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## DOMESTIC ANIMALS (DOGS) IN NATIONAL PARKS

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Pets, particularly dogs and cats, evoke the concern of most Australian national park managers. This is because National Parks and conservation reserves are dedicated areas set apart for the protection of both the landscape and of its indigenous flora and fauna, and domestic animals are seen as dominant competitors to native animals causing them to withdraw to safe and usually unseen habitats.

It is well recorded that predation mainly by feral cats can result in the decimation of populations of birds, reptiles and mammals, although the dietary component is dependent mainly on the locality.<sup>1</sup>

Having noted this concern, the question is posed as to what the public perceives of national parks and whether the policy goals set which restrain the movement of domestic pets into reserved lands, are appropriate?

On the one hand, national park administrators have a charter to protect and enhance the environment and on the other, to make significant areas accessible to the public for their inspiration and enjoyment.

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1. Department of Primary Industry (1978) Feral Animals - Report to Vertebrate Pests Committee

A reasonable element of this latter objective is that unhindered, wild populations of native animals can be seen, understood, and at times studied by the visitor.

However, if we look separately at the two objectives of environmental protection and accessibility, I believe it is the expectation of the public at large, that national parks are areas of landscape grandeur with unusual and attractive features and where the landform itself is the prime attraction, and is conserved.

Secondly, the public holds the opinion that it has an inalienable right to view this natural endowment, as long as it is not degraded.

Within this expectation then, the right to see and the desire to conserve go hand in hand.

Facilities such as roadways, carparks, walking trails and picnic areas are placed so as to make the landscape easily viewed without detracting from its inherent beauty.

The native animals are an additional feature which I suspect the visiting public does not initially recognise as a reason why he is attracted to a national park, but on seeing the animals, he is delighted and intrigued by their presence.

This is philisophic, but it has a bearing upon the question of dogs in national parks. You will note that I have drawn heavily upon the connection between national parks and people, but I do recognise that there are other forms of reservation, for example in Western Australia, we have separate wildlife reserves where people are excluded and the land is managed solely for the native fauna.

In other States, and indeed in my own State's national park system, there are also protected areas entirely conserved for wildlife.

## 2. DOMESTIC ANIMALS IN NATIONAL PARKS

Most national park authorities throughout the world and including those within Australia, prohibit the bringing in of exotic animals, of which in many places the dog is one. This policy direction is supported by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and has even been framed in various national park Statutes, Acts and Regulations.

In Western Australia, Regulations to the National Parks Authority Act, underscore the need to protect the flora and fauna and the environment. One aspect of this is to restrict the entry of stock and domestic animals into national parks without authority.

Interestingly, in this context, dogs are seen to be in the same category as cats, pigs, goats, donkeys, cattle and some varieties of poultry.

Moreover , for Western Australia management policies for national parks have been published which note that plant and animal species non native and exotic to a park, may not be introduced, and if they are found, they will be controlled and, if possible, eradicated.

The intent of these management objectives is to conserve and protect the native animal life which is a part of the ecosystem that is reserved. Such management will strive to maintain the natural abundance, behaviour, diversity and ecological integrity of native animals in the national parks as part of that overall ecosystem.

In my State, as in all other States with the probable exception of parts of the Northern Territory, dogs are not permitted in national parks even on a leash. A review by National Park officers has been made to test the public mood in this regard, and the results illustrate a number of aspects worthy of consideration.

Furthermore, a scan of the available literature points to an emotive assessment of dogs in society and their place if they have one, in protected areas.

In regard to dogs in public places, people have set ideas, some of which are reasonable observations.

a) OBJECTION TO THE PRESENCE OF DOGS

Objectors generally are concerned about the following points:-

- \* Dogs foul the ground where people walk, sit and picnic;
- \* Dogs bite and snap at the hands and legs of visitors and their behaviour is not always predictable;
- \* Dogs bark, they do fight and at times attack the visitor and in this way, destroy the tranquillity of the natural environment;
- \* Dogs, do knock down children and they will play in crowded situations which may be dangerous in hazardous areas (e.g. near water, cliff tops and gorges);
- \* Dogs by virtue of their presence, may attract other stray animals and lead to disputes;
- \* Dogs chase away the native animals.

Additionally, if one takes a harsh view, and examines tenuous statistics, it is known that domestic dogs may be reservoirs of 42 contagious diseases, one of the worst being toxocara. This disease which is carried by worms in dog faeces may attack the brain and eyes of children.

On an absurd scale it has been calculated that in London's urban parks and along pavements, greater than 50,000 tonnes of dog excrement is deposited annually.

These latter arguments unfortunately are emotive rather than being of any real value in considered debate. In understanding the policy on the prohibition of dogs,

we need to take a dispassionate view giving due weight to compelling facts which are not always easy to find.

However, it is the experience of Western Australian National Park Rangers that before the ban on dogs was fully imposed in 1976, people preferred not to restrain their dogs entirely on a leash whilst walking in a national park, despite otherwise good intentions of doing so. Consequently, at times when a dog owner was out of sight of a Ranger, 'Rover' was allowed freer movement often off the lead.

Qualitative data now being compiled for Cape Le Grand National Park, near Esperance, suggest that the native fauna is currently more abundant adjacent to camping areas and along nature trails, than had been the case prior to 1976. A firm trend now appears to be established which points to a relationship between the removal of dogs (even on a leash) and the return of native birds and animals.

Another example close to Perth is Yanchep National Park where tame kangaroos, possums and also birds are easily seen, patted and at times fed by the visiting public.

This experience was unavailable previously when dogs on a lead were allowed into the park, with the consequence that the native animals were observed not to remain in the same vicinity.

Additionally, it appears evident that the smell of a predator will persist for quite some time and this applies particularly to dogs which mark territory as they go. Their scent is sufficiently powerful to result in most marsupials remaining concealed whilst others will vacate an area until the foreign odour disperses.

On a slightly different tack, but nevertheless a related problem, it appears on the files of my Department on one occasion, that a pet owner was apprehended dumping cats in a national park, and offered the excuse "that there are lots of native animals around so the cats will be able to fend for themselves".

I suspect that that is a commonly held, but unreasonable belief. Of course such an attitude negates the very principle of trying to preserve the environment in its natural form with a representative component of the indigenous fauna.

#### b) DOGS IN SOCIETY

Presently, Australia-wide, there is renewed interest in the part that pets play in society. Indeed there is active promotion of the ideal that pets play an important role in modifying and tempering the behaviour of man. An example of this is that most Australian families have a pet probably for the comfort and security that is offered.

More recently, a group known by the acronym JACOPIS (Joint Advisory Committee on Pets in Society) has been established to lobby and promote the "value of pets in society for the psychological and physiological benefits which we may gain from contact with companion animals." This group has been campaigning in an endeavour to arouse awareness in local authority administration of the need, as they see it, for the provision of appropriate facilities for pets, and where necessary for pet owners.

As an example, a Perth coastal local authority this year moved to close a popular dog beach because of perceived health problems. The resolution roused considerable debate, both from people who supported the Council's plan for the closure and from those who did not. In the event, acting in part on data provided by JACOPIS, the Council decided to return to the status quo.

An additional element which must be borne in mind, is that a proportion of the travelling public wish to take their pets with them on holiday. Observations at Pemberton Caravan Park in the south-west of Western Australia, operated by the National Parks Authority, indicate that about 10% of travellers have dogs with them. The Authority however, does not permit dogs into any of its public facilities, including caravan parks and camping areas. In this regard, there is a reasonable comparison in that there are 285 registered caravan parks in the State of which 85 exclude dogs entirely.



The following statistics derived from R.A.C. (N.R.M.A.)  
Accommodation and Touring Guides are of relevance:-

STATE	NO. OF CARAVAN PARKS	% OF CARAVAN PARKS THAT EXCLUDE DOGS	REMARKS
Western Australia	285	30%	The remainder allow dogs on leash.
South Australia	203	22%	Another 22% indicate no concern about pets, whilst 46% allow dogs on leashes.
Victoria	371	'most'	The comment was received that Victorian Caravan Parks Assoc. ban all dogs.
New South Wales	550	60%	-
Queensland	371	45%	-

In the Northern Territory, the data are more difficult to determine but it appears that dogs on leashes have been allowed in all national park camping grounds. I do understand however, that the matter is currently under review.

National Park Rangers in my State report that travellers with dogs say that they are not aware that there is a ban on dogs in national parks until they reach a particular venue. Furthermore, interstate visitors who have dogs, believe that only Western Australia has a prohibition whilst other States may not enforce it.

This stance, which I am advised is not uncommon, is not borne out by the facts outlined above.

It does however, underpin an important issue. The message that pets are incompatible with native animals in national parks is not getting through or being understood by the general public.

National Park administrators need to be more forceful in advising the public of these matters and to educate the tourists that it is in the interest of the welfare of both native animals and of pets, if the latter were cared for elsewhere whilst their owners are on holiday.

### 3. OTHER ISSUES

There are other aspects of 'dogs in parks' which I will only dwell upon lightly.

In Western Australia by force of circumstances, a number of national parks (fortunately not many), have small freehold enclave blocks within them. It is also common for there to be road reserves through national parks, which I would expect is a situation that occurs frequently in other States.

In the former case, a land owner can have his domestic animals with him on his property, but his management objectives may not always be the same as those set for the national park. In such circumstances, it is the responsibility of the public authorities to engender an understanding, and a sympathetic realisation by the land-holder of the philosophy behind the reservation of land

and the conservation of its resources.

The strategy should be toward mutual co-operation through close liaison and goodwill.

In regard to gazetted road reserves, these are accessways where unrestricted movement by the public is guaranteed. In such circumstances, a dog owner can have his pet with him, as long as they remain within the road alignment.

We have found on the whole, that this does not pose a problem for the Ranger except where a road leads only to a public area within a national park. In such cases, the dog owner is normally asked to leave and this does arouse anxiety and at times resentment.

Again, the resolution of the problem is through efficient campaigns to inform the public of the objects of national parks.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Pets, mainly dogs, are mostly incompatible with the management objectives set for Australian national parks. On the one hand those charged with the responsibility for national park management, have a charter to protect our unique indigenous fauna, and on the other, they must be sensitive to social factors which demand a place for pets in our day to day life.

National Park standards are high, and I believe they are worth retaining, but to do this in the light of past experience suggests to me, an on-going need to advise and appropriately inform the public of the goals that have been won and which should be held.