful as the Japanese whale slaughter and the Canadian seal hunt.

References:-

1. <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/trade-use/wild-harvest/kangaroo/population/index.html>
2. AAT Submission, General Administration Division, NSW District Registry, No. 535 of 2007 (exhibit 13).
3. Arnold, G. "Can Kangaroos survive in the Wheat Belt?", West Australia Journal of Agriculture, Vol 31, 1990
4. <http://www.publish.csiro.au/paper/WR9740027.htm>
5. Ramp D, Coulson G (2004) Small-scale patch selection and consumer-resource dynamics of eastern grey kangaroos, Journal of Mammalogy 85, 1053-1059
6. <http://www.environment.gov.au/soe/2006/publications/drs/indicator/162/index.html>