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MANAGEMENT ON KANGAROOS ON ACT GRASSLANDS

In the absence of any AWAC consensus on the matter of how kangaroos on ACT grasslands are to be managed, you asked for the individual views of AWAC members.

While I noted my position (which is also that of the welfare organisations I represent on AWAC) at the meeting on Wednesday, I did not go into any detail regarding that position or the reasons for it. This submission will detail both my position and the reasons for it.

I note that, while I represent animal welfare interests on the AWAC, I am an environmental scientist and policy analyst by profession. I frequently critique the work of ecologists and other environmental scientists, and I am well-qualified to speak to ecological, as well as welfare, issues.

Position on the captive kangaroos at Belconnen

The kangaroos at Belconnen are a captive population. The ACT, as a community, therefore has an absolute responsibility for the welfare of these animals.

All the kangaroos on this site should therefore be **either** relocated to the NSW properties proposed by *Wildcare* **or** sterilised to ensure that:

- there is no future possibility of culling of these captive beings **ever** again; and
- the risks to human beings that will inevitably occur if such a cull goes ahead (because it will force people to put their own lives at risk in order to save the animals, as occurred at Googong in 2004) are avoided.

Reason for position

You would be aware, by now, that all welfare and wildlife protection organisations in the ACT who have had any experience with the relocation of kangaroos, support the relocation of the kangaroos from the Belconnen site to the nearby NSW properties nominated by *Wildcare*. This is because experience has demonstrated that relocation of captive kangaroos as a viable and very humane option.

There is only one welfare organisation which does not support relocation – but that is simply because those speaking on that organisation's behalf have no experience with the relocation of kangaroos. Because they lack this experience, they have been misled into believing two fallacies, firstly, that shooting kangaroos ensures a quick and relatively humane death, and secondly that relocation must involve high levels of injury and stress. In my view, these spokespeople are pushing these views without the support of their membership - especially those who have been involved with kangaroo relocations in the past.

In the early 1990s, the ACT Government assisted the *Wildlife Foundation*, with support from members of *Animal Liberation ACT* and *RSPCA Act*, to relocate a number of captive kangaroos from Government House to other properties.

The *Wildlife Foundation* monitored these relocated animals for years after the relocation. The animals were well accepted into new mobs and suffered no noticeable stress or injury from the relocation process.

Since then, *Wildcare*, have successfully relocated hundreds of kangaroos, and can clearly demonstrate, on the basis of empirical evidence (rather than the supposition and assertion which is all that appears to be provided in support of the contrary view), that, where the translocation is conducted with appropriate care, these animals show few or no ill effects from the experience.

The recent experience of anaesthetising kangaroos for sterilisation purposes, at the Defence Department site at St Mary's, although not supported (on economic grounds), by one of the scientists involved, continues to be strongly supported by welfare and wildlife organisations.

Obviously this would **not** be the case if the welfare issues involved with sterilisation (and the similar issues which apply to relocation) were of anywhere near the same order of magnitude as the welfare issues involved with "culling".

The operation at St Marys, we understand, resulted in a mortality rate of around 5%. It is critical to remember that the mortality rate involved with culling kangaroos is **100%** - and the injury rate, the suffering rate, involved with shooting kangaroos is generally much higher than 5%.

If you have been told otherwise, it is imperative you bear witness to a kangaroo "cull" yourself. If your scientific and policy advisers have told you that shooting is "humane", all you have to do is observe a session of it for yourself, and witness for yourself, the high injury rates (even with allegedly qualified marksmen, let alone local farmers), the panic and distress, involved with "culling" kangaroos.

Wildcare has indicated that there are properties in NSW where the kangaroos from Belconnen will be relocated. We know from experience that *Wildcare* can be trusted to monitor the well-being of these animals after relocation. The relocation option, to the properties identified by *Wildcare*, should be as strongly supported by the ACT Government, and by you, as Commissioner, on the same grounds that it is supported by all welfare and wildlife organisations who have the experience on which to base a meaningful opinion.

Some ecological concerns have been raised regarding the ecological impacts of moving additional kangaroos to properties which may already have resident mobs. Obviously, in times of drought, increasing the kangaroo populations in any one area will increase the overall competition between individuals. However, this is no different from the increases in population, and the resulting competition among individuals, which occurs when an area becomes uninhabitable due to flood or fire.

It is part of the natural selection process and at this time, of all times, this is a process in which we must **not** interfere (see below). The kangaroos currently at Belconnen have as much right to take their chances in these competitive processes as the wild kangaroos who have lived there all their lives.

Position on non-captive kangaroos

The free kangaroos at Majura, Jerrabomberra and Gungahlin should not be “managed” at all, beyond the humane euthanasia (by gunshot to the head or heart) of any starving, sick or injured individuals.

Any native animals that are thought to be threatened by the grazing of kangaroos should be protected, either by on site fencing, or by relocation to appropriate sanctuaries which also provide sanctuaries for their native habitat species. If their original, wild habitat or similar wild areas, are ever in a position to be restored to something remotely resembling their pre-European state, both plants and animals could then be returned to the wild.

Reason for position

Kangaroos have been living in a symbiotic, mutually dependent relationship with native grass species and other grassland animal species for millions of years. Kangaroos are critical to the survival of grassland species because they keep the grass to a level that is ideal for the proliferation (and welfare) of other grassland species (in terms of maintaining nutrients, maximising diversity and bushfire mitigation). It is an ecological nonsense to suggest that kangaroos grazing could be a thing which, of itself, poses a threat to native grasses or other grassland animals.

It is human development and human activity which have reduced plant and animal species to such a devastating extent that particular species are now endangered - so endangered that they are now perceived to be under threat from one of the very species on which they, in fact, rely on for their survival.

In these circumstances, there are only three courses of action that could possibly be considered ethical:

- to let these threatened species become extinct now, in preference to prolonging the agony and suffering of their inevitable demise; or
- protect the sites where these animals live; or
- relocate them to safe havens, sanctuaries, even zoos, where they can be bred in semi-captivity until such time (should such a time ever arrive) when their native habitat has been restored and they can be released back into the wild.

What is utterly repugnant, from any ethical standpoint, is to kill thousands of innocent individual beings in order to very, very briefly prevent the extinction of a species – especially when that species now represents only half a dozen individuals.

The impacts of human development on the kangaroos themselves is not an issue that should be ignored. In the past, prolific species have crashed to extinction in a very short period of time. Some kangaroo species are still prolific – but, with the synergistic pressures of all the human activities which are impacting on habitat, and

the increasingly rapid changing of the climate, we cannot reasonably expect this situation to continue. Kangaroos, along with all other native animals, are going to have an increasingly hard time surviving the next hundred years.

Now, more than ever in the past, we would be mad to interfere with processes of natural selection. These processes are all that now stand between most native animal species and extinction, the only thing giving any native species of this country, including the kangaroos, any hope of surviving the combined impact of climatic change and all the other pressures of human life. The fact that, compared to some other native species, kangaroos currently seem to be prolific is ecologically meaningless in terms of the risk of extinction shared by all wild species.

It is my view that the ecologists who are advising you are well aware of this. However, it seems to me that they are feeling so desperate about the mass extinctions this planet is facing, that they are willing to urge death to millions of a briefly prolific species in order to buy a tiny bit of time (a few years at most), for a few remaining members of one or two a threatened species.

The hypocrisy of killing thousands of one type of animal to save a few of another has never been clearer than at the Majura site. Here, at last count, there were, maybe, half a dozen surviving earless dragons. If these reptiles have survived the drought, it is unlikely they will survive the airport access road. If they survive the airport access road, it is unlikely they will survive the new parkway. If they survive the new parkway, it is unlikely they will survive the new rail link. If they survive the new rail link, they certainly won't survive a dragway!

Yet, for these doomed individuals, thousands of healthy, free-living animals must die? This makes no sense, logically, scientifically, ethically, or emotionally.

Position on culling generally

What is called "culling", as it is practiced in Australia by governments and farmers, is immoral and inhumane, and therefore unacceptable.

Culling of the allegedly weak, or of a random selection of young, although consistent with natural processes, is also unacceptable because these animals are not yet suffering and because our science does not know enough to make determinations of what really is "weak" in terms of long-term viability, in a changing environment.

Culling of sick, starving or injured individuals, by direct shot to the heart or brain, is acceptable because it prevents natural suffering which could otherwise be both extreme and prolonged.

Reason for position

You would be aware that the philosophy of animal rights rejects the notion that humans have a right to kill other animals for fun or profit. This philosophy is based on the view that all rights proceed from the fact of having life, of desiring to live, and of being capable of either suffering and pleasure. Indeed, humans themselves only

have rights because we are animals, therefore we have life, desire to live and are have the capacity to suffer and to enjoy life.

Consequently, all animal rights organisations oppose the killing of any animals (wild or domestic) for commercial or recreational reasons. This, obviously, includes the commercial slaughter of kangaroos (as well as sheep, cattle etc) **and** the culling of kangaroos by farmers in order to protect their profits.

It also includes all the so-called “culls” of kangaroos carried out by Australian governments over the last 50 years. These are **not** culls. They do not select the sick, the injured, the starving, for humane euthanasia. They involve killing at random – the sick, the healthy, the strong, the weak, the well-fed, the starving, indiscriminately.

I consider it very important, Commissioner, that you understand that **we do not oppose culling per se**. Culling, by strict definition, is the removal of the starving, the sick, the injured, the weak, the excess young. In the process, the suffering of the non-viable individual is ended, while the population as a whole is strengthened. True culling is the role carried out by predators in natural ecosystems – and humans have the ability, if we choose, to carry it out much less cruelly than other predators.

Animal Liberation – and I personally - would not oppose the **real** culling of sick, injured and starving kangaroos, to end suffering, and to assist the processes of natural selection – especially in the absence of so many of the kangaroos’ natural predators.

But we will continue to regard the killing of healthy animals for reasons of scapegoating, convenience, or eventual profit (for example to further develop their land) as murder, and will continue to use all methods available to us to prevent it.

Yours sincerely

Frankie Seymour
14 December 2007