Submission No 181

INQUIRY INTO DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Dear Members of the Dingoes in National Parks Committee,

I write to the committee as both a scholar working in the environment program at UNSW and also as a landholder of a rural property that has a boundary with Limeburners Creek National Park, just north of Port Macquarie, home to a well-documented and highly visible dingo population. My family has owned this property for over 40 years.

The legislation governing management practices of Dingoes by NPWS is outdated, not reflective of the latest ecological research, and in need of a radical overhaul.

1. Terminology: all references to wild dogs should be removed and replaced with dingoes

The terms feral dog and wild dog should not be used in legislation governing and directing the activities and responsibilities of NPWS. In recent years ecological research, and particularly genetic research, has shown convincingly that there are effectively no wild dogs or feral dogs in Australia. Almost all dogs living in the natural environment are dingoes. Research by my colleague at UNSW, Dr Kylie Cairns and others, has shown that even on the east coast of New South Wales, where there is the highest degree of hybridisation, the minimum dingo genetic content in these animals is 60-70%, and for the rest of the country that figure is significantly higher.

In the legislation and much related literature governing 'pest' management by LLS and NPWS, as in this example from the E&H 'Wild dog policy' the terminology is inconsistent and confusing.

> The conservation of dingoes is listed under the goals of the strategy and is to be achieved by having wild dog management plans focus control on areas where the risk of negative impacts is greatest and not undertaking control in other parts of the landscape with a low risk of negative impacts from wild dogs, to allow dingoes to fulfil their natural ecological role. https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/parks-reserves-and-protected-areas/park-policies/wild-dogs

The term wild dog is generally, as in the case above, used to describe the perceived negative impacts of dingoes on the agricultural sector. The same animal will be described as dingoes when they are performing an ecological role, indeed often in the same sentence, as in the above. The term wild dog is used to legitimate killing dingoes when they are judged to interfere with agricultural production. The language of wild dog should be removed from all official New South Wales policies, procedures and legislation. There are no wild dogs in NSW only dingoes; and the terminology should reflect the overwhelming evidence that supports this claim.

2. Use of the term wild dog leads to the aesthetic culling of dingoes

The problem with this inconsistent terminology — using two words to describe the same animal (one pejorative and one ecological) is that it leads many in NPWS, and other organisations such as LLS and Landcare, to conclude that there are wild dogs that are not dingoes. There is a common view that dingoes only look like the stereotypical sandy coloured dingoes, most well-known from K'gari (Fraser) Island. This assumption is incorrect. Dingo appearance is extremely varied, and there is substantial evidence that significant coat variation has been present since before European settlement and therefore predates any possible interbreeding with domestic dogs brought here by the settler population. The erroneous use of the term wild dog leads to extraordinary harm being performed on dingoes who do not look like the imagined idea of a dingo.

I have had many conversations with NPWS park rangers and field officers over the years in my area (The Macleay River valley). There is an established and well recognised dingo population in this area that I regularly see on my property either directly or on camera traps. Park management periodically engages in 'wild dog control' operations. Generally, they trap the dogs in this area rather than poison them. They have repeatedly said: "they don't kill dingoes; they only kill wild dogs". They determine who is a dingo on the basis of visual recognition. *Visual recognition cannot determine if a dog is a dingo.* As the above picture shows there is a high degree of coat variability in the dingo population, and while they share some common features: such as size, pointy ears and a bushy tail, very many dingoes are not sandy coloured. Unfortunately, even amongst NPWS staff the animals that are judged to be wild dogs — those that do not align with the *imagined idea of what a dingo should look like* — are killed.

The same misconception that one can visually differentiate wild dogs from dingoes is repeated amongst the many people employed by LLS to control feral animals and other bodies such as Landcare (as well as recreational shooters) to control so-called 'pest' animals.

Where genetic testing shows a high degree of hybridity or completely feral dogs, is in the very rare instance where there are domesticated dogs living on the periphery of human settlements, upon which they are dependent. Unlike dingoes these animals are not 'wild' self-sufficient animals.

The retention of the term wild dog in any legislation, as well as the practices and procedures in relation to the control of wild dogs/dingoes by NPWS sends a damaging message: If the government organisation that is supposed to be protecting and caring for Australia's native animals is killing those animals, and classifying them with inaccurate terminology (wild dog) in order to do so, then those animals are not an integral and valuable part of Australia's wildlife. Wh*y should the rest of the community value them if NPWS does not?*

The overwriting assumption for NPWS in its legislation and its practices and procedures should be the protection of dingoes not their destruction. The emblem of the dingo should be as proudly worn and promoted by NPWS as the Tasmanian Devil is by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service

3. Community engagement of NPWS with key stakeholders.

NPWS needs to be much more proactive and much more concretely engaged with communities where there are dingo populations to explain their important ecological role and not undertake, except in the most compelling of circumstances, any dingo control.

Rural communities, have very often seen themselves in some kind of war with dingoes, are reluctant to think of dingoes as an apex predator that needs to be respected and that it has a critical role in maintaining biodiversity and a vibrant ecology. I understand that NPWS is very under resourced, and much of their resourcing goes into fire management and mitigation, rather than conservation. However, educating adjoining property owners and local communities on the important ecological role of dingoes should be an important part of their community outreach. The notion of trophic cascades is not a difficult idea to explain, and many people are aware of this through the re-introduction of wolves into Yellowstone NP.

4. Ecological role of Dingoes.

Much recent evidence has indicated, for example, from my colleague Professor Mike Letnic at UNSW, that dingoes have a critically important role in the ecology. They have a very important role in habitats as the apex predator controlling macropod populations. The absence of dingo predation on macropods has negative impacts in particular on small mammals. There is considerable evidence that maintaining a viable healthy apex predator population is very important for robust biodiversity, firstly by increasing groundcover for small mammals which is damaged by overgrazing from macropods.

There is substantial evidence where there is a healthy and strong dingo population that fox predation is much more limited and the fox population is also reduced. This is a well-known ecological principal called Trophic Cascades.

5. Dingoes and feral ungulate control.

In the area where I own a rural property (Limeburners Creek NP) there is a feral pig and small deer population. Those population are managed much more successfully in areas that have flourishing dingo population than those areas that don't. Deer is much more frequent in areas, for example around Port Macquarie, where the dingo population is much smaller, than where I have my property. I have extensive camera footage of teams of dingoes hunting feral pigs. Their predation both reduces the population and causes the population to move to other areas where dingoes are not present.

Importantly predation on large feral ungulates requires coherent dingo packs. The killing of dingo populations in national parks and other areas in Australia reduces the pack size and coherence and diminishes the capacity of dingo packs to effectively control feral ungulates in Australia.

6. Management of Dingoes on properties adjoining National Parks.

Dingoes should not be controlled by NPWS, because of potential predation on domesticated animals in neighbouring rural properties. Rural properties that are housing livestock, in particular sheep and goats, which are much more susceptible to dingo predation than cattle, should not run such animals next to national parks where there is a dingo population. The dingo is the apex terrestrial predator in much of mainland Australia. If one chooses to farm domesticated animals that are prone to dingo production in farms in the vicinity of national parks that have a dingo population, NPWS should not be responsible for any predation that occurs. NPWS are no more responsible for dingoes predating on sheep, then they are for wedge tailed eagles that might nest in a park predating free range chickens. If one chooses to graze sheep and goats where there is natural predator then the graziers should protect those animals with non-lethal control measures.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my views to the committee.

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