

EURO POISONING AND FAUNA PROTECTION

The spate of correspondence in the daily press concerning the euro poisoning campaign now in train has no doubt caused many to wonder how the campaign stands in relation to the Fauna Protection Act. We have prepared the following notes so that all officers may have a better appreciation of the departmental attitude.

Perhaps the first thing we should do is to get clear in our minds just what the legal position is. Most officers will of course be aware that the provisions of the Fauna Protection Act are set aside if they directly conflict with the provisions of the Vermin Act. As far as the euro campaign is concerned, however, there is no possible conflict between the two Acts, because euros and red kangaroos, under the Fauna Protection Act, have been declared to be not protected throughout the entire State. In addition, under the Vermin Act, they have been declared vermin throughout the major portion of the pastoral area, including that part of the North-West where poisoning has been taking place.

Although there is very little on record about the fauna populations in the North-West, there appears to be no doubt that there are more euros now than there ever have been during the period that the white man has been in Australia. There also seems to be no doubt that the increase has been due to the fact that man has altered the habitat in the euro's favour. It is popularly believed, by pastoralists and many other people too, that the major contributing factor in the rise in euro numbers has been the greatly increased amount of water available to these animals as a result of the pastoralists' activities in setting up mills throughout the country. We believe, however, that the greatest contributing factor has been the alterations inflicted on the vegetation as a result of grazing pressure by introduced animals.

It is well known that different species of plants vary greatly in their ability to withstand grazing. The taller grasses, for instance, which predominate in what is known as a "climax" vegetation, are not able to stand up to much grazing. Indeed, under heavy grazing they will disappear altogether. Their place is taken by more resistant species, generally called "increasers". With very heavy grazing pressure even the "increasers" are killed out and their place is taken by "invaders" which are usually woody plants of low forage value to livestock. It has been demonstrated in the United States, where these matters have been studied very closely, that whenever low successional "invaders", replace the more nutritious climax grasses, a different group of animal species moves in and usually increases in numbers to pest proportions. We think this is what has happened in the Pilbara, where the euro,

which was once confined to rocky outcrops and hills, has moved into the surrounding plains. Man with his introduced animals - sheep, cattle, horses, donkeys, goats and even camels - has changed the environment and brought about a particular plant association in some areas which the euro finds highly satisfactory. The sufficiency of water might well prevent crashes in the population which otherwise might occur during times of prolonged drought, but it is doubtful whether it has played a leading role in the initial increase.

While we are prepared to say that this is how the position has arisen, we are not willing, due to the lack of scientific evidence, to be dogmatic about how it can be corrected. We are unable to say, for instance, whether the euro is helping to hold the present plant association at this stage which is so favourable to the species. Research carried out at Rottneest Island leaves little doubt that the quokka, with the aid of the occasional fire, has been able to keep the island overgrazed and in a vegetational stage which favours the continued existence of what we can only regard as an over-abundant quokka population. If the euro is acting similarly in the Pilbara, with overgrazing taking the place of fire, its numbers would first have to be reduced before we could expect to achieve any improvement in the condition of the pastures, irrespective of what grazing pressure was permitted. We believe it might well be demonstrated, however, that better grazing practices could by themselves do much to restore the pastures. Nevertheless, there would still have to be a massive euro mortality, as the present high population could not be maintained once the environment was restored, more or less, to its natural condition. Whether it is more humane to poison euros off "in one fell swoop", as it were, or to allow them to die slowly from a shortage of food, is something we are not prepared to argue about. We agree with Professor Abbie, of Adelaide, however, that civilised man's curious attachment and preference for the food he knows has been the cause of many such headaches as this. Professor Abbie wrote recently that the euro and other marsupials have demonstrated pretty clearly that they are able to convert fodder into meat far more effectively than introduced animals which have to be acclimatised, herded and protected against diseases to which the native fauna is highly resistant.