CHAPTER 6

CONCERNS ABOUT HELICOPTER SHOOTING

Introduction

6.1 Several witnesses, including groups strongly opposed to helicopter shooting, identified procedures that could be improved in order to minimise the suffering of animals. These procedures fall broadly into the following categories:

- training of shooters;
- accreditation of shooters;
- supervision of shooting;
- strategies for control; and
- operational matters.

6.2 In this chapter, the Committee examines these issues in order to ensure that the most professional and responsible approach to helicopter culling operations is adopted.

Training of Shooters

6.3 Most witnesses recognised that, if helicopter shooting is to proceed at all, it must be conducted by highly-trained, competent personnel. This will ensure that a high percentage of "clean kills" is achieved, thereby reducing the number of woundings and associated suffering.

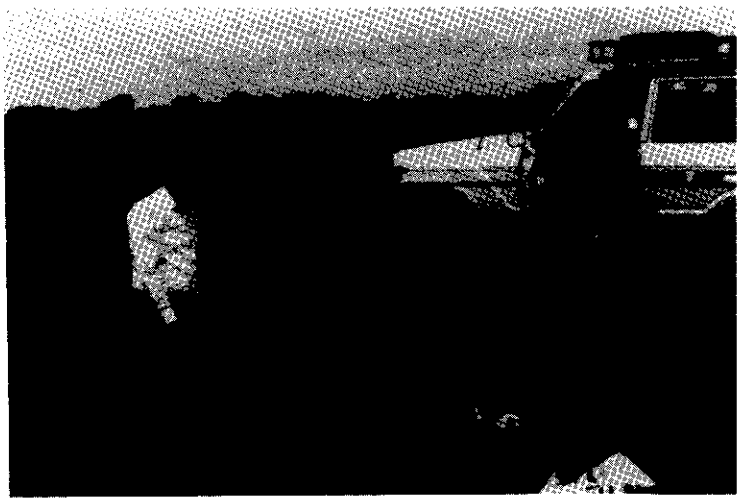
6.4 The Committee received conflicting evidence on training procedures for government personnel involved in helicopter shooting operations in the Northern Territory. For example, RSPCA Australia told the Committee that "people involved [in helicopter shooting] are not trained for the job at hand ... their accuracy as sharpshooters leaves much to be desired".[1] ANZFAS also expressed concern that the training of shooters does not involve shooting from "moving vehicles and with a moving target".[2] According to ANZFAS, "there is training but it is from the ground using standard 50 metres with balloons in the distance".[3]

6.5 The Northern Territory Government informed the Committee that it is standard procedure that only those shooters who have undertaken a course of training and are deemed competent to shoot from helicopters are permitted to do so.[4] Officers of the Government indicated that all staff are made aware of, and adhere to, the Code of Practice and the Territory's **Procedures and Guidelines For Shooting Feral Animals** .[5]

6.6 Training and refresher courses include written and practical examinations on firearms safety, firearms skills including marksmanship, helicopter shooting skills and animal welfare considerations.[6]

6.7 Mr Graeme Davis, an officer of the Government, expressed confidence in the procedures and guidelines for the shooting of feral animals from helicopters. He stated:

> I have been very happy with the way these programs have been implemented and the skill of the staff over the years. It has obviously been an evolving process. We all started at the bottom of the learning curve 15 years ago ... but over the last 5 to 6 years — and particularly in very recent years — there is a very high competence amongst staff in skilled marksmanship.[7]



Senator Bryant Burns, Mr Ross Bryan, Mr Antal Soos and Mr David Berman at Hermannsburg Airstrip, Northern Territory.

6.8 Mr Ross Bryan, an officer of the Conservation Commission in Alice Springs, told the Committee that officers have to go through a strict training course. He observed that "the end result has to be a 100 per cent pass ... in theory and also on a range and shooting out of a helicopter".[8]

6.9 Mr Bryan gave the Committee the following description of training methods from helicopters:

> We go out and fly in a helicopter and shoot out of a helicopter. We have got a life size buffalo outline in marine ply and there is a little hole for the heart and lung area [approximately six inches in diameter]. There are four on one run, two buffalo heads hidden

among the trees for another area and four on another run. The pilot flies over and we have got to get three rounds within that heart and lung area on each of the animals, two rounds in the heads and three on the other run. If that is not 100 per cent, we do not pass.[9]

6.10 ANPWS advised the Committee that shooting in Kakadu National Park is undertaken by experienced, conscientious marksmen who undergo intensive training before live shooting.[10] Two qualified Aboriginal rangers with over ten years experience conduct shooting of feral animals from helicopters.[11]

Conclusions

6.11 The Committee is satisfied that the Northern Territory Government recognises the importance of proper training and testing of personnel involved in the shooting of feral animals from helicopters and conducts specific programs to achieve this objective. The Committee considers that the Northern Territory Government and its agencies should maintain the highest possible standards in training and marksmanship, in order to minimise the suffering of animals. The Committee encourages similar training programs in other States involved in feral animal control by helicopter shooting.

Accreditation of Shooters

6.12 The Committee was concerned to receive evidence suggesting that unauthorised personnel may undertake helicopter shooting operations to cull feral animals. For example, Dr Melanie O'Flynn, Director, Animal Welfare Unit, Department of Primary Industries and Energy, stated that "there is nothing to necessarily stop landowners hiring a helicopter and going up with untrained marksmen and blazing away".[12] Similar evidence was presented by RSPCA Australia.[13]

6.13 Although "nearly all helicopter shooting is conducted by Government employees",[14] the Northern Territory Government confirmed that there is no legislation which prevents non-government personnel engaging in helicopter shooting operations.[15] The Government, however has indicated that authorities are unaware of any specific instances of unauthorised individuals shooting from helicopters.[16]

6.14 The Committee understands that the Government encourages landowners to use authorised personnel in helicopter culling operations. If the property owner provides the helicopter and the fuel, the Government will provide an expert shooter and ammunition at no cost. The Committee was told that in most cases, this arrangement is adopted[17] , as the relatively high costs involved in helicopter operations limit private culling activities.[18]

6.15 As noted above, shooting in Kakadu National Park is undertaken by two qualified Aboriginal rangers, each with approximately ten year experience in shooting large feral animals in the Park.[19]

Conclusions

6.16 The Committee is of the view that only personnel approved by government authorities should shoot feral animals from helicopters. This should apply to government officers and private individuals. The Committee's conclusion on this matter is based on two considerations.

6.17 Firstly, evidence to the Committee confirmed that there are considerable risks and dangers associated with helicopter shooting. In order to ensure the safety of all personnel, it is highly desirable that only shooters with appropriate skills and experience are involved in these operations.

6.18 Secondly, in the Committee's view, it is essential that the welfare of animals, and in particular the elimination of woundings and associated suffering, should be a primary objective of helicopter culling operations. This objective can only be achieved if responsible and highly skilled personnel are used.

6.19 In order to ensure that only properly trained and authorised shooters are involved in helicopter culling operations, the Committee considers that a system of accreditation or licensing is necessary. Such a system would enhance safety and animal welfare considerations and foster a professional and responsible approach to helicopter shooting.

6.20 *The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth, Northern Territory and other State Governments introduce accreditation or licensing schemes for government and non-government personnel involved in helicopter culling operations.*

Supervision of Shooting

6.21 Concerns were expressed about the overall control and supervision of helicopter operations, even though competent and skilled personnel may be in attendance. For example, Dr Wirth, President of RSPCA Australia, stated that culling programs must be controlled by government authorities.[20] He elaborated:

> [If you are going to have helicopter shooting] ... we have no opposition to governments using contractors for the base work of culling provided the contractors are subject to government controls ... Unless there are proper controls, you cannot rely on welfare in culling.[21]

6.22 The Australian Equine Veterinary Association also stressed that helicopter shooting operations must be part of a program, under very strict control, with skilled and trained shooters.[22]

6.23 The Committee notes that these views are shared, at least in principle, by the Northern Territory Government. In its Procedures and Guidelines for Shooting Feral Animals, the Government recognises that "helicopter culling operations should be authorised and supervised by the appropriate Territory authority".[23]

The Committee notes, however, that under current regulatory arrangements in the Territory, non-government personnel may conduct helicopter culling operations without government control, co-ordination or supervision.

Conclusions

6.24 The Committee considers that all helicopter shooting of feral animals must be supervised and co-ordinated by government authorities. In the Committee's view, this supervision should include appropriate notification, approval, monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

Strategies for Control

6.25 Evidence presented to the Committee emphasised that culling operations, including those that use helicopters, need to be properly planned and co-ordinated. It was suggested that long-term strategies on a local, regional and national basis are necessary.

6.26 Dr John Plant, President-elect, Australian Veterinary Association, identified one situation where the need for planning and co-ordination is obvious, but essential. He stated:

> It is no good cleaning horses out of four properties and then having a 2,000 square mile property in the middle where the owner is not doing anything and where the horses will repopulate and undo all the good work.[24]

6.27 Although the need for planning and co-ordination was recognised, several witnesses criticised the *ad hoc* approach to culling operations. For example, Dr John Auty of ANZFAS, described culling operations including helicopter shooting as "stop-go" in nature.[25] He explained:

> People go out and cull thousands of animals. The following year they go out and cull thousands of animals. The next year, for reasons best known to the organisations, they do not go out and cull animals ... if you are going to substantially reduce feral animals over time, you have to keep up constant pressure[26] ... you are not going to eliminate horses or donkeys [by this stop-go approach].[27]

6.28 It was suggested to the Committee that a donkey control program conducted in the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory between 1981 and 1984 exemplifies the need for proper planning and co-ordination. At that time, 83,000 donkeys were removed at a cost of $750,000. Because of a lack of follow-up control, the numbers of donkeys are now similar to those that existed before the program began.[28]

Feral Donkeys.

6.29 Although the timing of control programs should be an important element of strategic control, RSPCA Australia stated that this has not always been the case. In the Society's view, "half the time, the program to remove the animals is not carried out at the best possible time when the population is at its lowest ebb".[29] Breeding, climatic cycles and inter-related matters should be taken into account when planning control programs.

6.30 It was also recognised that, where possible, control strategies should be based on research on the population densities, movements and behavioural patterns of feral animals. In this regard, the Committee notes the important research undertaken by Mr Bill Dobbie and Mr David Berman on feral horses in Central Australia. This research is based on the close observation and documentation of feral horse groups. Their work suggests that feral horses in central Australia have an affinity with a specific area or "home range", centred around permanent waterholes. Therefore, overall strategies to control feral horses should concentrate on specific, defined home ranges, centred around permanent waterholes rather than a particular property or specific regions.[30]

6.31 The need for strategic and sustained programs of control was recognised by the Northern Territory Government. In particular, officers of the Government suggested that, following the completion of disease control activities associated with BTEC in 1992, programs of control should be implemented to ensure that feral populations do not become unmanageable again. Mr Davis stated:

> We maintain that now that populations are down to very low levels there should be programs in place to maintain populations ... and preferrably to bring populations within management.[31]

6.32 Mr Davis observed, however, that the Northern Territory Government did not have the resources to "really tackle the feral problem across the Territory in a scientific and methodical way."

Conclusions

6.33 The Committee concludes that programs to control feral animals should be planned, systematic and sustained. In the Committee's view, strategies with these features will result in more effective control and will heighten awareness of animal welfare responsibilities.

6.34 Although primarily a disease control program, BTEC operations in the Northern Territory have reduced significantly the number of feral buffalo, cattle and horses. The Committee considers that the benefits of these operations in relation to feral animal control should not be squandered.

6.35 *The Committee recommends that the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, in consultation with the Australian Agricultural Council, examine ways in which feral animal populations, reduced by activities associated with BTEC, may continue to be controlled following the completion of BTEC in 1992.*

Operational Matters

6.36 As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, concerns were expressed about day-to-day aspects of helicopter shooting of feral animals. These are:

- firearms and ammunition;
- woundings of animals; and
- fly-back procedures.

Firearms and ammunition

6.37 RSPCA Australia informed the Committee that it is not unusual for helicopter shooters to use inappropriate firearms and ammunition.[32] According to the Society, it is essential that the "right weaponry" appropriate to individual species is used.[33]

6.38 The Committee heard persuasive evidence rebutting assertions that inappropriate firearms and ammunition are used. In its submission to the Committee, the Northern Territory Government recognised that "appropriate and suitable weapons and ammunition" should be used in shooting feral animals on the ground and from a helicopter. The Government stated:

> Weapons such as the Springfield M14 and MIA, LIAI, SLR, Heckler and Koch M91 in .308 calibre [are suitable]. For helicopter shooting, spot on/aim point sights or 2x quality telescopic sights may be useful. Hard pointed jacketed projectiles 170 grain or heavier should be used. Two weapons should be carried by shooters at all times.[34]

6.39 ANPWS advised the Committee that strict animal welfare guidelines are established for helicopter shooting operations in Kakadu National Park. These guidelines address appropriate firearms and ammunition.[35]

Conclusion

6.40 The Committee endorses the view that only firearms and ammunition that are suitable for the species and appropriate for the task should be used in the culling of feral animals.

Wounding of Animals

6.41 Animal welfare groups registered strong concerns about the cruelty associated with helicopter shooting. In particular, these groups maintain that inaccurate shooting, resulting in woundings and suffering, are an inherent part of helicopter operations. Dr Wirth of RSPCA Australia explained:

> We have been adamantly opposed to the killing of animals from moving platforms because the beauty, if I can put it that way, of the unexpected bullet hitting the brain more often than not does not occur because of lack of accuracy from the moving platform.[36]

6.42 ANZFAS also observed that preferred frontal or temporal head shots are almost impossible from helicopters. The current practice of shooting at the heart and lung area can result in spinal injuries which immobilise the animal and make it difficult to ascertain from the air whether the animal is dead. ANZFAS added that even the best marksmen may miss and when death is not immediate the animal will suffer extreme pain.[37]

6.43 Formal and informal evidence from Government officers conceded that helicopter operations do not result in clean kills for all animals. For example, the Northern Territory Government advised the Committee that most, but not all, first shots result in an instant kill.[38]

6.44 ANPWS also indicated that despite intensive training, stringent procedures and the best endeavours of experienced marksmen and pilots "it must be accepted that a small number of animals are wounded and then cannot be found".[39]

6.45 The Committee understands that estimates of the number of animals wounded in helicopter shooting operations vary. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the rate may be between 10 and 15 per cent.[40] The Committee sought

additional information on this matter from the Northern Territory and the ANPWS. However, the Government and the Service do not collect data on clean kills as opposed to woundings.[41]

6.46 The Committee did obtain a report on a helicopter culling of feral horses conducted at Loves Creek in the Territory in 1986. Post-mortems carried out on 196 horses showed that "a few had obviously not been killed directly by the first bullet".[42] The report also recorded the following observation:

> Actual cause of death in most of the 196 examined was exsanguination from the heart or lung major vessels. The remnant died from cerebral trauma associated with neck shots.[43]

Conclusions

6.47 The Committee recognises that the shooting of feral animals, particularly from helicopters, may result in injury and suffering to some animals. It is imperative that this suffering is kept to a minimum. The Committee considers that a professional and responsible approach to helicopter shooting will achieve this objective. The Committee also considers that data should be compiled on apparent cause of death, particularly when field post-mortems are conducted on feral animals.

Fly-back Procedures

6.48 In order to minimise suffering of animals wounded in helicopter culling operations, prompt follow-up procedures are necessary to ensure that these animals are killed as soon as possible.

6.49 This procedure is supported by the Northern Territory Government. The Government maintains that "any animal inadvertently wounded must be followed up and killed before any further groups are targeted and shot".[44] A deliberate policy of "over-kill" is followed and an average of 4.1 rounds are used per animal.[45]

6.50 Mr Ross Bryan, an experienced helicopter shooter, described the procedures associated with helicopter culling. He stated: If you come across a run of horses — say, 10 or 12 — you come down and start from the tail end, shoot forward and then come back around and make sure that every animal is dead. There is no keeping going because another horse is galloping off on its own. We fly back and those animals are shot [again].[46]

6.51 Animal welfare groups were sceptical of fly-back or follow-up procedures. Dr Merran Evans of ANZFAS told the Committee that, although this procedure is endorsed officially, it is not followed in practice.[47] The additional costs associated with follow-up procedures "are too expensive and that is why it is not used".[48] Dr Evans also suggested that, when implemented, the policy of overkill is used to validate welfare aspects of control.[49]

6.52 The Committee sought a response to this evidence from the Northern Territory Government. The Government advised that "there are clear instructions" for government shooters to fly back and check that animals shot are dead.[50] Pilots and shooters effectively monitor each other to ensure that the task of checking is carried out from the air.[51]

6.53 Similar evidence was presented by the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service in relation to helicopter shooting of buffalo in Kakadu National Park. ANPWS advised that strict animal welfare guidelines are set for all operations. These guidelines stipulate that any animal wounded must be followed up and killed before moving on.[52] ANPWS also applies an overkill strategy, using two extra rounds to ensure that each animal has been killed.[53]

Conclusions

6.54 In the Committee's view, prompt follow-up procedures are necessary to ensure that feral animals shot from helicopters have been killed.

6.55 The Committee accepts that existing instructions and codes on helicopter shooting recognise the need for this procedure. However, the Committee considers that procedures to supervise helicopter shooting and, in particular, reporting mechanisms advocated by the Committee, should include confirmation of fly-back procedures by the pilot and shooter involved in the operation.

ENDNOTES

1. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 323.
2. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 381.
3. *ibid.*
4. *Evidence*, Northern Territory Government, p. 67.
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*, p. 59; p. 127.
7. *ibid.*, p. 9.
8. *Evidence*, Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, pp. 126-127.
9. *ibid.*, pp. 129-130.
10. *Evidence*, Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, p. 523.
11. *Correspondence*, ANPWS, 31 January 1991, p. 1.
12. *Evidence*, Department of Primary Industries and Energy, p. 506.
13. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 333.
14. *Evidence*, Northern Territory Government, p.67.
15. *Correspondence*, Northern Territory Government, 8 March 1991, p. 1.
16. *ibid.*
17. *Evidence*, Northern Territory Government, p. 38.
18. *ibid.*, p. 67.
19. *Evidence*, Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, p. 523.
20. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 333.
21. *ibid.*
22. *Evidence*, Australian Equine Veterinary Association, p. 222.
23. *Evidence*, Northern Territory Government, p. 76.
24. *Evidence*, Australian Equine Veterinary Association, p. 225.
25. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 373.
26. *ibid.*
27. *ibid.*, p. 380.

28. *Evidence*, Northern Territory Government, p. 42.

29. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 327.

30. *Evidence*, Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, p. 64.

31. *Evidence*, Northern Territory Government, pp. 47-48.

32. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 323.

33. *ibid.*, p. 330.

34. *Evidence*, Northern Territory Government, p. 76.

35. *Evidence*, Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, p. 523.

36. *Evidence*, RSPCA Australia, p. 321.

37. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 354.

38. *Evidence*, Northern Territory Government, p. 67.

39. *Evidence*, Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, p. 254.

40. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 355.

41. *Correspondence*, Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, 31 January 1991, p.2.
Correspondence, Northern Territory Government, 8 March 1991, pp. 2-3.

42. *Correspondence*, Department of Primary Industries and Energy, 8 January 1991, p. 4.

43. *ibid.*, p. 5.

44. *Evidence*, Northern Territory Government, p. 76.

45. *ibid.*, p. 67.

46. *Evidence*, Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, p. 128.

47. *Evidence*, Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies, p. 383.

48. *ibid.*

49. *ibid.*

50. *Correspondence*, Northern Territory Government, 31 March 1991, pp. 2-3.

51. *ibid.*

52. *Evidence*, Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, p. 523.

53. *ibid.*