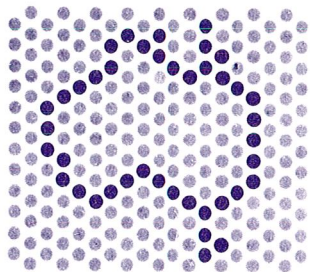


KANGAROO CONSERVATION



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The kangaroo is native to Australia. It appears with the emu on the national coat of arms and is used in many other ways to symbolise the nation.

Kangaroos are members of the marsupial family - a group of animals revealing great differences in size and general appearance. Their one common feature is that they have a pouch to accommodate their young. Kangaroos, wallaroos and wallabies are all members of the same marsupial group, the main differences being in size.

They range from the great grey and red kangaroos which are often taller than a man and can weigh about 90 kilograms through the medium-sized wallaroos and wallabies to the small musky rat kangaroos which have heads and bodies less than 30 centimetres long.

Since the 1770s when Europeans first settled in Australia, the kangaroo has been hunted and killed for food, for sport, as a pest and for profit. Paralleling this exploitation have been warnings and cries of concern for its conservation. One of the earliest warnings against the large-scale killing of kangaroos was issued by the British naturalist John Gould more than 120 years ago.

In recent years the calls for conservation have come more often and with more vigour, spurred by the sudden boom around 1958 in the demand for kangaroo meat as a pet food, the drought of 1956-69 which wrought havoc on the numbers of some kangaroo species, and the mounting world wide interest in conservation in general which swept into Australia in the late 1960s.

Against this background the Australian House of Representatives resolved, on 14 May 1970, to appoint a Select Committee to inquire into and report on a wide range of questions concerning wild life conservation in Australia.

Because of the intense public interest in the kangaroo controversy the committee decided to look at this question in isolation from the general terms of reference and, to avoid undue delay, to issue an interim report dealing specifically with kangaroo conservation.

The Select Committee held an extensive series of public hearings and field inspections in all the Australian States and the Northern Territory. More than 6000 pages of evidence were taken - much of it related to the kangaroo issue.

The main finding of the Select Committee's Interim Report, released in November, 1971, was that none of the larger species of kangaroo was under present threat of extinction and that there was no requirement for a total ban on the commercial exploitation of kangaroos.

The committee went on to make a number of recommendations, the main being:

That the Federal Government should liaise with the State Governments to obtain greater uniformity of laws relating to the taking of kangaroos. The committee also recommended a number of measures designed to control commercial harvesting of kangaroos.

- . That regulations controlling the export of kangaroo skins should be administered to ensure that local requirements by Australian manufacturers were adequately met.
- . That Customs regulations relating to the export of live fauna should be liberalised to allow kangaroos to be collected and reared by Australian zoos for export to approved overseas zoos.
- . That the Federal Government should offer financial assistance to the States for the creation of more national parks and wildlife reserves for kangaroos and other native fauna.
- . That pet food manufacturers using kangaroo meat in their products be required by regulation to indicate this on their packages.

The committee noted the difficulties it had faced because of the emotional nature of the kangaroo controversy.

The report said: "The kangaroo, as one of the emblems on the Australian coat of arms and our best known form of wildlife, evokes an emotional response. Consequently, the fact that this animal is slaughtered in large numbers for pet food is a moral issue for many people. Even if it could be proved that with proper management kangaroos are a sustainable resource, many would still oppose the killing of kangaroos for profit.

"By contrast, many pastoralists and graziers regard kangaroos as vermin which directly compete with stock for feed and water and inflict damage to their properties.

"The tourist industry in general regards wildlife, and particularly the kangaroo, as an extremely important tourist attraction and wishes to see adequate numbers of kangaroos to meet this need.

"The Kangaroo Industries Association claims that its operations are self-regulatory, in that the economics of the industry cause shooting to be discontinued in harvest areas before kangaroo numbers are reduced to danger levels.

"Wildlife scientists and State Government fauna departments in their evidence generally agreed that there is no basis for any claim that the larger species of kangaroos are presently under any threat of extinction, although in some specific areas over-harvesting may have occurred.

"The spectrum of opinion covered by the evidence ranges from that of extreme preservationists who do not want kangaroos shot under any circumstances, to those who advocate exploitation of the kangaroos as a renewable economic resource."

The Australian kangaroo belongs to three main family groups: the Eastern Grey and Western Grey Kangaroo found in forest and dense bush in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia; the Euros and Wallaroos which live in rocky hills and ranges in a band across the continent but are not found in the southern and northern regions of greater fertility; and the Red Kangaroo of the arid and semi-arid hinterland, some 3 218 000 square kilometres of plains, sand dunes, grasslands and lightly timbered country.

Of these species it is the Red Kangaroo which is said to be in the greatest danger. Its habitat is prone to the ravages of drought, it competes with farmers and graziers for the right to the land, and the relatively flat country with little cover makes it easy prey for shooters.

The concern of conservationists in recent years for the future of the Red Kangaroo coincides with a long period of drought and an increase in the numbers being taken by shooters.

A ten year drought which ended throughout most of the Red Kangaroos' territory only last year (1971) caused many deaths. Farmers, too, shot many of them as pests. In extreme climatic conditions or when there are simply too many they can be a pest, but generally the kangaroo can co-exist with sheep and cattle because they eat different foods.

Parallel with the long drought came a big increase in demand for kangaroo meat as domestic pet food and with this demand came those who would fill it, the commercial shooters.

Much of the anger and emotion in arguments against harvesting kangaroos comes from the methods employed by these shooters. They usually work at night with a fast vehicle, bright spotlights to dazzle and immobilise the kangaroos, and high-powered rifles with telescopic sights.

Despite public revulsion, evidence given to the Select Committee indicated that the use of spotlights and telescopic sights by professional shooters was the most humane method of killing kangaroos.

The professional shooter, experienced and well-equipped, rarely maims a kangaroo and regards himself in much the same sort of light as a professional fisherman.

The rise in demand for kangaroo meat as pet food followed the successful introduction of myxomatosis which virtually wiped out rabbits throughout Australia.

Killing of kangaroos for fur and hides - mainly for export - has been going on for more than a hundred years. Today the overseas demand is increasing - paradoxically as traditional sources of hides in other countries dry up in the face of pressure on hunters to conserve other threatened species.

Kangaroo skins are long-established articles of commerce. The skins make very good leather which is used in the manufacture of shoes, gloves and garments. They are also made up by the fur trade as bags, souvenirs, rugs, vests and coats.

The main overseas markets for kangaroo products are Britain and Japan for meat and the United States for fur and hides.

Current Government controls over the killing of kangaroos vary widely between the various Australian States and Territories.

Summarised they are:

Queensland Prior to 1970 there was little control over the killing of kangaroos. In fact before their commercial possibilities were realised kangaroos were regarded as pests and government bounties paid for their scalps. As the skin industry developed the annual harvest of kangaroos rose from about 350,000 in 1950 to over 1,000,000 in 1959. This level was reached again in 1964, 1965 and 1969.

Early in 1970, as a result of mounting public pressure, and a belief that in some areas numbers had been drastically reduced, the Queensland Government introduced controls aimed at restricting the harvest. In the first three months of 1971 the harvest was down to 73,000, compared with previous levels for that time of the year of about 200,000. It could well be, however, that seasonal conditions played a significant part in this reduction as well as the reduction, under the new laws, of the number of chillers allowed to operate in the harvest areas.

Western Australia Controls on exploitation in Western Australia came into operation - for the first time in the State's history - in February, 1971. These controls were based on the concept of optimisation of the total value of a natural resource. The State believed that continued uncontrolled exploitation would result in:

- (a) reduction of existing field populations to fugitive remnants;
- (b) the collapse of the kangaroo trade.

The current controls are aimed at reducing the annual rate of commercial harvesting to about 200,000 a year - less than half the previous total. Shooters are licensed and are issued with up to 4000 tags costing 10 cents each. Tags must be attached to each carcass sold. Property holders are allowed to shoot as many kangaroos on their properties as they wish, but they cannot trade in the skins or carcasses unless issued with tags.

New South Wales Shooters have been licensed in New South Wales and, to some degree controlled, for a number of years. Each shooter is licensed to operate only in a prescribed area. From time to time these zones are spelled completely from shooting. A tagging system came into operation in 1971, chiefly as a check on the geographic origin of animals. The tags are sold to dealers and shooters for a 20 cent royalty payment and must be attached to each carcass traded. The number of licensed shooters has now declined from 282 in 1969 to 174 in 1971. The kangaroo harvest in New South Wales in recent years has declined with the fall in the number of shooters. In 1967 about 170,000 kangaroos were taken. The total in 1970 was 77,000.

Victoria This State has the strictest controls against the killing of kangaroos. Only landowners with a legitimate complaint of damage caused by kangaroos can apply for a permit to kill them. Permits are issued under strict conditions governing the maximum number of animals to be killed (sixty) and the area in which they may be killed. In 1967 about 10,000 kangaroos were shot under permit. Numbers taken have declined since then.

Tasmania The only large kangaroo species in Tasmania is the Forester, which is the southernmost representative of the eastern grey kangaroo. This animal is fully protected and is not commercially exploited. It lives in the north-east region of Tasmania where its numbers are declining due to habitat loss as a result of agricultural development. There is limited commercial exploitation of the commonly occurring Bennetts and Rufous wallabies. This, however, is confined to skins. A decision is made each year by the Government on the length of the open season. Skin dealers must be licensed.

South Australia All kangaroos are protected in South Australia, permits being issued for their destruction only when they are known to be causing damage to pastures and property. To ensure that kangaroos can only be harvested in these circumstances the Government is planning to introduce controls based on weight limits, tagging and registration of processors, chillers and shooters. Permits specify the species to be taken and are issued to the property operator who then calls in a licensed shooter. The shooter is required to submit returns showing the number of kangaroos shot. The chiller operator buying from him is required to provide the same information.

Northern Territory The red kangaroo is the only species which has been subject to commercial exploitation in the Northern Territory. However, due to the effect of over population and drought there has been no harvesting since 1960. The Northern Territory Administration gives partial protection to the kangaroo and supports the concept of controlled harvesting if kangaroos are in pest proportions. Commercial harvesting is considered uneconomic at this stage due to the small size and relative inaccessibility of kangaroo populations. However it is believed numbers are now increasing and that in the future harvesting may occur again.

Australian Capital Territory There is no exploitation of wildlife in the Australian Capital Territory.

The Select Committee came to the conclusion that the various Government authorities had a dual responsibility to conserve wildlife and to ensure that relief can be given to landowners should wildlife numbers reach pest proportions. The committee found that at some times and in some places kangaroos reach pest proportions and reduction of their numbers was then justified.

The committee also considered that since it was wasteful to permit destruction of a resource without utilising it as far as possible, the controlled harvesting of kangaroos and the utilisation of their meat and skins should be seen as a tool of management. The committee emphasised that the interests of the kangaroo industry should be subservient to the needs of conservation and the needs of the primary producer.

Most experts agree that widespread fears that the kangaroo is being shot out of existence are unfounded. Some wildlife scientists testified before the Select Committee that they believed kangaroo numbers - with the exception of the Forester Kangaroo in Tasmania - are now far in excess of the levels existing at the time of European settlement of Australia.

Evidence was given that a number of smaller species which were either threatened with extinction or thought to be extinct had never been utilised commercially.

The harvesting of kangaroos has been viewed with alarm by many conservationists in Europe and America and led to the belief in some countries, that kangaroos are threatened with extinction.

However, two of the most important scientific organisations concerned in wildlife conservation throughout the world do not list the larger kangaroos as endangered species - although both include many other Australian animals and birds in their lists.

The experts administering the Endangered Species Legislation of the United States Congress have not listed the larger species of kangaroo in their schedules, although about 45 Australian birds and animals are already included.

Likewise the Survival Service Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, Geneva, Switzerland does not include the larger species of kangaroo in its famous publication, the Red Data Book. The commission monitors threatened species in all continents, and lists these in four categories which currently include several hundred birds and animals throughout the world.

Both the Red Data Book and the US Endangered Species Legislation lists include species of the smaller kangaroos and wallabies which are under threat of extinction for reasons other than commercial harvesting.

The Select Committee noted that there had been numerous complaints from the general public that by contrast with the position years ago it was now rare to see kangaroos in the wild, close to settled areas. Many tourists had complained of having travelled widely throughout Australia without seeing a kangaroo.

The report said evidence was given that Australian native fauna was largely nocturnal in nature. This was illustrated during the Committee's visit to Tuttaning Reserve in Western Australia - a research reserve of about 1619 hectares. During an afternoon tour of the reserve the committee saw no wildlife at all. At night, aided by spotlights operated by the research staff at the reserve, more than 200 sightings covering 10 different species were made. Without spotlights very few animals, if any at all, would have been seen.

The facts, however, are often disregarded. As Mr Vincent Serventy, a noted Australian conservationist, pointed out: "For the average Australian, any population of kangaroos which is hunted has become visually extinct. He will not be satisfied with census figures which indicate there are still kangaroos in the bush. As far as he is concerned they are gone."

The Select Committee received the following comments from prominent Australian wildlife scientists:

- . Professor G.B. Sharman, of the School of Biological Sciences, Macquarie University said: "Those species of kangaroos which have been most exploited for meat and fur trades are today the most abundant of all kangaroos."
- . Professor A.R. Main of the University of Western Australia, believed that kangaroos, as a result of commercial harvesting, were at the point where regulation was necessary, but that numbers were not dangerously low. It was his impression that kangaroos were very much more abundant than they were before stock watering points were established by graziers.
- . Prominent wildlife scientist Dr A.E. Newsome said: "The fauna of Australia as a whole wilts under the pressure of agricultural and pastoral production but there are a handful of species which benefit. The red kangaroo is one, the euro another. The grey kangaroo is another possibility." Dr Newsome also told the committee that total protection of the species could well result in its food supplies being destroyed. Large numbers of kangaroos had to be shot to manage the population in the interests of the grazier and he saw no reason why their carcasses should not be utilised.
- . Dr H.J. Frith of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) Division of Wildlife Research said: "There is no need at the present time to halt the hunting of kangaroos."

Dr F.H. Talbot of the Australian Museum said: "It is not inconsistent with sound conservation to have an animal exploited."

The weight of opinion from wildlife scientists was that a prohibition of commercial harvesting of kangaroos would need to be replaced by culling programmes of almost similar intensity. They considered that not to utilise the carcasses in such circumstances would be unnecessary wastage of a valuable and renewable economic resource. Their view was that any ban on the export of kangaroo products would be unlikely to have any real effect on the conservation of kangaroos.