

Attention: Committee Secretary

Dear Sir/Madam,

I wish to make the following short submission to your inquiry into the impact on agriculture of pest animals.

Since 1996, I have been a member of the WA Parliament for the seat of Vasse, within which occur most of the Margaret River wineries. Prior to 1996, I have been an environment consultant, worked for a major mining company with responsibilities for mineral exploration and minesite rehabilitation, been a wildlife officer for the then state Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, and an evaluation officer for the then Department of Conservation and Environment. I am a professionally qualified zoologist and geologist, with membership of a large number of professional bodies such as the Australian Institute of Biology, Ecological Society of Australia, Royal Society of WA, etc.

I wish to raise two issues for your inquiry's consideration.

First, in the minds of the general public, the definition or understanding of a pest species is often poorly understood. In Western Australia, the Kookaburra is an introduced species, having been released in Perth in the 1900s. It is today spread throughout the southwest of the state and does minor damage to aquaculture. More significantly, it is recognised by environmental authorities as a moderate environmental threat, due to its competition with native species for food. Similarly, the Rainbow Lorikeet was released into Perth in the 1960s and today its population is estimated at between 10,000 and 20,000, with the threat of damage to agriculture being significant.

The Kookaburra almost has iconic status in the minds of most West Australians, being considered to be a typically Australian bird with an admired and characteristic call. Few people consider it to have any 'pest' status. The Rainbow Lorikeet is an extremely attractive species, popular as a domestic pet, and also seen by few people as a pest species.

The aesthetic and other attractiveness of some pest species as described here is a problem that needs to be overcome if these same species are not to expand their range or inflict greater agricultural damage.

Second, there is no single government agency or body charged with the responsibility of addressing the totality of issues relating to pest species in WA, nor in Australia. In particular, I believe that a single body or group should be created, with a key part of its role to be community education and information.

The attached document which I had prepared in draft form for consideration by the Liberal Party outlines my concerns and suggestions in more detail.

Accordingly, I believe that the Federal Government needs to set up a body or group similar to my proposal for an Exotic Species Council.

Yours sincerely

Bernie Masters
Member for Vasse

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EXOTIC SPECIES ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR WA

- For discussion and comment –

INTRODUCTION

WA is home to one of the most unique and biodiverse regions on the face of the planet. The Fitzgerald National Park in the state's south west has over 1700 different species of plants. Around 75 of those species are found nowhere else in the world. The Gascoyne Murchison region covers some 57 million hectares and has an amazing level of biodiversity that includes so many species that as yet, researchers have not been able to scientifically name them all. Shark Bay is listed as a World Heritage area and our Ningaloo Marine Park has one of the world's healthiest and most biodiverse coral reefs.

However, we are all merely caretakers of these wonderful ecosystems for future generations. We have been given a responsibility by previous generations to care for these natural assets in such a way that we can pass them on to our children in no worse a conditions than when we inherited them. Hence, when we become aware of unacceptable changes taking place, there is only one generation of people with

the responsibility to take appropriate action: our own.

Adverse changes to the natural environment can take many forms, but one of the most insidious and damaging is the introduction and spread of exotic or foreign species. The need to control, and in time eradicate those species of birds, plants and animals that are alien to our environment poses many difficulties, both financial and ethical, but we cannot shirk the responsibilities that rest on our shoulders.

West Australians need to get serious about the dangers posed by exotic species to the environment and the economy. If we allow invasive, exotic and feral species to gain a foothold or expand their current populations, then we are jeopardising not only the intrinsic value inherent within our natural ecosystems but we also place at risk the values they provide to tourism and ecotourism, science and medical research, the ecosystem services they provide (clean air and water, for example), education and bioprospecting.

EXOTIC SPECIES AND THEIR IMPACT

Animal, insect and plant pests are costing Australian landowners and governments more than \$6 billion a year in crop and stock losses. About 20 new pests, weeds and diseases invade Australia every year destroying native flora and fauna as well as killing stock.

Fox

The major predator of mid size/weight range marsupials, the fox is responsible for almost eating to extinction native marsupials such as the numbat and woylie. It is also responsible for an estimated damage of at least \$250 million a year to agriculture. The fox was introduced from England in 1858 for hunting and is now found everywhere in Australia, including Tasmania.

Blackberry

Introduced from England in the early 1800's, the blackberry plant causes damage estimated at close to \$50 million in control costs and additional costs in terms of the refuge that dense blackberry plants offer to other pests. The range of the plant is some 8.8 million hectares spread largely through the cooler, wetter areas of Australia, including the south west of this state.

Jarrah Dieback

The jarrah dieback fungus attacks the roots of not only the mighty jarrah but also many other species of plants. Introduced soon after European settlement, it kills native plants that have no resistance. CALM research has found that 85% of native plant species though likely to be susceptible to the disease are in fact at least partially affected by it. As many as 2000 of the 9000 native plant species in Australia's south west may be susceptible to dieback.

Starling

Released in Victoria in the 1850's, this European bird is a major pest of cultivated soft fruits and cereals, also destroying food crops by defaecating on them. In urban areas, the startling nests in houses and tree holes. Evidence from established wine growing areas indicate that 10 to 15 percent of crops can be lost due to damage caused by starlings.

Rainbow Lorikeet

Deliberately released from the Nedlands area in the mid 1960s, the Rainbow Lorikeet's numbers have now reached at least 10,000 in the metropolitan area. While there is some community acceptance of the bird because of its beautiful plumage, increasingly complaints are coming from people living in urban areas as well as from commercial fruit

growers about the loss and damage caused to their crops.

The Rainbow Lorikeet is a noisy bird that out-competes more timid birds for nest hollows. It is capable of displacing the Western Rosella from its only habitat in the world, the south west of WA. The Rainbow Lorikeet has been declared a pest species within the Perth Metropolitan area. Open season has been declared on the species throughout the southwest division of the state.

ISSUES

Identification and Restrictions

The general public often has difficulty in recognising some exotic species and distinguishing them from species that are native to an area. In a state as large as Western Australia, employees of government agencies responsible for exotic species control face a difficult task, so the active support of the community in identifying and reporting suspect exotic species must remain a key plank in any government's environmental and agricultural policies.

Management

To determine the best management option for exotic species, it is necessary to assess their abundance and the existing or potential

damage individual exotic species may cause. For an analysis of the economic benefits of control, data will is needed on the relationship between control costs, damage levels and net returns, preferably for a range of control options.

Control Methods

While many techniques exist to control exotic species, the actual methods used must at all times be humane. Regardless of the damage that exotic species may cause to our environment and in spite of animals such as foxes and feral cats painfully killing native birds and animals, our control actions must always be undertaken with minimal or no pain inflicted upon the target exotic species.

THE WAY FORWARD

A WA Exotic Species Advisory Council

Government should establish an Exotic Species Advisory Council. Its roles would be public education and the provision of specialist, scientific advice to government, industry and the community on all aspects of threats posed by exotic species. It would also advise government on preferred control options for exotic species already present in WA.

In order to gain support for the control and eradication of exotic species, it will be

necessary to educate the general public on recognising and acknowledging what constitutes an exotic/invasive species. It will identify the costs suffered at present from exotic species but it will also determine what future costs will have to be paid by the environment and the economy should existing exotic species remain or new species be allowed to enter the state.

By establishing a body consisting of government agencies and representatives from the scientific community providing a coordinated and integrated approach, we will be able to better provide an understanding of the management and control of exotic species.

Membership

All relevant government agencies would be members of the advisory council with a rotating chair every two years. Those agencies expected to be involved would be:

CALM

the WA Museum

the Department of Environment

the Agriculture Department

CSIRO and

AQIS (the Federal government's Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service).

Several community representatives with interest and expertise in exotic species will also sit on the Advisory Council.

Functions

The role of the Advisory Council would be to examine, assess and report on:

- actual threats from species already here in WA
- the risks from species not yet in WA but which may require government or other action to keep them out of WA
- the efficiency of existing Australian quarantine laws
- communication needs with the public on all issues relating to exotic species that the Council considers important, and
- communication with the scientific community in WA and elsewhere on all exotic species issues.

Funding

An initial budget of \$100,000 per year is suggested as the funding required by the Invasive Species Advisory Council to effectively meet its goals. These funds will be sourced from

April 2004