

KANGAROO MANAGEMENT IN W.A.

EXPORT BAN AFFECTS CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

When the House of Representatives Select Committee on Wildlife Conservation visited Western Australia twice during 1971 they publicly announced that Western Australia was well ahead in conserving kangaroos and that they had seen more kangaroos here than in any other State.

For over two years a well-planned and co-ordinated management programme has been operating in W.A. to control kangaroo numbers in accordance with good rangeland management and multiple use principles. A quota has been established of 200,000 kangaroos per year and a limited number of shooters have been licensed and given an individual annual quota. No kangaroo carcass can be commercialised unless a self-locking royalty tag has been affixed and this tag must remain with the carcass up to the final stages of processing; after that it must stay with the skin. The most important feature of the management regulations are the returns which have to be forwarded to the Department. The information on these returns enables research officers to assess kangaroo populations, age and sex ratios, etc.

The management programme had been accepted by farmers, and the information from the shooters' and dealers' returns was becoming meaningful and valuable, when, in January this year the United States of America announced that it was proposing to place a number of species of Australian fauna, including the Red and Western Grey Kangaroo, on their Appendix "A" of endangered species. If this proposal had come about it would have meant that the import of kangaroo products into America would have been prohibited. As it transpires, the proposed ban has not come into effect because Australia, in an attempt "to put its house in order" has not renewed the waiver of the ban on the export of kangaroo products which has been in force since the 1920's. This has had the same effect as the proposed U.S.A. ban and has placed in jeopardy the whole kangaroo management programme operating in Western Australia. Without the export sale of skins the industry will be endangered and, if it fails, with it would go the flow of data from which the management and control programmes are determined. The alternatives to controlled shooting are shooting by Government officers or poisoning; the first is impracticable and the second unacceptable because poisoning is non-selective; it can be over-efficient and non-target species can be affected.

Western Australia has made the strongest possible protest to the Commonwealth Government at Ministerial and Departmental levels. The Minister for Fisheries and Fauna has been to Canberra to meet and request the Commonwealth Ministers concerned to lift the ban, and we understand that a strong argument on behalf of the rangeland management programme has been made also by the Minister for Agriculture. Western Australia has also participated in no less than five meetings of State and Commonwealth representatives in the last four months devoted almost entirely to reviewing existing State programmes and trying to develop a basic and united approach.

There is now hope that Western Australia's existing programme will be accepted with little amendment. Meanwhile the ban continues. The Commonwealth Minister for Customs, Senator L. Murphy has given little or no indication that he appreciates the effective controls operating in Western Australia or that he will exempt this State from the ban. Replying to a question by Senator Durack (W.A.) in the Commonwealth Parliament on June 7, Senator Murphy said:—

"I indicated earlier this year that the policy of law, namely that the export of kangaroo skins should not be permitted, would be enforced and that the provision for consent to export would not be invoked by me unless I was satisfied that it was in the interests of conservation to do so. A regulation was introduced to deal also with the products of kangaroo and that has come into operation . . ."

". . . As far as I am concerned the conservation of kangaroos will be a first consideration. The suggestion that there has been proper control and proper conservation has been proved to be a lot of nonsense. It is time that Australians woke up the fact that all around the world there is abhorrence at what has been happening in regard to the virtually uncontrolled slaughter of kangaroos. I agree that the State from which the Honourable Senator comes, Western Australia, has endeavoured to institute some form of quota and regulation. The report which I have mentioned indicates that the conference considered these measures to be absolutely essential for the preservation of the kangaroo. Yet, those same measures are not operating in the State where most of the kangaroos are taken."

We must take issue with Senator Murphy's statement that Western Australia "has ENDEAVOURED to institute SOME form of quota and regulation". The quota has been established and the regulations have been operating successfully for two years.

It is difficult to understand why, if the measures that have been taken in this State are "absolutely essential for the preservation of the kangaroo", we should be penalised because Senator Murphy is dissatisfied with the policies of other States.

Until all States have produced management programmes which are acceptable to Senator Murphy, the situation in Western Australia can only deteriorate. If the industry winds down or collapses, the management data supplied by the industry will no longer be a valuable means of assessing populations. In addition, kangaroo numbers will build up and the balance of the biomass will be upset. All grazing animals must be held within that level which avoids degradation and allows restoration of the rangeland. Unless accurate checks can be made on population levels of grazing animals then good rangeland management is impossible. We believe that, in the Western Australian situation, the necessary data can only be obtained at anything like reasonable cost under the present management programme.

The suggestion that excess kangaroos should be poisoned is even more abhorrent to the public than shooting. Recently the Hon. Premier, Mr. J. T. Tonkin, received a petition (with a thousand or so signatures) from the students of Perth Modern School expressing concern that the poisoning of water sources could be used for exterminating kangaroos. In his reply, Mr. Tonkin summed up the situation as follows:—

“Dear Mr. Stokes,

“I acknowledge the petition submitted on behalf of the students of Perth Modern School. I found it impressive, not only in respect of the number of signatories, but also for the degree of concern obviously felt by the rising generation for the well-being of kangaroos and other wildlife.

“I feel that my Government need make no apology for the management programmes it applies to grey kangaroos, euros or red kangaroos.

“The House of Representatives Select Committee on Wildlife Conservation investigated both programmes very thoroughly and generally accepted them as adequate. I think this is obvious from any reading of the Committee's Interim Report and from its recommendation 3, which reads:—

3. That the Commonwealth Government recommend to the State Governments that, where not already in effect:
 - (i) limits to the numbers of kangaroos to be taken be established, having regard to seasonal conditions.
 - (ii) a policy of declaring from time to time areas to be spelled from harvesting of kangaroos be adopted.
 - (iii) a tagging system be adopted to control trading in kangaroo meat and skins.
 - (iv) kangaroo shooters be issued licenses on an annual quota basis for both full-time and part-time shooters.
 - (v) a royalty be paid on each kangaroo shot for commercial use, and that such royalties be applied by the States to the conservation of wildlife.
 - (vi) permits be issued to graziers to allow the culling of excess kangaroo populations and that they be permitted to sell the meat and skins. Where these are sold, royalties should be paid.
 - (vii) pet food manufacturers using kangaroo meat in their products be obliged by regulation to indicate this on their packages.

“All these proposals have been part of our management programme for the past two years.

“In addition, there were three conclusions reached by that Committee which are particularly relevant.

These were:—

- (1) That none of the large species of macropod is at present under threat of extinction, whether from destruction of habitat, drought, or commercial factors. An exception is the Forester Kangaroo, a Tasmanian sub-species of the eastern grey, which is threatened due to habitat loss.

However, the Committee accepts the view of CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research that the position needs to be continually monitored and that continuous research with regard to larger kangaroo species is necessary.

- (13) That although repugnant to some sections of the community, spotlight shooting with rifles equipped with telescopic sights is the most effective and humane method of killing kangaroos.
- (21) That whether or not there is commercial harvesting, kangaroo numbers will need to be controlled. There is thus a need to determine the best way of culling any surplus populations.

“The kangaroo industry is used in this State as a tool of management by which kangaroo populations are kept within reasonable bounds.

“You have referred to the students' alarm that the ecological balance in the area could be seriously affected. I believe the position is that the true ecological balance in the area, in fact, has been upset by the development of the area by pastoralists with the introduction of a permanent water supply. As a result, not only have additional grazing animals been introduced but the kangaroo has been protected from the devastating effects of drought and prolonged dry periods. This has permitted substantial increases in population. We are now faced with the need both for proper control of sheep numbers and kangaroo numbers in order to avoid destruction of the vegetation with consequent severe erosion and permanent denudation of the area.

“Conservation cannot be centred around only one species or around the fauna, but must take into account the total ecological balance. The Kangaroo Management programme has been developed in this context. In the event of the kangaroo industry collapsing as a result of failure to lift the export ban on kangaroo products, consideration must be given to other means of controlling excess kangaroo numbers. For this reason the classification of red kangaroos as vermin under the Vermin Act can only be considered when it is evident that an effective management system is operating.

Yours sincerely,
J. T. Tonkin
PREMIER”

One further point needs to be made in regard to the poisoning of kangaroos. Sub regulation 10 (a) of the Fauna Conservation Act Regulation 54 provides:—

“Except as may otherwise be authorised in writing by the Chief Warden of Fauna, a person shall not use any explosive, poisonous, noxious or narcotizing substance in the taking of any fauna.”

From all the foregoing it should be obvious that Western Australia has already put its house in order.

In the previous issue of S.W.A.N.S. we said that Australia had only itself to blame for its poor image overseas in the sphere of conservation. Justifiably or not Western Australia is now reaping the harvest of that image.