

CHAPTER 8

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONTROL OF FERAL ANIMALS

Introduction

8.1 Although the Committee's terms of reference relate specifically to "large feral animals in the Northern Territory", evidence from several witnesses indicated that a co-ordinated national approach to the control of these and other feral animals is necessary. It was noted that, as the problems posed by feral animals are not confined to individual States or Territories, a co-ordinated national approach to a national problem is required.

8.2 This national approach would not infringe on the legislative and administrative responsibilities of the States and Territories. It was recognised, however, that the Commonwealth Government, as "an honest broker" is in an ideal position to co-ordinate these activities on a national level.

Co-ordinated National Approach

8.3 It was suggested to the Committee that a national perspective on feral animal control would have at least four advantages. Firstly, it would encourage a co-ordinated and planned approach to the control of feral animals. The Central Australian Conservation Council stated that "piecemeal efforts at control are totally inadequate".¹ According to the Council, control measures, backed by adequate resources and co-ordination across whole regions need to be put in place right across the nation.²

8.4 Other witnesses, including RSPCA Australia, also recognised the need for better co-ordination and planning. On this matter, RSPCA Australia observed:

Presently, the responsibility for culling feral animals rests in a diverse group of people and organisations. There does not appear to be national co-ordination or planning and frequently culling programs are embarked upon for local political reasons at the wrong time and in the wrong way using the wrong resources.³

8.5 Secondly, a national perspective on the management and control of feral animals would facilitate the collection and exchange of information. For example, it was recommended that a national data bank comprising details of damage and population information on feral animals should be developed. According to RSPCA Australia, this information would assist planning and "provide some consciousness within the community about the amount of effort required to control the feral animal".⁴

8.6 Thirdly, national co-ordination of research will result in a more concerted effort to address the problems posed by feral animals. On this matter, RSPCA Australia observed:

The present haphazard funding and lack of co-ordinated studies on control techniques and biology of feral animals in Australia suggest that we are merely fumbling rather than recognising this problem as being one of national importance requiring concerted action.⁵

8.7 Fourthly, a national approach to the control of feral animals will promote understanding of the feral animal problem and foster confidence in the strategies adopted to address the problem. This would be achieved by enhancing consultative processes and extending national and international education programs.⁶



"Pigs are omnivorous, consuming plant fruits, shoots and tubers, native fauna and carrion. Pigs are potential vectors of several exotic diseases, including swine fever and foot and mouth disease". Evidence, ANPWS, p. 521.

8.8 ANZFAS and RSPCA Australia presented evidence on how consideration of feral animal problems might be enhanced. ANZFAS recommends the establishment of an Animal Damage Advisory Council, within the Department of Primary Industries and Energy. The principal objective of this Council would be the promotion of long-term, humane, and where possible, non-lethal population control of feral animals.⁷

8.9 RSPCA Australia maintains that a peak national committee on feral animals should be established. According to the Society, there is no co-ordination between the peak bodies in the agricultural and conservation areas, namely the Australian Agricultural Council and the Council of Nature Conservation Ministers.⁸ Dr Wirth of RSPCA Australia explained the role of this peak national committee in the following terms:

I would prefer the Commonwealth to act as the honest broker in this regard, to set up some form of national committee which incorporates all the major players ... In that way there can be achieved a central repository of information, a central repository of impetus to research new methods of culling ... and a means of co-ordinating eradication of feral animals between neighbouring States ...⁹

8.10 RSPCA Australia considers that a national committee on feral animals would encourage a "unity of purpose"¹⁰ and a sense of urgency to a "massive" national problem.¹¹

8.11 Although not addressing the specific issue of a national approach to feral animal control, the Australian Conservation Foundation observed that a high degree of political will, commitment and action to address the feral animal problem has been lacking in the past and that "inaction is no longer an option".¹²

Existing and Proposed Mechanisms for Co-ordination

8.12 The Commonwealth and the States have been active in vertebrate pest control for many years and there are existing mechanisms and activities in place for co-ordination. The Committee was advised that these mechanisms and activities are being enhanced.¹³

8.13 Dr Peter O'Brien, the representative of the Department of Primary Industries and Energy on the Vertebrate Pests Committee, reviewed existing and proposed mechanisms for national co-ordination. He advised that the Vertebrate Pests Committee of the Australian Agricultural Council presents reports and provides advice to the Commonwealth and State Ministers for Agriculture on the management of these pests. The Vertebrate Pests Committee comprises representatives of State and Territory government agencies, the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Department of Primary Industries and Energy, CSIRO and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, New Zealand.¹⁴

8.14 This Committee meets annually and "discusses a wide range of issues".¹⁵ Current activities include a review of the use of 1080 in Australia, consideration of the importation and keeping of exotic vertebrates and organisation of the 9th Australian Vertebrate Pests Conference in April 1991.¹⁶

8.15 Dr O'Brien also advised that the Bureau of Rural Resources has a major role in this area and identified several projects undertaken by the Bureau on vertebrate pest management in Australia.¹⁷ These projects include:

- preparation of an atlas of the distribution and abundance of introduced animals in Australia;
- development of criteria for assessing the risks posed by exotic vertebrates;
- assessment of the commercial use of pest animals in Australia;
- participation in recent reviews of rabbit, rodent and bird pest research; and
- participation in the assessment of viral haemorrhagic disease of rabbit control.¹⁸

8.16 According to Dr O'Brien, the Bureau has recognised the need for "a more strategic approach to vertebrate pest management".¹⁹ It has obtained funds from within the Department "to develop comprehensive strategic management plans for the major vertebrate pests in Australia, taking account of environmental, economic and welfare issues and giving support and effect to government initiatives in land degradation, tree planting and sustainable development".²⁰ In addition, the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy and the Minister for the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories have asked their Departments to develop a proposal which will expand and improve this initiative on strategic vertebrate pest control.²¹

8.17 A further initiative relates to the National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare. The Committee was informed that the Consultative Committee, which provides advice to the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, has established a Feral Animal Working Group.²² The Group has the following terms of reference:

- identify Australia's problem feral animal species and other important introduced pest animals;
- identify the extent and nature of agricultural, environmental and other damage; and
- provide advice on potential avenues for research on humane, cost-effective methods for controlling these populations, including fertility control, and on the priority, implementation and funding of research.²³

8.18 Having heard evidence on existing and proposed mechanisms for co-ordination, the Committee questioned officers of the Department of Primary Industries and Energy on the need for a national approach to feral animal control. In response to a question on whether Australia has an overall plan to counter large feral animals, Dr Peter O'Brien agreed that "there has been a lack of long-term planning for vertebrate pest management in this country".²⁴ Dr O'Brien observed, however, that "the Vertebrate Pests Committee is the appropriate mechanism" for national co-ordination. He added:

[The new initiative] called strategic vertebrate pest control aims to develop plans which can then be implemented at the State level. That is a way of resourcing the activities of the Vertebrate Pests Committee. I guess what I am saying is that the structure is there but it needs better resourcing to do its job properly. I think its terms of reference are appropriate. I think that vertebrate pest management is in State hands ... Certainly State legislation is appropriate and potentially effective.²⁵

Conclusions

8.19 The Committee is of the view that there is an urgent need for a co-ordinated, national approach to the control of feral animals and considers that the Commonwealth Government, in consultation with the States and Territories, should facilitate an appropriate forum to achieve this objective.

8.20 The Committee notes current mechanisms and recent initiatives for national co-ordination of the management and control of feral animals. Nevertheless, the Committee is concerned that these arrangements appear to be fragmented and do not provide a focus for a concerted and co-ordinated approach to the control of feral animals in Australia.

8.21 *The Committee recommends that the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy assess current and proposed mechanisms for national co-ordination of measures to alleviate the problems associated with vertebrate pests, including feral animals.*

8.22 *The Committee further recommends that the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, in consultation with relevant Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers, consider the establishment of a national committee or task force to provide a concerted and co-ordinated approach to the control or elimination of feral animals.*

ENDNOTES

1. *Evidence*, Central Australian Conservation Council, p. 81.
2. *ibid.*
3. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 252.
4. *ibid.*, p. 253.
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*, pp. 338-339.
Submission, Australian Conservation Foundation, p. 2.
7. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 361.
8. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 334.
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*
11. *ibid.*, p. 337.
12. *Submission*, Australian Conservation Foundation, p. 2.
13. *Correspondence*, Bureau of Rural Resources, 17 December 1990, p. 1.
14. *Evidence*, Bureau of Rural Resources, p. 496.
15. *Correspondence*, Bureau of Rural Resources, 17 December 1990, p. 2.
16. *ibid.*
17. *Evidence*, Bureau of Rural Resources, p. 497.
18. *Correspondence*, Bureau of Rural Resources, 17 December 1990, p. 2.
19. *Evidence*, Bureau of Rural Resources, p. 498.
20. *Correspondence*, Bureau of Rural Resources, 17 December 1990, pp. 2-3.
21. *ibid.*, p. 3.
22. *ibid.*
23. *ibid.*
24. *Evidence*, Bureau of Rural Resources, p. 499.
25. *ibid.*, pp. 501-502.