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INQUIRY INTO DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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The Reintroduction of the Dingo into South Eastern Australia

Since European colonisation, Australia's native ecosystems have undergone significant transformation. While this has been largely driven by substantial habitat loss and changes in land use across the continent, the introduction of invasive species and the removal of apex predators such as the native Dingo (*Canis dingo*) have also had a significant impact.

Prior to colonisation, the Dingo was a keystone species that helped maintain the ecological balance between herbivores and vegetation. Despite this key role, it is currently classified in most juristinctions as a pest rather than a native species (Cairns, n.d.). This is despite evidence that increasingly demonstrates that dingoes help to regulate populations of both native and invasive species (including kangaroos, foxes and feral cats), which in turn assists in preventing overgrazing and helps to maintain populations of small native animals (Letnic & Feit, 2009).

The removal of the Dingo from South Eastern Australia has likely trigger a trophic cascade similar to those observed in other ecosystems where apex predators are lost, such as the decline of kelp forests after the removal of sea otters (Estes et al., 2004), seagrass collapse following shark culling (FIU, 2024) and the famous example of the loss of Wolves in Yellowstone national park (Fortin et al., 2005).

Aside from this increasingly acknowledged ecological role, Dingoes are also a cultural keystone species for First Nations people and played an integral part in Aboriginal Society, ceremony, and daily life (Garibaldi & Turner, 2004). Lethal control and removal from South Eastern Australia has disrupted not only their ecological role, but also their cultural role.

As evidence of the importance of the Dingo grows, this report will examine evidence that reintroduction to South Eastern Australia has the potential to halt landscape degradation, support the restoration of biodiversity, and acknowledge the indigenous relationship with country. This report will highlight the history of the Dingo in the Australian context and how we have arrived at this situation, before examining contemporary examples of keystone predators being removed or reintroduced. It will also highlight the importance of apex predators in sustaining resilient ecosystems (Boronyak & Jacobs, 2023).

*Figure 1: The Dingo***.** ***(****K.Cairns UNSW)*

The Dingo

While they are related to dogs, Dingoes are not domestic dogs, and recent research shows that they are likely a distinct species, separate from the more common domestic dog. This suggestion is particularly important, as the distinction between introduced dogs and the Dingo is essential when considering their roles and impacts in the ecosystem.

Genetic indicators suggest that Dingoes arrived in Australia between 5,000 and 10,000 years ago. Archaeological remains indicate that they may have been present around 4,000 years ago. However, the high acidity of Australian soils makes preservation across the country difficult, and thus, sites with information are sparse.

Indigenous Australians identify the Dingo as a cultural keystone species, which is pivotal to the structure and resilience of ecosystems (Levin, 2013). As a result, it is also a species that is embedded in Indigenous peoples' cultural traditions and narratives, their ceremonies, dances, songs and discourses (Garibaldi & Turner, 2004).

Early documents from European colonists highlighted the importance of their relationship with Indigenous Australians. Dingoes were described as ubiquitous within Aboriginal Society. They were a hunting partner, a navigational aid, a living blanket and a valuable trade and exchange item, making them an integral part of Aboriginal Society and culture. In addition to the above, they also had the indispensable skill of waterfinding. Even on the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition, the Dingo was hailed as a water finder and was included in the last painting of the expedition in 1861 (Phillip, 2021).

In traditional Society, women travelled with Dingoes draped around their waists, like garments of clothing, and played an important role in the protection and mobility of women and children. There is evidence that wild Dingo pups were taken and adopted into Aboriginal Society, being considered effective hunting aids and guardians against intruders (Phillip, 2017).

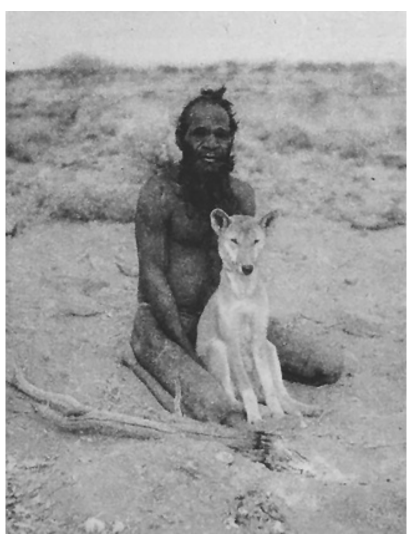

Figure 2: The Dingo as a companion animal to Indigenous Australians

Post colonisation, it became impossible to keep the Dingo in Aboriginal camps as they were targeted for eradication due to their predation on livestock. This would have had a significant impact on the lives of Aboriginal women, leading to a loss of traditional knowledge and status.

Despite their arrival prior to Europeans and the role they play within the ecosystem (and culturally), they are not listed as a native animal under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* (EPBC Act). As a result, how they are treated differs between jurisdictions. In the Northern Territory, Queensland and Victoria, Dingoes are managed as protected wildlife in National Parks and conservation areas, but in the majority of the states, they are unprotected and treated as pests. In contrast, in Western Australia, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales, Dingoes are considered unprotected wildlife, which means they are afforded no protection, even in conservation areas. These decisions have been made on the historical assumption that Dingoes are not a unique species compared to regular dogs, a view recent research suggests is not the case (Cairns et al., 2023).

As noted above, there is increasing evidence that suggests that Dingoes are genetically distinct from common dogs. There is also increasing research showing that interbreeding between dingoes and dogs is rare, with DNA testing indicating that most Dingoes are purebred and have little to no dog ancestry (Cairns et al., 2023). Combined with the cultural role they have played, it is clear that they are a native species that was integrated into the ecosystem, suggesting that our current Dingo policies are based on false information and need to be revised (Crowe, 2023).

Current Dingo Management Measures

As they are not a protected species, the management of Dingoes is at the discretion of individual landholders. The majority of farmers within areas populated by Dingoes consider the animals to be a pest, a predator of small livestock, and one that needs to be exterminated at all costs. Across much of Australia, it is regular practice to shoot, trap, poison and fence Dingoes, which are a native animal, to protect their financial interest.

Poisoning of Dingoes is accomplished with the infamous sodium monofluoroacetate, also known as 1080. It is one of the most toxic substances in the world, with no known antidote and is banned in a majority of countries worldwide. Animals that ingest the poison suffer a painful death, which is considered inhumane. The National Wild Dog Action Plan claims the poison is derived from native plants, but it is actually an industrially produced, synthetic poison (The Coalition Against 1080 Poison, 2022). Lethal control has terrible side effects, as many native species will also ingest the 1080 baits, meaning any attempt to poison out Dingoes comes at a greater cost, as other species are also impacted.

The obligation to control native dingoes is dictated by the National Wild Dog Action Plan, which is described as a livestock industry driven initiative that dictates the management of dingoes (National Wild Dog Action Plan, n.d.). The agricultural sector wields enormous power in Australia and describes itself as an active, powerful lobby group dedicated to the interests of farmers. Additional support for local wild dog groups from the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions and the Australian Wool Innovation further amplifies pressure to conform to lethal control.

Poisoning is not the only control measure that has been utilised against Dingoes. Spanning South Australia through Queensland, the 5614km long Dingo fence is the longest barrier fence in the world. Installed in the 1950s, it was built to keep Dingoes out of grazing lands, separating Eastern Australia's sheep country, located inside the fence, from the north and west of the continent, which is outside the fence. Decades of baiting, trapping and extermination have rendered the Dingo extinct within the fence boundaries (with some small exceptions of locally managed populations).

Figure 3: The Dingo proof fence (Australian Geographic)

Figure 4: A Map highlighting the Dingo-Proof Fence (Recovery)

As the dingo fence is 1.7m tall, it is high enough to prevent the movement of most medium to large native animals such as kangaroos, wallaroos and emus, as well as introduced species such as feral horses, goats, camels and pigs. The fence's primary objective is to protect the sheep industry from predation, but similar to baiting, it comes at the cost of the movement of other species, having impacts that extend beyond the Dingo (Smith et al., 2020).

Agriculture inside the Fence

Land managed for agriculture makes up a significant component of the Australian landscape. Australian farmers and pastoralists manage approximately 426 million hectares of land, which accounts for 55 per cent of Australia's landmass (Dept of Agriculture, 2025). Grazing native vegetation makes up the majority of Australian agriculture by land area (around 82%). Only 22 million hectares are used for cropping and horticulture. A further 1.95 million hectares of land are used for commercial forestry plantations (*Industry*, n.d.).

In addition to grazing on native vegetation, extensive land clearing practices continue and are on the increase in NSW and Queensland. The Australian Conservation Foundation, using satellite images, has shown that 90,000 hectares of land, spread across 176 properties, have been cleared in the past five years, all of which contain habitat for threatened species. None of the land clearing had EPBC approval, as neither the state nor federal governments adequately monitor or protect the habitats (Boss et al., 2025).

Australia has an extremely poor record of species extinctions, with 90 extinctions since colonisation, as recognised under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act). A further 17 threatened birds and animals are likely to become extinct over the next 20 years (Geyle et al., 2018). While some of this is driven directly by land clearing, there is growing evidence that the removal of the Dingo from the Australian environment has accelerated this decline by hastening the degradation of the environment. While it is acknowledged that the reintroduction of dingoes would have an impact on the agricultural industry, it is unlikely to affect growers and likely to only impact pastoralists and graziers.

Impact of the Dingo Fence

As mentioned previously, Dingoes are Australia's largest terrestrial predator and, as discussed above, present a significant threat to livestock (though mainly smaller animals such as lambs). As management actions have been effective at excluding the Dingo from South Eastern Australia, it offers an excellent insight into the effect that Dingo removal has had on the environment.

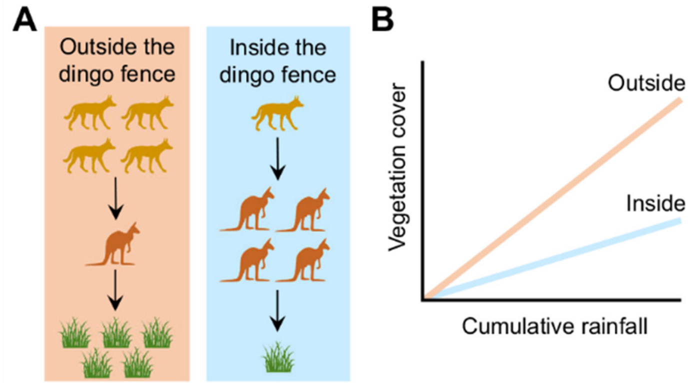

Figure 5: Environmental impacts of Dingo removal. Remote sensing of trophic cascades.

At a very basic level, we can see this effect move through the ecosystem. Dingoes eat kangaroos, and in turn, kangaroos eat grasses and other shrubs, in some cases, grazing particular species of grasses preferentially (Letnic et al., 2017). We can see that the regions within the Dingo fence contain significantly more kangaroos and less diversity of grasses, which then, in turn, has other impacts, such as increasing soil erosion and encouraging the formation of sand dunes. This increased erosion and lack of vegetation, triggered by overgrazing of kangaroo populations, in turn impacts small mammals, as there becomes less habitat and fewer hiding places for them, increasing their predation by birds and other pests such as cats and foxes (Letnic et al., 2011).

Figure 6: Effects of overgrazing by Kangaroos (Heritage, 2021)

Similar changes in other ecosystems have been extensively documented over the previous decades, suggesting that this simple change, the removal of dingoes, has resulted in a trophic cascade, drastically changing the ecosystem, likely for the worse. Studies conducted overseas, however, lack the sharp spatial changes evident on either side of the Dingo fence (Letnic & Koch, 2010). Although there is considerable difficulty mapping these changes due to the large spaces involved, satellite imagery compiled over the last 30 years highlights the differences in vegetation quite effectively. Inside the fence, these images show the stark effect that kangaroo grazing has on the landscape. Landsat images between 1988 and 2020 revealed obvious differences in maximum dead vegetation cover and its temporal variability. These results have been verified by ground surveys and kangaroo counts (The Conversation, 2021).

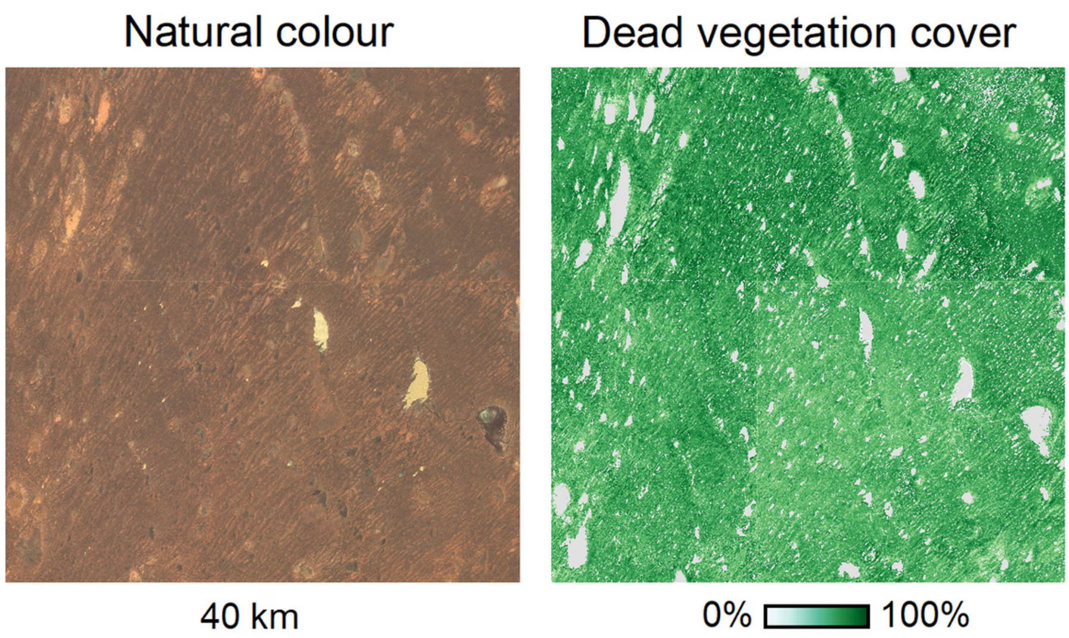

Figure 6: Satellite Imagery showing disparities in dead vegetation cover (a proxy for actual vegetation cover) along the boundary of the Dingo Fence (The Conversation, 2021)

Removing the Dingo Fence

The purpose of this proposal was to assess the feasibility of removing the Dingo Fence to promote ecological restoration in parts of South Eastern Australia. A range of research has slowly been developed over the last decades that suggests our current management approach (exclusion) has been unsuccessful and is ultimately detrimental to the environment.

Small animals thrive where dingoes are present, and conversely, herbivore populations, which include kangaroos, both *Osphrante*r and *Macropus* species, emus (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*), feral goats (*Capra hircus*), European rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), feral pigs (*Sus scrofa*), and smaller predators, including feral cats (*Felis catus*) and European red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*), explode where there are few. Recent studies have shown that dingoes are effective in controlling both foxes and cats, which are linked to the extinction of at least 20 mammal species and the ongoing survival of more than 100 native species (Letnic & Feit, 2019).

On this basis, it is essential that the reintroduction of Dingoes into South Eastern Australia should be considered in detail. If the above information is correct, successful reintroduction would allow the regeneration of grasses and the reduction of pests, essential activities for the promotion of biodiversity gain. Management of Dingoes should be rooted in a clear understanding of both their impact on farmers and also their (increasingly known) importance to ecosystems (Choquenot & Forsyth, 2013).

The timing of this proposal is fortunate, as it falls within the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, which will continue until 2030. This visionary initiative is a cry for the restoration of global ecosystems, the reduction of biodiversity loss and action on climate change. The removal of the Dingo Fence (or steps or studies in said direction) would be a standout innovation for Australia and represent a trailblazing initiative in large-scale ecological restoration. The fence presents a significant obstacle to ecological restoration in Australia's arid zone and has the potential for significant biodiversity gains following its removal.

The remainder of this report will examine similar examples elsewhere, demonstrating the importance of key predators in an ecosystem, the impacts of their removal, and the potential value of their return. Additionally, it will also include a short term and long term plan to study the biodiversity gain (and impact on agriculture) that the removal of the Dingo Fence would result in.

International Impacts of Removing Apex Predators

As has been noted above, removing Apex predators (such as the Dingo) can have a devastating impact on the ecosystem in question, as a trophic cascade occurs at the top of the food chain and ripples down to affect plants and other animals. Fortunately, there is already a range of research that provides insight as to the extent of these impacts.

A key example (and one that has been heavily studied) is the overfishing of sea otters in the North Pacific (they were hunted for their fur) in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Sea Otters predominantly feed on sea urchins, which are a herbivorous species that grazes on kelp, a type of large seaweed that forms dense underwater forests. When the Sea Otters were removed from the ecosystem, the Sea Urchins multiplied unchecked, overgrazing on the kelp and destroying the environment for other species, leading to a collapse in Biodiversity (Estes et al., 2004).

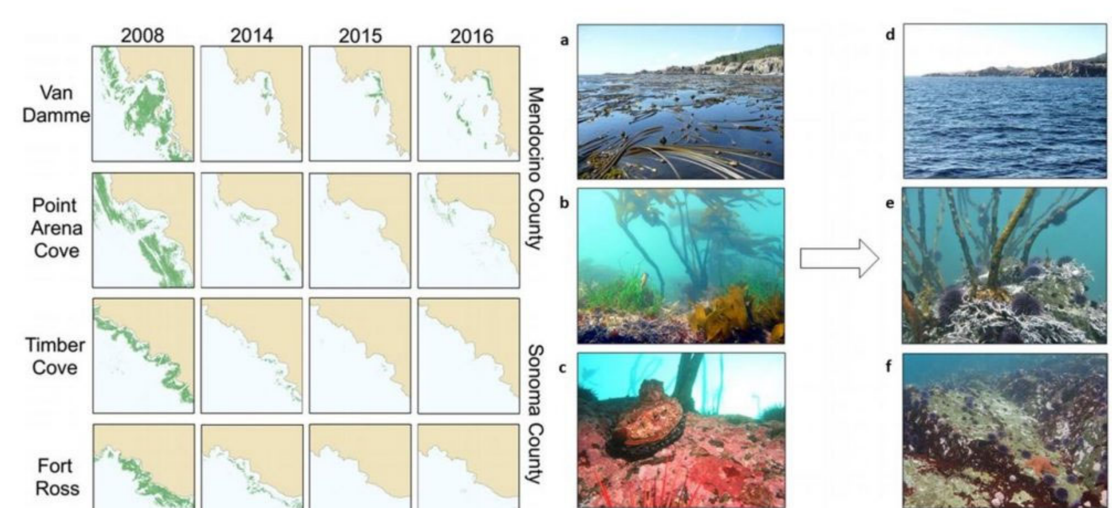

Figure 2. Ecosystem shifts observed for kelp forest canopy *(top)*, subcanopy *(middle)*, and benthose *(bottom)*, pre-impact (**a–c**) and post-impact (**d–f**). Photo credit: CDFW (K. Joe (**a,c,e**); L. Rogers-Bennett (**b**); C. Catton (**d,f**)).

Figure 7: Receding kelp forests in regions where Sea Otters have been removed along the Canadian and Alaskan coastlines. (Kone & Hamilton, 2019).

A similar study can be seen in sharks, which are apex predators of the sea and present at the top of the food chain. They play a key role in regulating the behaviour and numbers of mid-level predators, such as large fish or turtles. When sharks are removed, the balance shifts and the large fish and sea turtles increase in number, resulting in the overgrazing of seagrass meadows and a biodiversity collapse (FIU, 2024).

But both these examples go further than the collapse of biodiversity. Seagrass meadows are critical habitats that store carbon, provide habitat and nursery ground for many fish species, and protect the coastline by stabilising sediment (Moksnes et al., 2008). As overgrazing occurs, these functions are lost, meaning that the impact of the removal of the key predator has a far greater impact than just on biodiversity (Hughes et al., 2016).

Both these examples have significant parallels with dingoes, as otters and sharks regulate herbivorves, dingoes regulate kangaroos and other invasive species. The removal of the Dingo is likely also leading to overgrazing and ecosystem imbalance, which has been studied extensively overseas. And while not studied extensively in Australia, there are also expected to be similar ecosystem functions being lost, which will cause further issues through loss of water quality, increased erosion and such.

International Benefits of Reintroducing Apex Predators

While the above examples examine similar cases of ecosystem loss caused by the removal of apex predators, there are international examples of the reintroduction of such predators that have had a significant impact on local ecosystems. The most commonly known example is the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park in the United States. In that case, wolves, which had been extinct from the region for several decades prior to the reintroduction in the 1990s, were reintroduced.

The wolves' extinction in the park left it without a clear Apex predator, as the largest carnivore was the coyote, which was unable to prey on larger animals such as the Elk. Without natural predators (and also without hunting of Elk due to the location being a National Park), the species proliferated significantly, and the extensive herds not only overgrazed the existing grasslands of the park but also began to cause damage to the forest within by grazing on small saplings (Frank & McNaughton, 1992). Over time, this would lead to the destruction of forests and the expansion of grasslands within the park (Painter et al., 2015).

The opening up of the grasslands is a similar form of biodiversity loss to what we see in our current dingoes case. Small mammals and herbivores that rely on the forest were pushed into smaller areas, suffering losses as they adjusted to the new, reduced habitats (Frank & McNaughton, 1993). Some ecosystem functions were lost as beavers and other small animals were outcompeted.

The reintroduction of wolves is widely believed to have reversed this trend, with wolves preying on the extensive elk herds, which in turn reduced their grazing pressure on the landscape. This then cascades down through the ecosystem and allows smaller mammals and species to expand, placing them at lower risk of local extinction but also allowing them to contribute to the environment more. For example, the increase in beavers when competition was reduced slowed waterways due to additional dams, helping retain water and hydrate the landscape.

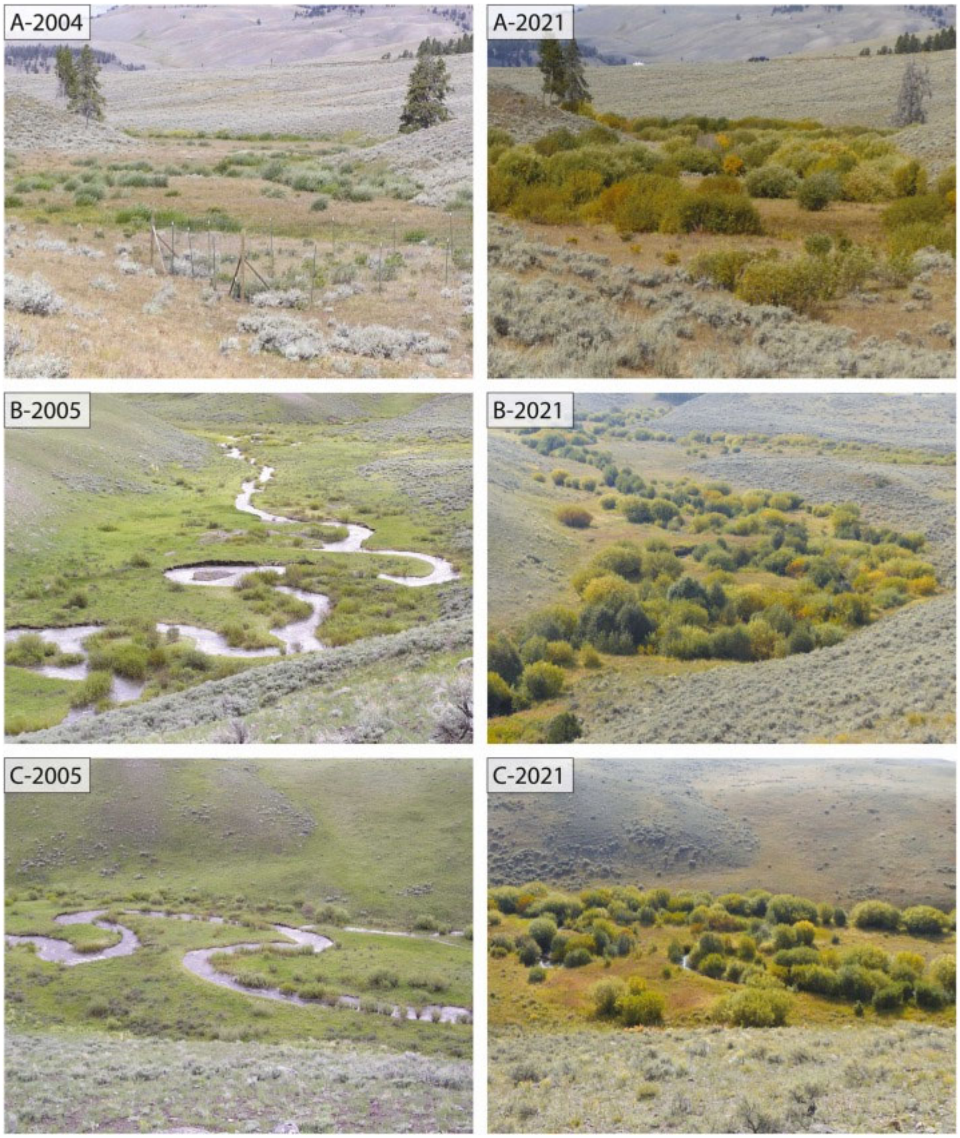

Figure 8: Visible examples of regeneration within the Yellowstone National Park following wolf reintroduction (Ripple et al., 2025)

While there is still uncertainty around the importance of the wolves in renewing the landscape (Peterson et al., 2014), they have had a significantly positive effect on the landscape and helped to promote the biodiversity gain that has been seen. As such, it is imperative that these lessons from overseas be carefully considered and implemented in Australia regarding Dingoes to help restore the degraded landscapes of South Eastern Australia.
As such, a trial should be conducted to highlight the potential for a trophic cascade to cause ecological gain in South Eastern Australia, as climatic differences may limit the strength of the cascade compared to Yellowstone (Morgan et al., 2017)

Short Term Trial Proposal

Given that there would likely be significant resistance to the idea of the reintroduction of dingoes into South Eastern Australia, it is vital that any trials or research into the impact of Dingoes needs to be designed to ensure that confidence can be provided to the agricultural sector, to demonstrate the positives that this policy proposes.

A first short term trial study should be conducted in a national park or large fenced area along the edge of the existing Dingo Fence. The Sturt National Park is an ideal location, as its large scale, fenced enclosures, and lack of private land provide an excellent area from which to conduct a trial. While the trial should be rigorously designed, it should be performed with key goals in mind, which have been highlighted in a number of previous research papers, such as Glen et al. (2007) and Newsome et al. (2015):

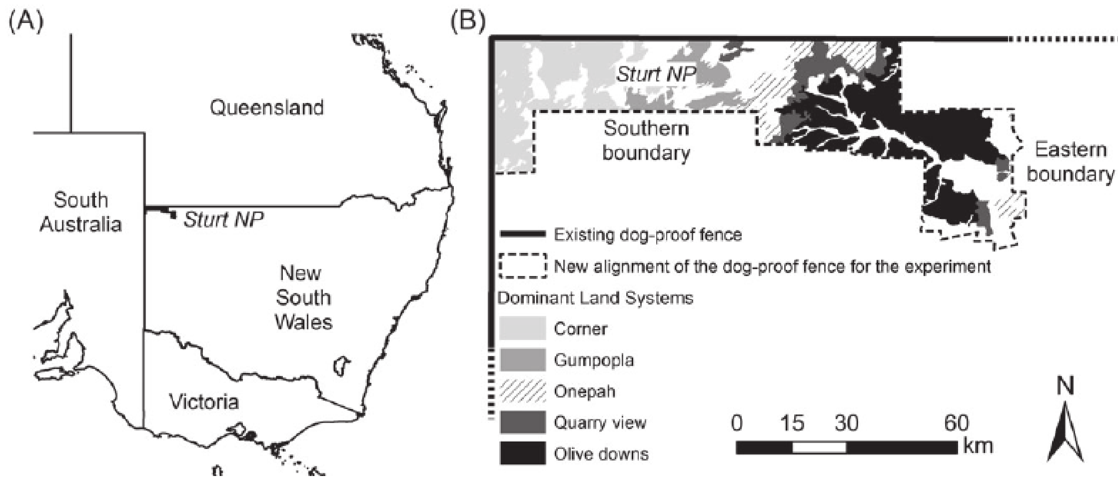

Figure 9: Proposal taken from Newsome et al. (2015), suggesting the opening of the Sturt National Park (B) in Eastern Australia (A) to Dingoes.

- Study the impact of Dingoes on livestock. While there is no livestock present within the National Park, it is currently infested with feral goats. While they are not a replacement for livestock, they can be used as a proxy given their similarities to Sheep. Various populations would need to be surveyed semi-regularly to determine the losses they suffer from the presence of Dingoes. Understanding these losses would potentially allow for the consideration of the economic impact that farmers would suffer as a result of this policy.
- Study the spread and population dynamics of the Dingoes reintroduced into the National Park. Dingoes should be studied to identify their range and approximate densities that they settled into. While this provides some ecological data, it is similar to the point above: by understanding density, we can estimate the frequency with which they may come into contact with stock or humans. With this density, we can estimate the impact it will have on local communities.

- Study the revegetation of the National Park. This is one of the essential goals. A large number of survey sites would be needed, both in the park and on both sides of the Fence (outside of the park to function as control points). Due to the large nature, review of satellite and aerial imagery should also be used to track any revegetation and regeneration that does occur with the introduction of Dingoes.
- Study populations of small mammals and reptiles within the National Park. Similar to the above, but focused on the fauna rather than the flora. Once again, reference points would be needed on both sides of the fence (outside of the park) to verify that any trends can be linked to the presence of Dingoes rather than any weather or climatic changes.

It is envisaged that this study would go on for several years (the number cannot be specified until a final study plan has been developed), preferably long enough to capture a number of generations of dingoes growing up within the repurposed National Park. Once the study is completed, the data can be analysed to determine if the reintroduction of Dingoes would have a significant regenerating effect on the environment or not. If they fail to do so, the policy should be reconsidered in light of whatever the results are (not considered here). However, if successful, the existing management action of exclusion should be reconsidered.

Long Term Proposal

Assuming that the short term trial is a success, the existence of the Dingo Fence should be reconsidered. While a number of actions are suggested below, they should be carefully reviewed in light of any data produced by the short-term trials. But they should generally consist of the following:

- A large scale public information campaign focused on disseminating the results of the initial trial and educating people (both rural and urban) about the importance that Dingoes have to local ecosystems in Australia. This will help build public knowledge, support and confidence for the ultimate removal of the fenceline.
- Review into the economics of stock losses against the environmental benefits that Dingoes provide. Regardless of how the short term trial goes, this information will be important in the long run to understand the financial impact that various groups may face. It helps these groups understand what local management they should take to minimise the cost, and if considered significant, what government support could be used (improvements to fencing or compensation for stock losses) to support farmers, graziers and pastoralists during any transition.
- Removal of the Dingo fence. This should likely be done in a staged manner over several years. Ideally, certain parts of the fence that are separated by significant distances should be removed first. This would likely allow Dingoes to begin repopulating South Eastern Australia without causing issues due to overlapping population groups, as issues with overlapping population groups might slow down or hinder the rate at which they repopulate the region.

Finally, ongoing monitoring would be required post removal of the Dingo Fence to ensure that the outcomes are those that have been predicted and that their reintroduction does not causes new and unexpected issues (though the short term trial should identify these).

From the evidence summarised above and the historical evidence of the role of Dingoes in the landscape, this should be considered a priority if Australia wishes to engage in meaningful environmental restoration. The evidence is reasonably clear that reintroduction will have positive impacts across all levels of the ecosystem, making it potentially one of the most effective actions (both impact- and cost-wise) that can be taken in relation to conservation in the country.

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