

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENCE ON THE NEED TO CONTROL FERAL ANIMALS

Introduction

4.1 In the previous chapter, the Committee concluded that large feral animals have a major, adverse impact on the Northern Territory. In this chapter, the Committee reviews evidence on the need to control these feral animals and related moral, ethical and animal welfare issues.

4.2 Given the national and international debate associated with culling programs conducted in Australia, the Committee considers that it is important to record the views on these issues presented by various interested parties to the inquiry. The Committee also records general conclusions.

Views on Control of Feral Animals

4.3 Animal welfare groups that presented evidence to the Committee were not opposed to the culling of feral animals. Indeed, most organisations advocated the eradication of feral animals from the Australian environment. These organisations, however, registered strong concerns about the current methods used to control the populations of feral animals. In particular, helicopter shooting of feral animals was perceived by some as a cruel and inhumane method of control.

4.4 RSPCA Australia strongly favours the destruction and culling of feral animals.¹ The Society gave the following reasons for its views:

Not only is it important to cull feral species from the point of view of preserving uniquely Australian species, it is also important from the point of view of preserving a broader genetic heterogeneity. Another important reason for culling feral animals is to preserve a lifestyle in Australia for the human species.²

4.5 In evidence to the Committee, Dr Hugh Wirth, President of the Society, stated unequivocally that "there is no position in Australian environmental systems for feral animals".³ He went on to say, however, that feral animals, as sentient creatures, deserve to be eradicated or reduced in number by humane methods.⁴

4.6 In its submission to the Committee, the Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies recognised that "there may be a case for reducing the number of feral animals in a particular area".⁵ When questioned on the control of feral animals, including horses, Ms Glenys Oogjes, Director of ANZFAS, replied:

We certainly have no problem with the elimination of the horses ... We come at it purely from an animal welfare point of view. If the animals are there, and it is a very hard life for them and they are seen as causing a problem, then their eradication is, from a welfare point of view, a better idea.⁶

4.7 The Federation, like RSPCA Australia, expressed strong concerns about current methods of control including helicopter shooting and transport to abattoirs for slaughter.

4.8 Conservation groups, including the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Central Australian Conservation Council, are concerned about the damage feral animals cause to Australia's unique flora and fauna and support controlled and humane programs of control.⁷

4.9 Biblical references were also referred to the Committee as guidance on this issue. The Calvinistic Political and Social Association indicated that "animals were and are given for food" and mankind has "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth". According to the Association, this dominion must be balanced with responsibility. The Association concluded that culling can be an effective way of stopping damage to a certain environment and over-population of a certain animal in a particular area.⁸

4.10 The Committee also thought it important to hear the views of Aborigines on the culling of large feral animals in the Northern Territory. Accordingly, representatives of the Central Land Council were invited to give evidence at public hearings held in Alice Springs.

4.11 The Committee was advised that dramatic changes in land use have occurred since white settlement of the Territory. Although feral animals have contributed to these changes, Aborigines now perceive these animals as "an attractive alternative source of food, income and employment and ... as part of a modified economic resource base for Aboriginal people".⁹ Many Aborigines are reluctant to give their consent to the eradication of a valuable resource. Feral animals are considered a part of the country, and not as exotic animals that "do not belong". The damage done by feral animals is perceived largely on a localised level and widespread, more subtle land degradation is not recognised as a major problem.¹⁰

4.12 Mr David Alexander, Co-ordinator Land Management, Central Land Council, told the Committee that, in general, Aboriginal people consider that feral animals need to be "managed, domesticated and looked after" rather than eradicated.¹¹ He observed, however, that there is not an "Aboriginal point of view", but "many different views" on these issues.¹²

4.13 Representatives of the Council stressed the need for consultation with Aboriginal people on feral animal control. According to the Council, Aborigines, as owners of large areas of the Northern Territory, should be involved in the decision-making process on feral animals.¹³

4.14 Other submissions lodged with the Committee also recognised that some feral animals should have a place in the Australian environment. For example, it was suggested to the Committee that brumbies, along with buffalo, camels, donkeys and cattle, are part of the twentieth century Australian environment and that it should be possible for them "and our beautiful nation to live together and accommodate each other".¹⁴ Brumbies, and in particular the wild descendants of horses developed for use in the First World War, were recognised as an integral part of Australia's heritage.¹⁵

Government Policies

4.15 The Commonwealth Government's position is that the number of introduced wild species, including feral horses, need to be reduced periodically to levels that are compatible with the conservation of the environment and the welfare and long-term survival of all animals which share their habitat.¹⁶

4.16 The Government, through various agencies, has also published several statements on the culling of feral animals. For example, in 1990, the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Rural Resources produced a broadsheet entitled **Feral Animals in Australia**. This publication states that "because feral animals did not evolve in Australia, they have no place in the Australian environment or agriculture and must be controlled".¹⁷

4.17 In 1989, the Department of Foreign Affairs produced a fact sheet for international use entitled **The Management of Feral Horses in Australia**. This publication recognises the need to reduce the numbers of these animals. The information sheet states:

The threat to Australian wildlife is now so great that culling of feral animals is vital ... Feral horses destroy feed, cause soil erosion, damage fences on pastoral properties and could act as a potential reservoir of exotic diseases. Under these circumstances, feral horses must be considered a threat to Australia's national priorities.¹⁸

4.18 The Northern Territory Government also maintains that the control of large feral animals is essential.

4.19 Officers of the South Australian Government supported the total elimination of feral animals. For example, Dr Geoffrey Neumann, Principal Veterinary Officer, South Australian Government stated:

We should have in place policies which say we are going to eliminate [the feral animal] problem. Unpleasant though it may be, in that it may have some animal welfare connotations, it should be a one-way trip and we should not be culling feral animals 20 years down the track.¹⁹

Conclusions

4.20 The Committee agrees with the overwhelming opinion expressed in evidence that feral animals and, in particular, large feral animals in the Northern Territory, such as horses, buffalo and donkeys, must be controlled. Ideally, total eradication should be the goal of control programs.

4.21 In the Committee's view, animal welfare considerations must be taken into account when programs are developed to control or eradicate feral animals. In particular, the Committee considers that specific methods of control must be implemented in a manner that causes a minimum of suffering to animals.

4.22 In the next chapter of the report, the Committee considers current methods of control.

ENDNOTES

1. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 233; p. 327.
2. *ibid.*, p. 242.
3. *ibid.*, p. 319; p. 327.
4. *ibid.*, p. 319.
5. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 349.
6. *ibid.*, p. 374.
7. *Submission*, Australian Conservation Foundation, p. 1.
Evidence, Central Australian Conservation Council, p. 89.
8. *Submission*, Calvinistic Political and Social Association, pp. 1-2.
9. *Evidence*, Central Land Council, p. 157.
10. *ibid.*, p. 159.
11. *ibid.*, p. 159; p. 197.
12. *ibid.*, p. 205.
13. *ibid.*, p. 196.
14. *Submission*, Ms S. Rowley, p.2.
15. *ibid.*
16. *Correspondence*, Department of Primary Industries and Energy, 8 January 1991.
17. Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Rural Resources, *Feral Animals in Australia*, Canberra, 1990, p. 2.
18. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *The Management of Feral Horses in Australia*, Fact Sheet, No. 26, July 1989, p.1.
19. *Hansard*, Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare, Transport of Livestock within Australia, 23 April 1991, South Australian Government, p. 617.