

EXOTIC GAME SPECIES

With few exceptions, the wildlife of Western Australia has never been considered in the category of "game". Other countries have their various species of deer, pigs, hares, turkeys, pheasants, grouse and other edible animals but Western Australia's only indigenous fauna, which might be considered as game, are wild ducks, quail and kangaroos.

Apart from the use of kangaroos as an important food source for the early settlers and the subsequent development of a valuable export trade in meat and hides, the kangaroo was never really treated as a game species—it was considered generally as "sport" shooting, although some of the more epicurean shooters of late may have utilised the tail for that almost legendary dish—kangaroo-tail soup.

Before we became conscious of the dangers and economic losses caused by the introduction of exotic species, our forefathers, ignorant of the consequences introduced rabbits, goats and foxes which were to plague future pastoralists or they allowed the horse, donkey, pig, goat, buffalo and camel to become feral animals.

Only when it became evident that these animals were having an adverse effect upon the environment and indigenous wildlife—and becoming responsible for agricultural losses—were steps taken to prevent the introduction of further exotic species and control those already introduced, e.g. "Destructive Birds and Animals Act, 1893".

But with all this knowledge gained from past experience there have been many overtures made over the years to introduce "game" species—basically to provide "sport" for those few people who wish to display their skills with a rifle by killing an animal—either for a trophy or to leave its carcass to rot in the bush. A rifle club membership and shooting at targets or clay pigeon could surely satisfy this urge!

If additional species were required for the sake of the meat or food content it would be understandable but more often than not the desire to shoot something (quite often the signs and notices) or bag a trophy is the motivating factor.

In January the Deputy Premier, Mr D. H. O'Neil very aptly spelt out this State's attitude to the introduction of deer into Western Australia when he replied to an enquiry from an Eastern States' Association.

Mr O'Neil's comments, published below in precis form, may be taken as a definitive statement on the hunting philosophy adopted in Western Australia.

- A previous decision made by Cabinet stated that no animals other than ducks and quail should be declared under the Wildlife Conservation Act to be a game species.
- It is believed that the majority of the public is opposed to sport shooting, particularly native (indigenous) animals although limited hunting of feral pigs and rabbits is tolerated.
- Any proposal to introduce an exotic game animal, such as deer, would wake strong reaction from conservationists and the agricultural community which already has to contend with many introduced pests.
- The diminution of wild ducks over the last few decades may be attributed to environmental factors—duck shooting has not been considered a vital factor because in years of drought no shooting season is declared. It is considered that the effects of both drought and shooting may be cumulative rather than concurrent.
- Sport hunting is believed to play a minor role in the control of pest animals, but commercial hunting of kangaroos and feral animals is in a different category and can be of real significance.
- The Government's view is that while sport hunting can be one means of cropping native animals whose populations have to be reduced, it is not one that suits the Western Australian situation or its people. To allow it, there would need to be changes made in the policies relating to firearms and forest and wildlife management programmes—plus the appointment of additional enforcement staff. It is believed these are more acceptable and more economical ways of controlling animal populations.

To introduce further exotic animals into Western Australia could be catastrophic. Already our wildlife is under extreme pressure from man, agricultural expansion, clearing, increased salinities in waterways and growth of new towns. All these take their toll, and the introduction of other species for the sake of game shooting will speed up the rate at which our wildlife is diminishing—it might in fact be the straw which breaks the camel's . . . or rather the kangaroo's back.