

Australian Society for Kangaroos

Box 524 Castlemaine 3450 Vic
www.australiansocietyforkangaroos.com
Email: australiansocietyforkangaroos@gmail.com
Phone: 0417354408

SUBMISSION

Non Lethal Management Plan for Eastern Grey Kangaroos at Belconnen Naval Transmission Station

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INTRODUCTION

Lethal control programs in regard to kangaroos, is known to be a cruel, simplistic and unnecessary response to complex ecological and often political situations. Historically, starvation has been used to justify large-scale slaughter of remnant kangaroo populations, however when investigated, it is usually the case that the kangaroos are not starving, but healthy and well adapted to their local environment. This has been found to be the case at the Belconnen and Majura Defence bases, where starvation as well as changes in plant biomass and reductions in threatened species, were claimed to be the result of an unsustainable kangaroo population. However what has been found is a mob of healthy kangaroos, with a stable population. In regard to the changes in plant biomass and threatened species, this will be discussed in detail later, however, the significant absence of available, credible peer reviewed, published research, in regard to the alleged effects of kangaroos on threatened species, means that we act with caution when considering the strategies to address the grasslands habitat and all its species. We must address this severely compromised habitat with a holistic, entire ecosystem strategy that takes into account the welfare of all native species. It is cruel and unethical to target one species as the blame for the severe disruption to the function of this “grassland”, that has already been severely transformed and damaged by human activities. It is also unethical and callous to use short- term quick -fix approaches such as shooting or euthanasia, when there are a multitude of holistic and ethical environmental solutions available. Also, as climate change, drought, loss of habitat, encroaching civilization and the ongoing decimation by landholders, roads and governments already threaten the future existence of kangaroos across Australia, we must do our best to preserve this internationally admired creature that serves as one of the main attractions to tourists. Kangaroos, in the wild, and in abundance are found to be the target of a majority of international tourists, and with the horrific treatment and environmental conditions that now threaten them, it wont be long until they disappear from our landscapes, and are seen only in remote national parks and refuges that make up a small fraction of this country. Already, kangaroo numbers have crashed by 65% as the drought and the commercial industry continues to decimate them at a rate they may never recover from. It is true that their population is at its lowest level in decades. We must support kangaroos in their hardest battle ever, and appreciate how lucky we are to have them in our cities and suburbs, as the truly unique and intriguing creatures that they are. We must also acknowledge the tragic fact that these kangaroos have nowhere else to go.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS IN RELATION TO THE MANAGEMENT OF GRASSLANDS AT BNTS.

NATIVE VEGETATION

In regard to concerns about the native vegetation at the Belconnen Naval Transmission Station, it is essential to consider all the factors involved in the current condition of this severely transformed “grassland”.

Firstly, this particular site was previously a pastoral landscape, heavily grazed by sheep and cattle before the area was further transformed into the Naval Transmission Station. It is well known that grazing by introduced animals has significant impacts on the biodiversity of habitats, and the dynamics of native species. With the establishment of the Naval Transmission Station, the area was further disrupted and excavated for the erection of three massive electrical towers, and a village with houses, roads and multiple service buildings. Also, a very large earth mat was buried under the ground to house a series a copper wires radiating out from the central mast site.

It must therefore be assumed that the original ecological diversity of this “grassland” was significantly destroyed well before now.

It is also essential to consider other significant factors impacting on this current health of this “grassland”. The fact that the towers were dropped back into the ground, potentially emitting large volumes of toxic metals, has significant implications when considering the factors contributing to the health of this habitat. Another important factor to consider is the apparent recent and regular use of ‘weed control’ at the site. We can only assume that this ‘weed control’ involved some use of poisonous chemicals. Also the existence of several toxic dump sites at this station and within the adjoining waterway, is another point of concern when considering the factors influencing threatened species at this site. All these impacts and potential contaminants must have impacted upon the survival and existence of all native species, and are an indication of the complexities and ambiguities that can influence the biodiversity and health of any habitat.

So this highlights the fact that there are a multitude of destructive factors involved in the current condition of the Belconnen Naval Transmission Base that must be considered when deciding on its rehabilitation program.

Also, we have been unable to find any evidence or research that can reveal past or current data on the existence of native flora and fauna within this “grassland”. In light of this, it is impossible to make assumptions about the role kangaroos may have played in the current biodiversity at this site, if there is no historical research or data to compare to.

When looking at the relationship between kangaroos and native habitat, it is important to consider that where there has not been grazing by introduced animals or severe disturbance by humans, the balance is optimum in regard to the relationship between plant species and native herbivores. This argument is clearly highlighted in several

studies conducted by Daniel Ramp and documented in the text "*Kangaroo Myths and Realities*" (2005) which will be forwarded to your department. One of the studies Ramp conducted at 'Yan Yean' in Victoria, a wildlife reserve with a history of grazing and clearing, revealed that with the use of exclusion fencing, plants will easily regenerate when grazing is removed. The most important finding was that there was no change in species diversity (biodiversity) as a result of reduced grazing pressure, and when the kangaroos were excluded, the biodiversity within the excluded area equaled that outside the fencing. Ramp went on to also say that even when human disturbance had been severe, balance was still possible with sensible management and fencing off areas of ecological importance. Other factors highlighted in this chapter include the fact that plant communities do not exist in herbivore free environments, and would not exist as they do if they did. Marsupials are very important to native Australian plants, as they enhance regeneration with their everyday behaviors. They roll in the dirt, scratch the ground, the seeds becoming embedded in their claws and fur, and transported to new places for reseeded. Also, seeds are carried in their feces, encouraging further regeneration throughout their range.

Australian plant species have evolved under various grazing regimes over 16 million years of macropod existence, they are adapted to it, and this fact is confirmed by many leading Australian ecologists. (Ramp, *Kangaroo Myths and Realities*, 2005.)

Ramp adds that studies examining the conformity of plant responses to grazing, have found that consistency is infrequent, and the response neither linear or consistent, between different locations. So while there is no question that kangaroos eat, he adds, many studies on the grazing impacts of kangaroos prove only this.

Therefore to maintain a balance between plants and herbivores, a total landscape approach is required. Rather than culling, habitat restoration provides a sustainable and appropriate means of maintaining an environmental balance in temperate Australia.

Ramp states that real examples of this type of strategy are so far lacking, however our ecological knowledge is currently sufficient to warrant nation wide endorsement.

This habitat restoration would involve a dedicated commitment to restoration including exclusion of areas of ecological importance, as well as replanting programs within and without these exclusion zones, using tree guards that have been proven to be effective to deter browsing (Tasmanian Dept Primary Industries, '*1080 Alternatives, Landcare Final Report*', 2006). Once the plants have reseeded, the fencing and guards could be removed, the kangaroos presence then enhancing regeneration with their movements and behaviors. The exclusion fencing could then be moved to another place for protection.

It is also true that kangaroos serve an important grazing pressure in all habitats in Australia, and that without them we would see an overwhelming increase in rabbits and other introduced fauna and flora, as well as an increased fire risk.

THREATENED FLORA AND FAUNA

Without clear peer reviewed or published research on this "grassland", that considers all the historical factors involved in the changes to this area, it is unnecessary and unscientific, to make claims as to the impacts of Eastern Grey Kangaroos at this site, and then proceed with their destruction. As discussed previously, kangaroos are in balance

with the Australian ecology, can control their reproduction in response to it, and will benefit the environment if an entire ecological approach is taken to restoration.

In regard to the '*Golden Sun Moth*', known threats include continued loss of and fragmentation of its grasslands, weed invasion, and development, among many other threats, of which eastern grey kangaroos have not been listed. The Wallaby Grass, which has been identified as a habitat for the Golden Sun Moth, can be easily planted and protected with the use of exclusion fencing.

In regard to the '*Gininderra Peppergrass*' it is apparent to us that this species is unpalatable to the kangaroo population at BNTS.

The '*Grassland Earless Dragon*' and the '*Striped Legless Lizard*' are not relevant to the BTNS so will not be discussed in this submission.

ANIMAL WELFARE

It is clear from observations made by multiple stakeholders that the kangaroos at the BNTS are in good health, despite a long history of drought. It has also been made apparent that these kangaroos have independently responded to their environment and stabilized appropriately, as we would expect kangaroos to do. Kangaroos are highly evolved Australian marsupials, superbly designed to adapt to the harsh and barren environment that has been their home for 16 million years. It has been made apparent to us that this population is not at risk of future large -scale starvation, having successfully stabilized in response to their environment. This is evident in their lack of ex pouch joeys and mature age range. To go ahead and destroy these highly adapted and genetically superior kangaroos when they have shown their superior strength in surviving the longest drought in a century, would be a horrific decision. Kangaroos are an essential ingredient in the Australian ecology and despite negative propaganda to the contrary, are in perfect harmony with it. Indiscriminate slaughter of these highly evolved and healthy kangaroos would undoubtedly interfere with and eventually destroy the intrinsic genetic diversity and strength of this population leaving them more vulnerable to future drought.

It is also essential to consider the fact that kangaroos are gentle, complex, and social creatures with strong and loyal bonds within their mob. They are sensitive and loyal animals, with a social life not unlike humans. Female joeys in particular stay close to their mother for the rest of their lives. When members of the group are shot or killed, the survivors suffer significant stress and trauma, and their social order is destroyed. Also when females with offspring are killed, their in- pouch joeys not only experience the murder of their mother, but are then themselves removed from their pouch and killed. Female kangaroos also have dependent ex pouch joeys for up to 8 months after leaving the pouch. Not only do these joeys also witness the death of their mothers, but are then orphaned and unable to survive without her.

David Nicholls, ex kangaroo shooter, (*'Kangaroo Myths and Realities'*, 2005) points out,

“After the death of the mother, the ex pouch joey is all alone for the first time in their short lives, panic stricken after witnessing the brutal death of their mother, and left to die from starvation and or hypothermia.”

Also ‘in’ and ‘ex-pouch’ joeys can become separated from their mother during any lethal control program, as sometimes the females will throw their pouch joeys in distress. These joeys will be orphaned as well and die alone later from starvation and exposure.

Lethal management programs such as shooting, also pose a risk that the kangaroos will suffer from “myopathy”, a cruel and often fatal condition caused by severe stress.

It is important to note that killing kangaroos is an unnecessary, simplistic, short term and cruel approach that is not well accepted by the community, and lacks scientific credibility. There is no research that successfully upholds the process of killing native animals when addressing any environmental issue, and it is something that Dan Ramp believes should be “relegated to our unflattering past”, (*Kangaroo Myths and Realities*,2005).

SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

We are aware that there has been widespread protest in regard to the destruction of Eastern Grey Kangaroos at the BNTS. We are aware that there is not only disapproval from within the general public but particularly among the residents that surround the Defense Base. Research and public opinion is continuing to reveal the desires of the community to find humane and non lethal solutions to wildlife management, as also highlighted in the results of a survey quoted in the Tasmanian Dept Primary Industries “*Alternatives to 1080, Landcare Report*” report, where the majority of respondents supported the use of contraception as an alternative to poisoning and shooting.

TOURISM

It is essential to consider, that the allure of Australia to most international tourists is our unique wildlife. Tourist information in Australia and overseas lists Canberra’s attractions as Parliament House and kangaroos. Surveys conducted on international tourists have consistently reported that seeing an abundance of Australian animals in the wild, particularly kangaroos, is one of the main attractions of their trip to Australia. It is a fact that kangaroos are the second most recognized symbol in the world. Tourists are often shocked to find out that we not only consume but decimate our national symbol.

CONCLUSION

It is important to consider, that currently kangaroos are being decimated across Australia at a rate that cannot be sustained, and that they may never recover from. Red kangaroos are being killed three times faster than they can reproduce and the average age of a red kangaroo is just 2 years old. They can live up to twenty years old. Recent reports have declared that the Big Reds are gone, shot out by the commercial industry.

There are other reports coming in, that within New South Wales and South Australia, kangaroos have all but been wiped out and are not to be found by professional shooters. This is why these states are pressuring many local and state governments to open up new areas to the commercial industry, and why they are now forced to import kangaroo products from interstate. Areas where kangaroos can now find sanctuary are diminishing at an astonishing rate. In NSW, only 7% of the state is now protected for kangaroos. Kangaroos are an ancient and highly evolved marsupial that is suffering like every other species under the pressure of drought, loss of habitat and the ongoing decimation by landholders, not to mention the commercial industry, which kills millions annually. In most cases across Australia, and in particular in the ACT, many kangaroo populations have nowhere else to go, except these final remnant areas that have not been developed. It is time that Governments set an example as to how we can preserve and honour our precious kangaroos, just like we honour our other native wildlife. Its time we utilized all the humane and non- lethal options available before continuing this ongoing decimation so prevalent across our country. There comes a time that we must stop and think before we continue this callous approach to this national icon, before its too late and we remove them from our existence altogether. Also, the fact that kangaroos also have a right to exist in the landscape often seems to be forgotten.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Before we are to continue to address the management of BNTS ‘grasslands’ in a manner that views the kangaroos as the key variable in the change in dynamics of threatened grasslands species, it is paramount that credible, vigorous, peer reviewed research is conducted which considers all confounding environmental factors that have contributed to the final condition of the BTNS site. However if there is no research or data that records preexisting biodiversity at this site, it would be impossible to find the kangaroos responsible.
2. In the meantime, there are holistic and scientifically credible strategies that can be adopted that will reduce the grazing pressure to areas of the BNTS, and assist in the repair and restoration of this modified habitat.
These include
 - a. The use of exclusion zones using appropriate fencing to protect designated areas from grazing.
 - b. Rigorous replanting of native plant species that have been found to be important for the existence of threatened fauna, within these exclusion zones.
 - c. Rigorous replanting of native flora outside the exclusion zones using tree guards found to be effective in deterring browsing by macropods. (Refer

Tasmanian Dept Primary Industries, “*Alternatives to 1080, Final Landcare Report*, 2006)

- d. Exclusion fencing and tree guards to be removed when plants are established and seeding, allowing for effective dispersal by kangaroos. Fencing can be moved to other areas in a rotation method.
3. Eastern Grey Kangaroos at the BNTS must be monitored regularly, and if it is found that there is large- scale starvation there are a multitude of further actions that can be applied to prevent this continuing.
 - a. Feed the animals during this short time of low food until autumn rains come. Small scale supplemental feeding will not induce breeding or increase the population of these animals, but simply prevent starvation in kangaroos over the short period following summer, if this were to occur.
 - b. Humane euthanasia by a qualified veterinarian only of kangaroos found to be severely starving and suffering, evident by their inability to move to available food and water.
 - c. Consider the sterilization of alpha male kangaroos. This is a very simple operation requiring a vet to vasectomies the male kangaroos and wallabies. This method can be used if the population is clearly found to be significantly unsustainable, in that there are signs of large -scale starvation. This fertility control will enable a sustainable population of kangaroos to be maintained for many years in a population that has been found to be currently and significantly sustainable.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND YOUR EFFORTS IN GAUGING THE
OPINIONS OF ALL STAKEHOLDERS IN THIS MATTER.
REGARDS

NIKKI SUTTERBY
PRESIDENT
AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY FOR KANGAROOS

CONTACT:
www.australiansocietyforkangaroos.com
Email: australiansocietyforkangaroos@gmail.com
Address: Box 524 Castlemaine Vic 3450
Ph: 0417354408