

Secretary: *ANMS*

RECEIVED

30 MAY 2005

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES

AND FORESTRY

SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT ON AGRICULTURE OF PEST ANIMALSIdentification of nationally significant pest animal issues.

The problems Australia has with pest animals as with many other problems has its roots in our history.

The problems are lack of uniformity and practice and the differing priorities and attitudes to pest animals which vary from state to state occur because each state developed as a separate entity.

Our colonial ancestors came to Australia and declared it empty. However not only was the country occupied by people but it had great biodiversity so every niche was filled. The first feral animals were domestic pets and stock released or lost by colonists. Sadly the attitudes which evolved then have carried through to the present. There does seem to be problems in relation to responsible ownership of animals and respect for the country.

Does our culture encourage responsibility?

In NSW there is a situation where double standards have arisen in regard to responsible ownership of animals, in this case dogs and cats, which has its roots in the colonial era. Even though people who own cats are encouraged to keep them confined most do not. Responsibility cannot be expected to flow through a community, when a large section of the population know that they do not have to bother, and the rest of the community is expected to put up with their arrogant self centred behaviour. These owners do not see that they are inflicting cruelty and stress on their neighbours and native wild life and also those people who have to care for injured native animals. *How does this relate to agriculture?* This same arrogant tunnel visioned attitude shows up in animal rights groups and others.

A permit is required in NSW, to hold native animals. This has tended to act as a barrier in relating to our animals, and in turn has marginalised our mammals to a large section of the population. This is resented by some people. *If people only relate to exotic animals, native animals become irrelevant.* The pet industry did apparently warn the NSW government some years ago that this may occur. When recent restructuring of some government departments took place in NSW, some personnel in the department concerned with wild life wanted to prevent the feeding and the keeping of native birds. It seems that these people wish the vast majority of the population to remain foreign in their attitude to our native animals. After all seeing native animals in a zoo does not have the same meaning as Aboriginal and country people would tell you. You have to live with them to relate to them. Australia is not a zoo. It is the place where we live. A vast change in attitude is required, otherwise feral animals new and old will continue to increase at the expense of our native wild life, many of which will increasingly be found only in protected islands [national parks], in private sanctuaries or become extinct. There is a danger of continued alienation, which would be a sad reflection on our ability to manage this country. Quite a few native animals are useful to some agricultural enterprises either directly or indirectly, and of course some are not. They are part of Australia.

Definition of pest animals used in this document.

Pest Animal— A pest animal is one which is considered to be detrimental in some way to the management of a gene pool. The animals considered here are vertebrates — reptiles[turtle], amphibians [cane toad], birds and mammals.

Pest animals can be divided into two basic groups: Those that are native to Australia and could be subject to natural controls of the ecosystems in which they have evolved including diseases. These would not be eradicated but care would have to be exercised with any control measures to ensure that a trigger mechanism did not set off a latent train of events such as a disease which rapidly destroyed the population.

The second group are those which have been introduced to Australia from elsewhere, without most of the controls of those ecosystems in which they evolved. This gives these animals an unbalanced selective advantage over native animals if they become feral pests. Australia has a highly diverse gene pool which is now divided into managed systems according to use [some more intensely than others]. Contrary to what animal rights groups would like to think, little wild unmanaged bush remains in most states. Unfortunately their behaviour seems to be a carry over of the colonial mentality, only being far more knowledgeable than the settlers in the 19th century their arrogant attitude appears ignorant and very destructive.

Approaches to pest animal issues.

Pest animals are part of the environment and should be placed within a total package and not treated in isolation. One way of doing this would be to allocate all land a number an *Environmental Management Index Number*. This number would indicate the status of the land through selected criteria. The numbers would cover the continent of Australia and cross states boundaries. The system would be a centralised collection of environmental information similar to land information. This would be held by the Commonwealth and being centralised may overcome any problems of entrenched practices and ideas if they exist and create a more uniform and standardised framework to objectively identify and prioritise common problems between states. This would assist in better co-ordination and possibly more efficient use of limited funds.

The States and other relevant organisations should be able to collect and retain their own data and use it in a similar manner. However certain information would be forwarded to the central system. Much of the data is already available but is often held in isolation. The information may be derived from many sources such as: satellites, [photography and G.P.S], aerial photography, on ground surveys, parish maps etc. The data would be available to anyone. It could have a large number of uses. It could locate pest animals particularly herds, and track movements for efficient eradication, [or culling where applicable for native species], and to trace any diseases, as introduced feral animals are far more dangerous as potential carriers for disease and possible transmission to humans and livestock than most native Australian animals. All stake holders in an area would be co-ordinated for an eradication campaign no matter which animal is targeted. If adjacent landholders are working on different animals the area will not be cleared, which is a waste of time and money. This system may also be able to pinpoint where re-infestations may originate once eradication or biological controls have been introduced. To help prevent the introduction of new pests [animals], all new animals introduced to an area or region no matter how small the number should be able to be easily identified and traceable[preferably micro-

chipped] and owners should have a plan of management. A fee should be levied on certain animals which are known to become feral or are assessed as a potential problem. This levy could then be used for eradication programmes. Animals sold from pet shops and pet sales in news papers would be more difficult control. The index could also be used to act as an early warning on environmental degradation in any region, and detect problems which may arise with any long term change in climate.

All successfully breeding wild exotic animals from rats, cats [large and small] to Indian Mynas would be treated as feral, even though they may not appear to be a problem. Any favourable small change could alter this situation.

Lobbyist Groups such as Animal Rights would have to prove that their current proposal [to allow introduce feral animals to compete with native animals on a "survival of the fittest basis"] would not damage the environment.

If well managed it may prevent financial waste and create jobs [in the country] through better co-ordination and on going use of limited funds [not just at election time]. Even though the introduction may appear daunting, it could be phased in over a number of years.

Urban areas councils could allocate an index number to a suburb or an industrial zone. It would help to even up the disparity between country and urban areas and cities because they would become responsible for controlling feral animals to prevent re-infestation of rural areas. There is a big problem with small sized [hectares] subdivisions i.e., farms and life style lots in regard to feral animal control which councils "don't want to know about". If councils don't wish to do the work themselves then they can pay somebody else to do it for them.

Initially because of 200 years of degradation and the aging population of rural Australia a certain amount of latitude would have to given during implementation.

Rural areas used as an Example:

Rural properties could be allocated numbers 1-5. Numbers 1 and 2 would be the highest rating. These properties through good management would be assessed as environmentally sound, though those rated at 2 may have potential problems to watch. However for 1 and 2 even after bad seasons no serious problems arise, or are easily rectified. Those allocated 3 or 4 have problems which need attention otherwise degradation will continue. The last group [5] have such severe problems that it is unlikely that they could overcome them to reach a higher level and other options would have to be considered. If those managing properties 3-5 choose to ignore the problems then a percentage of the sale price would be retained to help in restoration. This is to encourage good management rather than to be punitive. Landowners that do not have property plans of some kind and have a conservation attitude in relation to land management cannot expect the taxpayers to continually pay for deliberate environmental degradation without having "strings" attached. Arable land is a very valuable resource, and it is important to try to prevent any further degradation.

On a planet with a very large population nobody is really free of constraints, i.e., nobody is really free. The allocation of numbers could be considered intrusive but the emphasis would be on good management with clear hopefully achievable long term goals:

The adequacy of State Government Expenditure.

Large tracts of land with native vegetation and plantations such as those concerned with Forestry, National Parks or any other reserves or open space are liable to be infested by feral animals. The managers of these lands **have not** introduced these animals. Other people with a variety of motives do this. There are a number of ways that infestations occur. They may have spread naturally from adjacent areas, or have escaped because of inadequate fencing. Illegal grazing and antagonistic attitudes of some people who also lead to the deliberate release of animals. The ignorant dumping of domestic pets or failing to control breeding between domestic pets and feral populations is a continuous problem [The writer knows landowners whose own dogs disappear to breed with feral dogs, and then complain about lack of controls]. As a result large sums of money are budgeted each year for continuous eradication campaigns against infestations and re-infestations which should not occur. This leads to criticism by those with narrow views on the environment [including reporters]. Unless there is a change in attitude, this expenditure will remain a large problem. Substantial punitive measures should be introduced to deter offenders.

Education.

To overcome more than 200 years of occupation and the attitudes which evolved along with it, an education programme starting in primary schools would be necessary. External courses do not reach most of the population. In consulting with other people it appears that we are taught less about our own country now than in previous years [1940s, 50s and 60s].

Severe fines and rewards for information would be necessary to prevent reinfestation of vulnerable areas such as Forestry areas and parks, reserves etc. This is a negative approach, but some people think warnings are a joke.

Selling off stock of any kind rather than just opening the gate and letting them go or just leaving them behind on the property, should be compulsory especially where small numbers may not be tagged [apparently miniature rabbits have been released near Nowra near a park].

Conclusion

In the end I have to ask: Have we looked after this country? No—not as well as we should have, though many people are working hard to try to change this.

Many actions are currently being undertaken but are they working efficiently?

In the end pest animal control cannot be treated in isolation. There is far greater satisfaction and sense of achievement in restoring working systems than to continue to degrade and destroy. All the feral animals required to create another Middle East are currently present in this fragile country. We have the choice of changing and succeeding, or failing.