Submission No 174

INQUIRY INTO DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Submission: Inquiry into dingoes in national parks in New South Wales

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^ *It is noted that this submission has been prepared by individual officers of Council and does not purport to represent the views of Council, or its elected representatives.*

Inquiry: NSW Legislative Council Animal Welfare Committee inquiry into the treatment and cultural and ecological significance of dingoes in national parks in New South Wales

Purpose: To provide practical, place-based evidence from MidCoast Council's experience managing dingoes on Council-managed land adjoining Myall Lakes National Park and other conservation areas.

1. Executive summary

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry. Our experience in the eastern Myall Lakes area (including Myall Lakes National Park) demonstrates that dingo management in and around national parks is most effective when it is scientific / evidence-based, culturally respectful, tenure-neutral and focused on managing human behaviour and human and stock risk, rather than applying widespread, broadscale lethal control.

Council's current approach seeks to protect public safety and manage specific stock risks while recognising **dingoes as ecologically important and culturally significant animals**.

As with much (if not all) of the MidCoast Council area, the eastern Myall Lakes population of dingoes has demonstrated **high genetic integrity**. It is the subject of ongoing applied research through the Myall Lakes Dingo/Dapin Project. We consider that the Inquiry should support reforms that clearly distinguish dingoes from feral domestic dogs, reduce unnecessary lethal control in national parks, and embed Aboriginal knowledge, leadership and cultural protocols in dingo conservation and management.

2. Recommendations

1. Recognise dingoes in national parks as culturally significant native wildlife requiring conservation-oriented management, not solely as a pest animal or subset of "wild dogs".
2. Require national park dingo management plans to apply a risk-based hierarchy that prioritises education, attractant management, monitoring and non-lethal interventions. If lethal control is required, then a targeted lethal control is employed; thereby reducing harm and disturbance to dingoes that are behaviourally compliant.
3. Limit lethal control in national parks to clearly defined, documented and reviewable circumstances, focused on identified individual animals where there is an unacceptable risk to human safety or a substantiated, site-specific impact to stock that cannot reasonably be managed by any other means.

4. Formalise Aboriginal (First Nations) involvement in dingo conservation through co-designed governance, cultural protocols, repatriation practices, paid roles, and opportunities for Aboriginal-led monitoring, interpretation and broadscale public education.
5. Improve cross-tenure coordination between NPWS, Councils, Local Land Services, Aboriginal organisations, researchers, tourism operators and neighbouring landholders.
6. Invest in long-term research, community reporting systems and public education to support the recognition of the ecological and cultural significance of dingoes, as well as coexistence and adaptive management frameworks and processes.

3. MidCoast Council context

Dingoes occur across the entire MidCoast Council area. Historic parts of the MidCoast are named after dingoes, such as Dingo Tops / Tapin Tops and Dingo Creek.

Within the focus area of our applied (targeted) management efforts, namely the eastern Myall Lakes landscape, dingoes occur widely but at low densities / numbers across Myall Lakes National Park, Wallingat National Park, other private and public lands and in the areas of Hawks Nest, Yacaaba Peninsula, Winda Woppa, Tea Gardens, Pindimar, Seal Rocks, Sandbar, Bungwahl, Forster and Nerong. This population has been extensively studied and described by the University of NSW / Taronga Conservation Society. Individual dingoes and family groups move across Council-managed land, residential and tourism areas, State Forest, Crown land and the National Park lands. This makes tenure-neutral management essential: actions taken on one tenure can and will affect dingo social structure, behaviour and risk across the broader landscape.

Since 2019, Council's approach has shifted from reactive and untargeted lethal control to a structured coexistence model. The current Management Plan for Dingoes on Council Managed Land in the Eastern Myall Lakes promotes public safety, community education, reporting, behaviour classification, active monitoring, targeted decision-making and Aboriginal cultural protocols. It is compatible with NPWS procedures and is informed by the Myall Lakes Dingo/Dapin Project led by University of New South Wales and Taronga Conservation Society.

4. Response to the terms of reference

(A) GENETIC STATUS OF DINGOES, DISTINCTION BETWEEN DINGOES AND DOGS, AND RECENT GENETIC RESEARCH

Recent genome-wide research has challenged long-standing assumptions that dingoes in eastern Australia are extensively hybridised with domestic dogs. They are not. Contemporary genetic testing using large numbers of genomic markers has found that wild dingo populations have far less dog ancestry than previously suggested and that older genetic methods often over-estimated hybridisation. This is directly relevant to NSW Policy because the umbrella term "wild dog" obscures the conservation status, cultural relevance and ecological role of dingoes.

In the Myall Lakes region, genetic investigations have identified very high dingo genetic integrity, including animals sampled near urban centres. Thus, even in the circumstances of high proximity / availability for dingo + domestic dog reproductive co-mixing, the dingoes of Myall Lakes remain genetically intact. Thus, dingoes breed with dingoes.

We point to the extensive scientific research of Dr Kylie Cairns and others in respect to this issue.

We submit that management in national parks should be informed by contemporary genetic evidence and should avoid relying on coat colour, public perception or the generic "wild dog" label as proxies for dingo ancestry.

Presently, a number of NSW legislative and policy instruments incorporate dingoes into the definition of "*dogs"*. This is incongruous with scientific knowledge and is a fundamental inadequacy of the NSW statutory and policy platform.

(B) LEGISLATIVE, REGULATORY AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS GOVERNING DINGO MANAGEMENT IN NSW NATIONAL PARKS

Current NSW settings create tension between biosecurity obligations, biodiversity conservation, animal welfare and cultural values. Under the *Biosecurity Act 2015*, free-living dogs including dingoes are managed through the "*wild dog*" framework at the same time as NPWS policy recognises the need to conserve dingoes in areas where the risk of negative impacts is low. Pure dingoes that are injured, for instance, cannot be captured, treated and released in NSW because they are deemed to be "wild dogs" in the biosecurity legislation and thus must be destroyed.

Council supports a clearer statutory and policy framework for national parks that recognises dingoes as distinct from feral domestic dogs and requires management responses to be proportionate, evidence-based and transparent.

Council's dingo plan demonstrates that biosecurity duties can be met without indiscriminate lethal control. A practical framework should include behaviour-based risk assessment, incident verification, identification of individual animals where possible, consultation with Aboriginal representatives and experts, and escalation pathways that prioritise non-lethal measures unless there is an unacceptable and immediate risk. We have demonstrated that this model is effective.

(C) ECOLOGICAL ROLE OF DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS

Dingoes perform important ecological functions as apex predators, including regulating prey behaviour and abundance and influencing introduced mesopredator activity (and particularly those of foxes). Research indicates that suppression or removal of dingoes can negatively alter mammal assemblages and vegetation structure through multiple ecological pathways, including increased activity of (naturally) over-abundant herbivores and increased activity / effectiveness of feral mesopredators. Removing dingoes increases fox numbers and their hunting behaviour placing greater predation pressure on small to medium sized classed mammals.

Dingoes have been present in Australia for several thousand years, affording native wildlife an ability to co-evolve in the presence of dingoes and adapt ecologically responsive defensive strategies. Dingo populations naturally self-regulate, so they do not become over-abundant in unmanaged landscapes.

Contemporary dietary studies repeatedly identify that the dingoes' main diet are large macropods. The removal of dingoes can lead to unbalanced herbivory. In two major contemporary studies in the

MidCoast Council area, dingoes are not substantive predators of koalas and, as stated, have many millennia of co-habitation across different habitat types.

Dingoes predate feral deer, feral goats and feral pigs, and their role in population suppression and barriers to population spread of these impactful feral pest animals is likely to be substantial and positive. Broadscale, uninformed lethal control of dingoes probably negates this feral pest animal population suppression effect at landscape scales. The apparent significant escalation in numbers and spread of feral deer and feral pigs across the MidCoast since about 2019 is coincident with a substantial escalation of aerial 1080 baiting of national parks, state forests and other lands following the 2019/20 black summer bushfires.

In the Myall Lakes, dingoes are part of a landscape that includes internationally significant wetlands and high biodiversity values. Council submits that national park management should preserve stable dingo family structures at every possible opportunity across all national parks and other public spaces.

Disrupting family groups through untargeted lethal control can create dingo social instability, constrained dispersal, territorial conflict and unintended escalation of risks to people, pets and stock.

Dingoes serve vital ecological roles and functions in national park landscapes in NSW. These roles are not appropriately recognised in contemporary dingo population control and reduction management.

(D) CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DINGOES FOR FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

The eastern Myall Lakes are on the traditional lands of the Worimi Aboriginal People. Council recognises that dingoes have cultural connection and significance for Aboriginal people, including as animals that lived alongside Aboriginal families and communities for thousands of years. Dingo persecution can cause cultural harm and can reinforce historical trauma associated with dispossession and the extinguishment of Aboriginal relationships with Country.

The broadscale lethal baiting control of dingoes in landscapes has a traumatic connection with Aboriginal massacres by European settlers involving arsenic poisoning of waterholes and foodstuffs. This is not a heritage that contemporary NSW should maintain.

In our experience with working with First Nations peoples, referring dingoes as ‘wild dogs’ based on their appearance and genetic lineage is also resonant and triggering.

We recommend that the Inquiry recognise Aboriginal knowledge and leadership as central, not supplementary, to dingo conservation. This should include co-design of management plans, culturally appropriate public messaging, cultural repatriation protocols for deceased dingoes where desired, paid participation in management groups and support for Aboriginal-led monitoring, research and education.

From our personal perspectives when working with Aboriginal organisations such as the Barray Alliance or Aboriginal NPWS staff it is easy to witness the stress that currently sub-standard dingo management causes. Dingoes and how they have been treated (including references to their genetic

status) represent a kinship to Aboriginal people that is difficult to explain. Decision makers should walk the Country with Aboriginal people to be cognisant of this.

(E) IMPACT OF CURRENT GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS

Current policy settings have improved in recognising dingo conservation values, but implementation can still be inconsistent where dingoes are managed primarily through pest animal frameworks. In Council's experience, public concern, tourism pressure, fear of negative encounters and domestic animal incidents can lead to calls for rapid lethal action. Without a clear, transparent and evidence-based framework, these pressures can invoke decisions that are disingenuous and harmful.

Council's behaviour-class model provides a practical example of a more balanced approach. Most reported sightings require no intervention or remote monitoring. More concerning behaviours trigger additional investigation and expert review. Only behaviours that present an unacceptable public safety risk leads to targeted lethal control. This approach has supported lower levels of serious interactions while maintaining an emphasis on coexistence, education and stable dingo social structures.

We recommend a widespread consideration and adoption of the Eastern Myall Lakes Dingo Management Plan framework for action.

(F) DINGO MANAGEMENT AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND LEADERSHIP IN CONSERVATION

Council supports a statewide dingo management model for national parks that is adaptive, culturally informed and locally applied.

Firstly, statewide dingo management needs to differentiate between dingoes and feral dogs. It needs to recognise the cultural values and ecological functions of dingo populations.

From a human risk perspective, a successful model should manage the drivers of conflict, especially human feeding, access to food waste, inappropriate tourism behaviour, unsafe pet management and inconsistent reporting. Public education should be treated as a primary management tool, not an optional communication activity.

It is true that, from a state-wide management perspective, some policy and planning frameworks provide for dingo recognition, management and conservation. However, these frameworks are not effectively applied.

For instance, the NSW Wild Dog Management Strategy 2022-27 (the Strategy) aligns with the objectives of the Act and aims to reduce the negative impacts of wild dogs within NSW, whilst also recognising the considerable interest in dingo conservation in Australia, including concerns about their genetic integrity and preserving their ecological roles elsewhere. This Strategy purports to promote a balance between managing dingoes in areas where they have negative impacts and preserving their ecological roles elsewhere and recognises the public interest in the roles of dingoes in ecosystems and the value of dingoes as an iconic species.

Further, the Hunter Regional Strategic Pest Animal Management Plan has an action:

Support conservation management and maintenance of the genetic integrity of dingoes in identified conservation reserves	Dingo conservation	Identification of areas important for dingo conservation based on best available science and genetic testing. Co-ordination of wild dog management activities. Collaboration and data sharing	Wild Dog/Pest Animal management groups, NPWS and other public land managers, LLS, Universities, researchers.

Finally, the National Parks and Wildlife Service policy advises that its management activities focus control where wild dog risks to agriculture and threatened animals are high and avoid areas in national parks where the risks are low, allowing wild dogs to fulfil the ecological role of the dingo in these locations.

However, there appears little to no accountability in respect to the implementation of these dingo-focused recognition and conservation actions. There is little to no published data on how and where such decisions are implemented on the ground and in real terms. Instead, aerial baiting programs are widespread across large swathes of NSW national parks on the MidCoast. There is little to no science that links aerial and ground control methods of dingoes in the core of large MidCoast national parks with *bona fide* conservation or social outcomes. And the cost of dingo campaigns depletes resources available for pressing, urgent feral pest animal management issues, such as expanding feral pig and feral deer programs, identification and management of priority pest incursions, extension of bio-control strategies for wild rabbits, etc.

Indigenous knowledge and leadership should be incorporated through decision-making structures, not simply through consultation after decisions are made. In the Myall Lakes context, Council's model includes Aboriginal representation in behaviour assessment and cultural protocols for repatriation of controlled dingoes, where appropriate. This model could be strengthened and adapted for national parks across NSW.

We work strongly with the local Aboriginal Community in regard to implementing our cross-tenure dingo monitoring strategies. Currently the Barray Alliance monitors dingo population and family groups across National Parks and MidCoast Council Lands using a systematic array of remote sensing cameras. They contribute to genetic and population analysis. This array has been scientifically developed by our partnership with the University of New South Wales and the University of NSW. While informative and necessary this is also a culturally appropriate approach to understand dingoes and develop understanding that goes far into Country.

(G) OTHER RELATED MATTERS

Cross-tenure coordination is essential because dingoes do not recognise administrative boundaries. National park policy should be aligned with adjacent council, Crown land, private land, state forest and Local Land Services settings so that actions on one tenure do not undermine coexistence objectives on another. This is particularly important in coastal tourism areas where dingoes move between parks, beaches, campgrounds, villages and public reserves.

We also recommend investment in consistent incident reporting, shared databases, identification profiles for individual dingoes, long-term population monitoring, non-lethal deterrent trials, attractant audits, visitor behaviour research and coordinated seasonal messaging. These measures would improve public and stock safety and provide a stronger evidence base for future policy.

5. Proposed management model for national parks

1. **Recognise:** identify dingoes as culturally significant native wildlife with important ecological roles.
2. **Prevent:** prioritise education, visitor behaviour, pet management and compliance with direct feeding of dingo prohibitions.
3. **Monitor:** maintain consistent reporting systems, expert behaviour assessment and population monitoring. Our partnership program with UNSW/ Taronga Zoo / NPWS /MidCoast Council and the Barray Alliance (previously TIDE) has developed monitoring strategies that are led by first and partnered with First Nations Peoples – these programs are also enjoyable as well as informative.
4. **Assess:** classify behaviours using transparent risk categories that consider context, provocation, human behaviour and individual dingo identity.
5. **Intervene:** apply non-lethal interventions wherever reasonably practicable.
6. **Escalate:** allow targeted lethal control only where an identified individual dingo presents an unacceptable risk to people or stock in specific circumstances, and after documented expert and Aboriginal input.
7. **Review:** evaluate outcomes, share learnings across tenures and update plans as new evidence emerges.

6. Conclusion

We submit that NSW has an opportunity to modernise dingo management in national parks by aligning policy with contemporary genetic research, ecological science, Aboriginal cultural values and practical risk management.

The eastern Myall Lakes experience shows that coexistence is achievable when management is evidence-based, transparent, culturally respectful and focused on specific, known outcomes. We encourage the Committee to recommend reforms that protect public and stock safety while conserving stable, culturally significant and ecologically functional dingo populations in NSW national parks.

Source notes

- *NSW Legislative Council Animal Welfare Committee, Terms of reference: Inquiry into dingoes in national parks in New South Wales, 19 May 2026.*
- *NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Wild dog policy and wild dog control information.*
- *NSW Wild Dog Management Strategy 2022–2027.*
- *Cairns et al. and associated genome-wide dingo ancestry research reporting that many wild canids previously treated as "wild dogs" are genetically dingoes with far less dog ancestry than earlier methods suggested.*
- *Ecological research on the consequences of apex predator suppression, including studies linking dingo control to shifts in mesopredator activity, herbivore activity, vegetation structure and small mammal abundance.*
- *MidCoast Council, Management Plan for Dingoes on Council Managed Land around the Eastern Myall Lakes, February 2025.*