



Welfare implications of commercial kangaroo killing: Do the ends justify the means?

THINKK 

**THINKK, the Kangaroo
Think Tank
University of Technology
Sydney**



THINKK'S MISSION

The mission of THINKK is to foster understanding among Australians about kangaroos in a sustainable landscape, through critically reviewing the scientific evidence underpinning kangaroo management practices and exploring non-lethal management options that are consistent with ecology, animal welfare, human health and ethics.

THINKK SCIENCE AND POLICY

The Think Tank is governed by a Research Advisory Committee comprising of macropod experts, Dr Dror Ben-Ami, Dr Daniel Ramp and Dr David Croft, ISF sustainability expert Professor Stuart White and ISF animal and environmental law expert Keely Boom. ISF sustainability expert Louise Boronyak is THINKK's project manager. Other expert advisors include pioneering animal welfare expert Christine Townend and Indigenous elder Uncle Max Dulumunmun Harrison, inform and refine THINKK's research priorities and content.

Welfare implications of commercial kangaroo harvesting: Do the ends justify the means?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Debate on the pros and cons of kangaroo management in Australia has recently centred on the awareness that commercial killing (commonly referred to as harvesting), a by-product of management, is difficult to regulate and that there are animal welfare costs that the current regulatory framework is yet to resolve. Moreover, public interest in animal welfare is at an unprecedented height and is expected to increase over time. At the core of animal welfare law and policy is a question of ends and means. Animal welfare laws have existed for around 200 years, and presently attempt to prevent 'unnecessary' or 'unreasonable' suffering by animals. Yet at the same time, large scale animal industries have developed that often involve high levels of harm and suffering being inflicted upon a great number of animals in order to produce food and other products for human use. From a policy perspective, industrial suffering of animals is 'necessary' or 'reasonable' where there is both legitimacy of purpose and legitimacy of means. As a fairly recent animal industry to evolve, Australia's kangaroo industry provides meat, leather and other products from the killing of about three million adult kangaroos each year. This report provides an analysis of the kangaroo industry and seeks to answer the question: 'do the ends justify the means?'

The methodology adopted in this report is to clearly define the ends of the kangaroo industry followed by a review of the means using the available scientific information within the framework of animal welfare law and policy. Case studies of similar wildlife based industries in developed countries provide an international perspective on the kangaroo industry. Finally, the question whether the ends do justify the means is assessed.

THE ENDS

- 1) **Damage mitigation:** Although kangaroos are largely perceived as pests in the rangelands current research does not indicate that they are overabundant in the landscape. The estimated annual costs incurred by farmers due to kangaroos is placed at (AUS throughout) \$44 Million (M) or \$1.67 per kangaroo/year. This is markedly lower than previously estimated at over \$200 M due to long-term research showing that there is minimal loss in pastoral property productivity due to competition between livestock and kangaroos for resources.
- 2) **Commercial value:** The kangaroo industry estimated its worth to the Australian economy in 2005 at \$200 M, providing approximately 4000 jobs. Recent low revenues of \$50 M for 2008/2009 (for meat, pet food and skins) and reports of financial hardship to shooters due primarily to quality control issues and extreme climatic fluctuations suggest that industry's estimate of its worth is over-valued.
- 3) **Environmental value:** In recent years the commercial killing of kangaroos has been considered to be environmentally friendly due to the perception that there are too many kangaroos and they can replace livestock in the landscape. There is no convincing data to support claims of overabundance. Moreover, kangaroos are mostly shot by shooters in a separate activity to the livestock industry. Therefore, there is no demonstrable environmental value to killing kangaroos.

THE MEANS

- 1) **Young:** Every year approximately 855,000 dependent young die as collateral damage to the commercial kill. This would be unacceptable in the livestock industry. There is currently no routine field auditing of compliance with the National Code of Practice for the Humane Shooting of Kangaroos (Commercial Purposes - termed the 'Code') into the manner of killing of dependent young. Ecological data suggests the young are highly unlikely to survive without their mothers and will die of starvation, dehydration, exposure or predation.
- 2) **Adults:** Field data suggests that anywhere from 120,000 to over a million kangaroos are miss-shot annually. There is virtually no monitoring of killing in the field and given the field conditions of the killing it would be impossible to do so.

- 3) **Evolutionary potential of individuals and genetic integrity:** The social structure of kangaroo groups is likely to have evolutionary significance in maximising the ability of individuals, and ultimately populations, to persist. Research is necessary on the impact of the kills on the various species' social systems and their long-term genetic integrity.
- 4) **Compliance:** There is increasing awareness that the Code is both impossible to regulate and unsatisfactory in its provisions. It is within the gap between what the Code says and what occurs in practice that the strongest welfare concerns emerge. The Code provides that kangaroos are to be brain shot, yet it would appear that kangaroos shot in the neck are regularly processed. The Code provides that injured kangaroos are to be euthanized quickly and humanely, yet shooters are permitted to shoot more than one kangaroo in a group before retrieving the carcasses. Furthermore, although the Code prescribes methods of killing joeys, there is considerable doubt about the humaneness of these methods and the capability and/or willingness of shooters to perform them.
- 5) **Public attitudes:** The comparative study of commercial kangaroo killing with the killing of other wildlife such as Harp Seals, Whales and White-Tailed Deer has revealed that three key drivers are found in public attitudes to wildlife kills: commercial value, 'pest' status and ecological concerns. The parallels between these industries and increasing public concerns for animal welfare suggest that without a resolution of the outstanding welfare issues pertaining to the kangaroo industry, an Australian moratorium and/or international trade ban on commercial kangaroo killing may eventuate.

DO THE ENDS JUSTIFY THE MEANS?

The legitimacy of the ends of the kangaroo industry is questionable, particularly the much-inflated perceptions of kangaroos as pests (damage caused to farmers and the landscape) and as a panacea for Australia's land degradation and greenhouse gas emissions. The 'means' by which kangaroos are killed carry high welfare costs to both adult kangaroos and dependent young that are below the mandated welfare standards in the Codes. Therefore the ends of the kangaroo industry do not justify its current means.

CONCLUSIONS

- 1) The legitimacy of the commercial kill on the landscape level should be re-evaluated on the grounds of both necessity and ethical considerations.
 - a. At the same time we note that kangaroo management on the property needs to be reassessed and/or redesigned given the apparent low costs incurred by farmers and graziers from kangaroos and the occasional drought driven competition for resources between kangaroos and livestock
- 2) In light of shifting public sentiment mechanisms for improving welfare standards should be implemented. Previous efforts to reconcile stakeholder interests in the commercial killing of kangaroos have led to a detailed consultation process and report about how to best manage the kangaroo industry in the Murray-Darling Basin that encompasses three key states – QLD, NSW and SA. A similar consultation should be undertaken to resolve the serious welfare concerns that are apparent in the kangaroo industry.
- 3) A number of policy changes are required to close the gap between the aims of the Code and its welfare outcomes. Two recommendations that would be practical to implement and that would address substantial welfare concerns include:
 - a. Amending the Code to clearly provide that neck shots are not compliant with the Code, that shooters will be required to retain the heads on carcasses, and that only brain shot kangaroo will be accepted for processing.
 - b. Mandating a ‘males only’ kill would ensure that the welfare of young is not compromised and would be in line with research that has already shown an annual commercial kill rate of 10% and male only commercial killing would achieve the best solution from a conservation perspective of non-government conservation organisations and wildlife management agencies (McLeod et al. 2004)

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