

Animals Australia

the voice for animals

28 March 2014

Ms Lauren Mesiti
Committee Clerk
Standing Committee on Public Administration
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Perth WA 6000.

Via email: lcpac@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Ms Mesiti,

***Animals Australia submission to the
Inquiry into recreational hunting systems in Western Australia***

As you may be aware, Animals Australia is a peak animal protection organisation, representing some 40 animal welfare organisations and many thousands of individual supporters. On their behalf we welcome this opportunity to provide input to the inquiry.

Animals Australia has consistently provided evidence and arguments supporting our strongly held view that recreational hunting cannot be made humane, is unnecessary and therefore unethical, and is thus strongly opposed. The proposal before the Committee that an extension of recreational hunting on public lands in Western Australia will 'control' pest animal populations is not supported by empirical evidence, is highly likely to lead to inhumane and uncontrolled killing practices, and will inevitably pose a safety risk to community members using public lands or properties adjoining such areas.

Relevant extracts from the Animals Australia Policy are provided here by way of explanation of our position:

Animals Australia is opposed to all forms of hunting.

Animals Australia advocates the promotion of recreational practices which involve the observation, rather than the killing, of wildlife.

Hunted animals are likely to suffer stress, pain and injury before being killed in a hunt. Some are left wounded and will die slowly. Young, whose mothers have been killed, may starve to death and social groups may be destabilised by the sudden death of one or a few individuals.

The most common hunting weapons are guns, but knives and bows and arrows are also used by hunters. Inexperienced hunters and those who are not very skilled are likely to injure a larger proportion of their prey.

In duck, fox, pig and deer hunting, dogs are used to track, attack and/or retrieve the prey. Dogs may cause, and in some cases (pig hunting) suffer extensive injuries.

Animals Australia is also opposed to recreational hunting and the payment of bounties for the killing of introduced species primarily because these practices encourage the participation of inexperienced and incompetent persons in the hunting/trapping of the animals; this increases the risk of animal suffering.

Moreover, hunting for recreation, and the establishment of recreational hunting for commercial benefit, promotes the perception that hurting and killing other sentient beings for pleasure is a legitimate pursuit. This compromises the most fundamental ethical values of a civilised society.

A large number of animal and human welfare concerns arise if hunters are permitted into further regions to shoot animals for recreation, and we are gravely concerned that the real motivation for this Inquiry may be masked by the false claims that a new regulated system may assist with pest animal impact mitigation; experience from WA and other States and the scientific literature shows it will not.

Animal welfare

The welfare of animal is our primary concern; given that the pursuit and killing of most animals will occur in remote areas without independent monitoring or scrutiny, all animals (wildlife or 'pest') will be exposed to unacceptable and inevitably high risk of fear, distress and prolonged suffering without providing any viable mechanism to prevent, deter, detect or punish violations.

Even with the best of intentions or experience, very few people are sufficiently expert marksmen to be able to kill every animal they target without either fatally or non-fatally wounding some of their victims. Hunters of course have variable skill levels and there are no skills testing of hunters. Where female or provider-parent animals are killed, any dependent offspring will also perish through starvation, predation or exposure as a consequence of the recreational pursuit. Any opening up of further areas for recreational hunters will inevitably mean more animals will be pursued and targeted and thus the number of animals caused unacceptable harm for 'fun' will increase.

Further, if there is any suggestion that methods other than shooting would be employed (as occurs in other States) then our concerns for the animals escalate – for example the use of knives to kill pigs, the use of dogs to hunt for pigs or deer, the use of bows and arrows for deer. These methods are not canvassed here, but we can provide damning scientific evidence of the suffering caused to the targeted animals by these methods if necessary. The use of dogs is of particular concern as it frequently causes the hunting dogs involved to be injured or lost and left in wilderness areas. This is neither good for the dogs or for the wildlife.

Public safety

The safety of humans using public areas has been well covered by the debate in the WA Legislative Council and will not be expanded here, except to acknowledge that the use of high powered firearms in vast and uncontrolled regions increases risk to animals and humans alike. When that additional risk factor is measured against the (intended) harm to targeted animals and the highly likely ineffectiveness of any 'pest' reduction attempts by ad hoc recreational hunting (see below), the risk to human safety simply does not stack up.

Safety of other wildlife

A person with a gun can become frustrated if the 'pest' species are not readily available and may well shoot other native or protected animals. Such 'buck fever' as it has been called is particularly concerning and has in the past led to documented human deaths and to the shooting of protected species.

In Victoria licensed recreational duck shooters in a pre-planned gathering on a remote property at the opening weekend of the 2013 duck shooting season, shot over 1,000 waterbirds including rare protected species and left most of them in situ (The Age 15/3/2014). A clearly agreed cone of silence frustrated Police and Department investigators such that no charges were laid despite the clear frenzied and illegal killing that occurred. There can be no real doubt that otherwise 'protected' animals are at times also shot to satisfy the needs of would-be 'recreational hunters' when legal targets do not seem sufficient.

Seeding and leaving pest animals

Recreational hunters will often have motivations contrary to the goals of 'pest' animal population control, and in fact have an incentive to maintain populations to ensure they have ongoing hunting opportunities; moving on from a heavily hunted region, or leaving the young or females for example. It is also well documented that hunters deposit the young or breeding animals caught in one area into other habitats, including in WA (Moriarty 2004ⁱⁱ; Spencer 2005ⁱⁱⁱ). This 'seeding' will ensure they breed and provide future hunting opportunities, and is known to occur with deer and pigs particularly. Whilst it is illegal to translocate pest species, this practice occurs in remote areas without monitoring and therefore, it will continue to occur whilst ever recreational hunters are given 'legitimate' access to such areas. The killing too of prized large animals (trophy animals) usually means that young and female breeding animals are left in the habitat – now with less competition for resources to continue to survive and breed.

Reducing wild animal/pest populations?

Contrary to claims, there is no reputable evidence to suggest that the ad hoc hunting of feral animals by recreational shooters in any way advances moves to control their numbers or reduce impact. Many of the targeted 'pest' animals have high fecundity and are usually able to quickly fill any resource niche if others are removed. Wherever individuals are killed, and (given even local eradication is rarely attempted and virtually never achieved), the remaining niches of those killed animals are taken over by other individuals of the same species who would otherwise not have survived because there were no niches available for them. It has been estimated that some 87% of rabbits, 65% of foxes (Hone 1999^{iv}) and over 40% of deer (Hone et al 2010^v) need to be killed each year to achieve population reduction. Ground shooting of these species and others (including pigs and goats) are not considered effective techniques to reduce populations^{vi}.

Additionally, because current practices generally involve lethal control, they select forever increasingly control-resistant strains or wary and adapted individuals of introduced wild animals. In the case of fox control bounties for example – found to be ineffective in reducing populations substantially in studies of the 2002/3 bounty in Victoria (less than 4% reduction^{vii}) - the naïve young foxes are killed, the more cautious established breeding pairs survive and reproduce.

Whilst it is necessary to acknowledge that some introduced animals continue to cause great suffering to other animals due to habitat changes, competition or direct attack/predation, this is only relevant to this debate if it is the case that the current proposal could significantly reduce such damage. Seeing rows of dead animals hanging on fences demonstrates that animals have been killed but cannot itself give any real clue as to whether the complex ecosystem from whence they have been plucked has been advantaged by their deaths. There is in fact scant evidence that this is likely to be the case.

Even government co-ordinated programs (let alone recreational hunting) have not been found to significantly reduce pest animal numbers or impact. A review of existing 'pest' animal control program in Australia (conducted by researchers in 2004 – Reddix et al^{viii}) assessed 1306 'pest' animal population control operations (foxes, wild dogs, feral cats, feral rabbits, feral pigs, and feral goats) – most in NSW, Victoria and Western Australia. The analysis concluded –

*The belief that pest animals have caused declines in native species (and damaged production values) is reflected in legislation and has led to many attempts to control these pests. Many agencies and organisations including Federal, State and Local governments commit significant resources managing these species. However, **there is limited hard evidence that this management has led to a reduction in threats and to a reversal in the decline.**[our emphasis].*

Indeed, it is known too that the complex nature of ecosystems and the interactions of the various fauna and flora species, and habitat change, makes the impact of any population control measures a similarly complex task. For example, only this month a University of NSW study has shown that reducing the population of one important species – in this case the poisoning of dingoes in NSW – can lead to further imbalance and impacts on the environment from other species that take over the vacated niche. Dr Mike Letnic of UNSW stated^{ix}:

“Poisoning of dingoes is counter-productive for biodiversity conservation, because it results in increases in fox activity and declines of small ground-dwelling native mammals.”

Bounties

Whilst bounties are arguably a more intense and targeted program than the more casual recreational hunter access to public areas (being proposed in WA), they have still consistently been shown to have little impact. This is not surprising given the high proportion of a population of (most) introduced species that need to be removed to significantly reduce their population and/or their impact (as above).

A most recent example of the failure of bounties is the Victorian bounty on foxes which was introduced in October 2011, providing a \$10 per scalp payment to recreational shooters or landowners. At the outset of the bounty the (then) Department of Primary Industry estimated there was over 1 million foxes in Victoria (The Age 22/12/11^x). The current count (almost 2.5 years later) is that some 250,253 foxes scalps have been provided over that time (Agriculture Minister Peter Walsh, Weekly Times 19/3/2014^{xi}).

As we know from scientific estimates that the annual rate of population renewal (potential growth) for foxes is some 105%, and that at least 65% of foxes need to be removed annually to effectively reduce the population (Hone 1999), the fact that this current Victorian bounty scheme has removed only 10% of the fox population per year indicates that there will have been no significant impact on the fox population in Victoria.

On the other side of the equation, the cost of the Victorian bounty scheme over this period has been \$2.5M in bounties paid out, plus administration costs of the scheme. Despite the known flawed nature of the bounty system, no available data about current Victorian fox populations nor measures of fox impact, Minister Walsh still recently declared *“The only good fox is a dead fox, and I am pleased the ... successful initiative is helping farmers deal with these vicious pests”*.

It is therefore our strong view – supported by scientific research and evidence - that to open up public lands to recreational shooters is not justified by the notion that they will contribute to any significant reduction of ‘pest’ species populations or their impact on the environment.

Or Making a bad situation worse?

Perhaps even more alarming is that it is clear that the opposite to population reduction through recreational hunting may occur; the impact of unwanted animals may in fact increase, along with the feared increase in the risks outlined above to human safety, environmental damage and animal welfare. This warning is provided because a further consequence of hunting is where dead targeted animals are left in situ – as occurs with large animals in particularly remote area or where the animals are unlikely to be prized (i.e. foxes) – other scavenger animals (wild dogs, cats and foxes) will be advantaged through easy food availability and thus be more likely to grow in number.

Also, the paths and trails that may be newly formed through public land as hunting access is increased, may further risk the spreading of feral animals into new areas. Such movement by hunters and increased corridors for animals can also lead to ingress of invasive weeds and the further spread of dieback, already an issue in Western Australia.

Returning to our primary concern – animal welfare – we further advise that an increase in recreational hunting of sentient animals is the antithesis to the principles and objectives of the (all-Governments-adopted) Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (AAWS); the AAWS 'mission' is 'to deliver sustainable improvements in the welfare of all animals'. If Western Australia was to allow recreational hunters free-reign on public lands, with the clear focus on increasing their hunting opportunities, it will be in direct contrast to the WA Government's commitment to the AAWS (accepted by the former Minister of Agriculture) in May 2004.

We urge you to fully consider the comments and recommendations made in this submission. If introduced animals need to be controlled, we further urge the WA government to introduce methods to reduce their population that are humane and effective rather than allow hunters to inhumanely exploit them for recreational purposes in a way that is likely to cause negative ecological outcomes, as this proposal from the Hon Rick Mazza clearly intends.

Please contact me if you require clarification of the points made or require any further references relied upon.

Yours sincerely,



Glenys Oogjes
Executive Director

ⁱ <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/duck-shoving-claimed-in-box-flat-bird-massacre-20140315-34u1k.html>

ⁱⁱ Moriarty A. 2004. The liberation, distribution, abundance and management of wild deer in Australia. *Wildlife Research* 31:291–299

ⁱⁱⁱ Spencer PBS, Hampton JO. 2005. Illegal translocation and genetic structure of feral pigs in Western Australia. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 69: 377-384.

^{iv} Hone J. 1999. On rate of increase (r): patterns of variation in Australian mammals and the implications for wildlife management. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 36: 709-18.

^v Hone J, Duncan R, Forsyth D. 2010. Estimates of maximum annual population growth rates (rm) of mammals and their application in wildlife management. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 2010, 47, 507-514.

^{vi} See for example: Commonwealth of Australia. 2007. Background document for the threat abatement plan for competition and land degradation by feral rabbits. Canberra: Department of Environment and Water Resources. www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/tapdrafts.html and

Sharp T, Saunders G. 2007. Model code of practice for the humane control of foxes. NSW Department of Primary Industries. http://www.invasiveanimals.com/downloads/COP_for_foxes.pdf

^{vii} Fairbridge D, Marks C. 2005. Evaluation of the 2002/03 Victorian Fox Bounty Trial. Frankston: Vertebrate Pest Research Unit, Department of Primary Industries.

^{viii} Reddiex, B., Forsyth, D.M., McDonald-Madden, E., Einoder, L.D., Griffioen, P. A., Chick, R.R., and Robley, A.J. (2004). Review of existing red fox, wild dog, feral cat, feral rabbit, feral pig, and feral goat control in Australia. I. Audit. Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Melbourne.

^{ix} Lethal control of an apex predator has unintended cascading effects on forest mammal assemblages *Proc. R. Soc. B* May 7, 2014 281 178220133094; 1471-2954

<http://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/science/stop-poisoning-dingoes-protect-native-mammals>

^x <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/sly-new-twist-on-the-fox-problem-20111221-1p5oh.html>

^{xi} <http://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/news/national/victorian-governments-fox-bounty-passes-250000-mark/story-fnkfnspy-1226858562874>