

INQUIRY INTO DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Submission to the Inquiry into the management of dingoes across National Parks in New South Wales

Dear Animal Welfare Committee,

I appreciate this opportunity to provide a submission to this Inquiry. I am based in Brisbane, and have enjoyed numerous visits to National Parks in NSW. I have a strong commitment to animal welfare, and have a considerable knowledge and experience with native wildlife and conservation. I also have family roots in rural areas, which has given me a deeper understanding of the challenges, hardships and complex issues facing pastoralists.

I am deeply concerned about the ongoing and cruel persecution of dingoes, the native inhabitant and apex predator on this continent from time immemorial, and the short-sighted and destructive consequences of outdated, ill-informed, simplistic and unchallenged policy and management. I am therefore providing this submission with strong underlying principles of coexistence, animal welfare, ecological balance and genuine respect for First Nations knowledge, culture and connection to dingoes and Country.

Dingoes are a native animal of high conservation value, yet they are highly persecuted in NSW and around the country through being shot, trapped and poisoned (Sodium fluoroacetate 1080), with Governments enabling indiscriminate and flagrant animal cruelty. This is a legacy of an outdated narrative that they are a major predator of farm animals and a pest that must be controlled. The longstanding and blunt use of 1080 poison on a broad-scale basis does not eradicate the chances of livestock being predated upon, and research has even shown that 1080 baiting could indeed increase the predation risk to calves (source: Allen, L.R. *Wild dog control impacts on calf wastage in extensive beef cattle enterprises*. *Anim. Prod. Sci.* 2013, 54, 214–220, <https://doi.org/10.1071/an12356>).

This persecution is not only ecologically irresponsible, but it also demonstrates complete and deliberate ignorance of the significance of dingoes to First Nations peoples – including through their lore, customs, stories, kinship relations, dance, and deeply rooted cultural responsibilities to Country. In many First Nations communities, dingoes are teachers and protectors. Indigenous knowledge systems hold detailed, place-based understanding of dingo behaviour, ecology, and their role in broader ecosystem function, complementing and strengthening western scientific approaches. Our history of dingo management policy and practice has failed to look beyond/incorporate/embrace the rich font of directly relevant First Nations' knowledge.

In 2023, the First Nations Dingo Forum saw 100 Traditional Owners from 20 nations across Australia come together. The National First Nations Dingo Declaration was proclaimed, which I have attached for the Committee's reference. This Declaration calls for a new, respectful, ecologically responsible and culturally informed approach to dingo management, founded upon "*Caring for Dingoes on Country*", in which greater involvement of Cultural Custodians in dingo management would be embraced. The Declaration is an opportunity for genuine and deliberate engagement with First Nations communities to constructively inform future policy development and support more inclusive and effective decision-making regarding dingo management approaches, stepping out of the shadows of the deeply flawed and inhumane policy and practice we are still seeing today. Indigenous-led approaches to dingo conservation and management, including expanded roles in National Park governance and decision-making, is the key to reducing dingo-pastoralist conflict, and achieving ecological, conservation and cultural objectives. Indigenous knowledge systems hold

detailed, place-based understanding of dingo behaviour, ecology, and their role in broader ecosystem function, complementing and strengthening western scientific approaches.

As a clear example of the significant contributions First Nations peoples are already making in relation to dingo management, Indigenous ranger groups in NSW are increasingly leading programs to monitor and manage dingoes on Country. This is providing important on-ground insights into dingo populations and behaviour.

Archaeological research and First Nations' oral histories demonstrate that Cultural Custodians buried companion dingoes, with evidence showing that these dingoes were given intentional burials consistent with ancestral or ceremonial practices (source: <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2023/10/23/archaeologists--barkindji-custodians-excavate-dingo-burial.html>).

Best practice ecosystem and native wildlife species policy and management is underpinned by both rigorous scientific evidence and genuine consultation and learnings from First Nations community stakeholders. Current dingo management in NSW and elsewhere in Australia fall behind both dimensions, including dingo genetics research. Current dingo management policies are largely based on obsolete genetic research, where only 23 genetic markers were used. Contemporary research is using up to 195 000 markers. This is significant, as the contemporary genetic analyses demonstrate that overwhelmingly, Australia's wild-living canids are dingoes, with hybridisation being a relatively uncommon occurrence in undisturbed, stable dingo populations. In New South Wales, in excess of 75% of the sampled wild canids showed over 93% contemporary dingo lineage. The killing of dingoes disrupts stable dingo pack structures, which increases social instability within the pack and consequently increases the risk of interbreeding with domestic/roaming/feral dogs.

Failing to distinguish between dingoes and other dogs (roaming/domestic/feral/hybrids) is one such example of the flawed basis upon which dingo management is built upon. Dingoes differ from domestic dogs in several important ways, including their ecological role, social structure, breeding patterns, and behaviour. Dingoes and domestic dogs differ in several important ways e.g.:

- social structure (stable, family-based packs compared to more opportunistic groupings in domestic dogs)
- breeding patterns (dingoes generally breed annually, compared to multiple breeding cycles in domestic dogs)
- behaviour and ecology (co-operative hunting, territoriality and wild-adapted behaviours in dingoes)

Australia does not have an established continent-wide population of feral domestic dogs living independently across ecosystems, and it is now widely understood that the wild canids occupying these landscapes are dingoes performing important ecological functions.

As Australia's apex native predator, their ecological function is key to ecosystem health. The indiscriminate persecution of the native top predator clears the paths for the continued and expanding widespread destruction of a wide array of other native species by invasive mesopredators i.e. foxes and feral cats (sources: Newsome, T., Greenville, A., Ćirović, D. et al. *Top predators constrain mesopredator distributions*. *Nat Commun* 8, 15469 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms15469>); Feit, B., Feit, A. & Letnic, M. *Apex Predators Decouple Population Dynamics Between Mesopredators and Their Prey*. *Ecosystems* 22, 1606–1617 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10021-019-00360-2>/

This devastation by invasive species is a large factor in Australia's ongoing and appalling record of species declines and extinctions. Dingo management practices and persecution based on outdated information and unchallenged, simplistic, and historical narratives therefore myopically takes no account of the significant and devastating consequences across our landscapes and ecosystems.

Dingoes support healthy ecosystems, habitat and vegetation across landscapes, regulating (through natural control) macropod populations (kangaroos and wallabies), pigs and feral goats, species which place a grazing pressure on vegetation (sources: *Campbell G, Emmott A, Pollock D, Traill BJ. (2022) Can dingoes increase graziers' profits and help maintain Australia's rangelands?. The Rangeland Journal 44, 129–135. <https://doi.org/10.1071/RJ22002>*; *Fisher, A.G., Mills, C.H., Lyons, M. et al. Remote sensing of trophic cascades: multi-temporal landsat imagery reveals vegetation change driven by the removal of an apex predator. Landscape Ecol 36, 1341–1358 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10980-021-01206-w>*

Research has shown that dingo populations that are stable can be more effective in suppressing fox foxes than relying on poison baiting programs. (source: *Hunter DO, Letnic M. (2022) Dingoes have greater suppressive effect on fox populations than poisoning campaigns. Australian Mammalogy 44, 387–396. <https://doi.org/10.1071/AM21036>*).

From an animal welfare perspective, the killing of dingoes presents serious concerns in light of contemporary standards and expectations. 1080 poison is unquestionably a most cruel method of lethal control, causing intolerable suffering for dingoes (and other animals that consume the bait, including companion animals). The trapping of dingoes is a matter of serious welfare concern, with the length of time the animal remains in the trap, in pain, under extreme stress, and being unable to access food, water or shelter.

The current approach to managing dingoes in National Parks in NSW is primarily based on protecting agricultural interests rather than ecosystem health and biodiversity goals. There are many non-lethal strategies available to protect farmed animals, such as guardian animals and noise deterrents.

Livestock Guardian Dogs are effective in reducing or eliminating predation on livestock by dingoes. Additionally, landholders benefit from the presence of Guardian Dogs, as they deter kangaroos and wallabies from grazing paddocks, and provide protection to livestock from birds of prey and invasive foxes (source: <https://pestsmart.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/06/Guardian-Dogs-web.pdf>). Donkeys have also demonstrated their value to landholders by virtue of their effectiveness in protecting livestock from canid predators:

- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2019-04-23/donkey-guardians-protect-herd-from-wild-dogs/11018666>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jun/22/kicks-like-a-mule-trained-donkeys-deployed-to-protect-sheep-from-wild-dogs-on-nsw-farm>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-19/donkeys-to-protect-stock-in-nsw/102741256>

I note that there is no funding allocations made towards research and development of non-lethal dingo management/coexistence approaches to benefit the adjoining or local agricultural property stakeholders to a National Park in NSW. As a step forward, the funding which is current allocated for broad-scale 1080 baiting of dingoes and trapping and shooting in National Parks could be re-directed to support neighbouring landholders with coexistence extension services.

I see this Inquiry as a crucial opportunity to rethink and reshape dingo management in NSW, moving away from the entrenched policy and practice that is inhumane, destructive, ecologically irresponsible, and is culturally ignorant. The Inquiry is an opportunity for NSW to take a decisive step forward, through close and genuine engagement with First Nations peoples; taking contemporary scientific evidence on board; and listening to the demonstrated lived experience of pastoralists who have already chosen non-lethal approaches as part of their commitment to coexistence.

Key measures I therefore strongly advocate for the Committee's consideration are as follows:

1. Cessation of killing of dingoes across the National Parks of New South Wales
2. Formally ban the use of 1080 poison, which impacts other native wildlife e.g. non-target species through secondary poisoning, and companion animals
3. Support landholders who neighbour National Parks to successfully implement non-lethal coexistence strategies.
4. Introduce strong legislative protection for dingoes
5. Stronger and genuine engagement with Cultural Custodians in decision-making regarding dingo management
6. Indigenous-led dingo management approaches in National Parks
7. Formally recognise dingoes as culturally significant native animals

I sincerely trust that through my contribution and the submission of others across our community, that the Committee will appreciate the community's concerns and perspectives regarding dingoes their welfare, and their place in the cultures of Traditional Owners. It is also my steadfast hope that through our collective submissions, the Committee will fully appreciate that safer, more effective and ecologically responsible approaches are available to us, and that empowering and embracing First Nations peoples' knowledge and experience will benefit dingoes, ecosystems, and pastoralists alike.

Coexistence rather than persecution must be the way forward.

Thank you.

Regards,

Leonard Fitzpatrick

Additional references

- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323870910_Promoting_human-dingo_co-existence_in_Australia_moving_towards_more_innovative_methods_of_protecting_livestock_rather_than_killing_dingoes_Canis_dingo
- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343874447_Co-existing_with_dingoes_Challenges_and_solutions_to_implementing_non-lethal_management
- <https://theconversation.com/farmers-fear-dingoes-are-eating-their-livestock-but-predator-poo-tells-an-unexpected-story-254787>