

INQUIRY INTO DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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INQUIRY INTO DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Big Desert Dingo Research (BDDR) is an independent, field-based research initiative founded by Elisha Martion. Since 2020, Elisha has monitored the Wilkerr dingo population across the Big Desert and Wyperfeld landscape in north-west Victoria, on Wotjobaluk Country. Wilkerr is the Wergaia language word for dingo and is used with permission from Barengi Gadjin Land Council. Since 2023, the research has been undertaken in collaboration with Deakin University and has included long-term camera monitoring, individual identification, field observations and genetic sample collection.

This submission argues that NSW should move away from broad “wild dog” management in national parks and adopt a modern dingo conservation and coexistence framework. Dingoes, including predominantly dingo animals that form part of established wild populations, should be recognised as native animals with ecological, cultural and welfare significance rather than obscured within a pest-control category that also includes feral domestic dogs and hybrids.

The “wild dog” label creates a significant transparency problem. NSW policy defines wild dogs as including dingoes, feral domestic dogs and hybrids, yet research found that only 19.1 per cent of surveyed respondents understood that “wild dog” management included dingoes (1). Recent genome-wide studies also challenge assumptions that Australia’s wild-living canids are predominantly feral domestic dog hybrids and show why management should be based on contemporary genomic evidence and population context (2–5).

The Wilkerr population provides a cautionary case study. Approximately 77 Wilkerr were estimated across the study area (6), and the population is geographically isolated, highly inbred and vulnerable to further loss (2–7). NSW should act before national park dingo populations become similarly isolated, genetically compromised or concealed within pest-control frameworks. This submission recommends clearer terminology, stronger protection in national parks, limits on routine lethal control, improved genetic and ecological monitoring, Traditional Owner-led governance where communities choose to participate, transparent reporting and practical coexistence support for neighbouring landholders.

SUBMISSION

(A) THE GENETIC STATUS OF DINGOES, THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN DINGOES AND DOGS, AND RECENT RESEARCH INTO THE GENETIC PROFILE OF NSW DINGOES

Modern genomic studies show that dingoes are genetically distinct from contemporary domestic dogs (8), with structured dingo populations across Australia and limited evidence of recent domestic dog admixture in many wild populations (2, 3, 5).

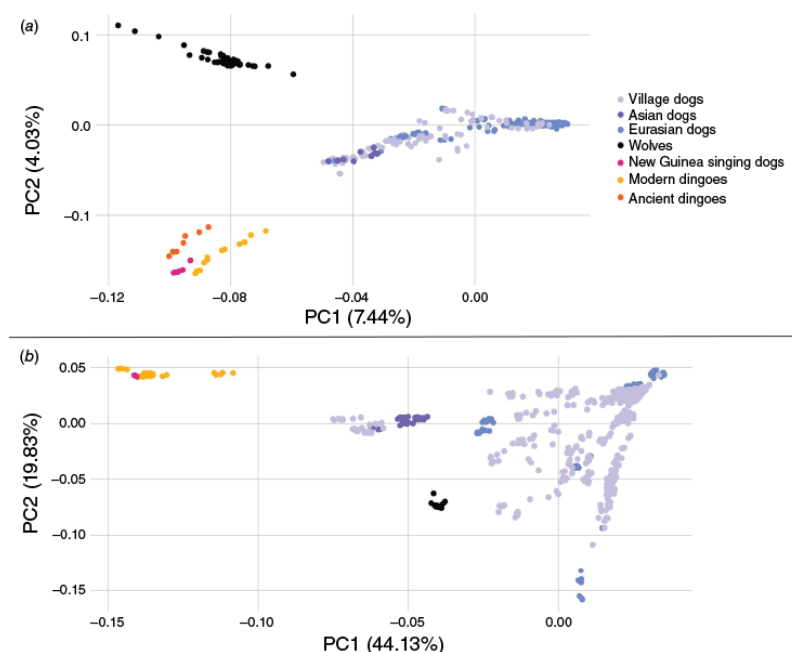


Figure 1 Principal component analysis from Cairns et al. (2025) showing that ancient and modern dingoes cluster closely with New Guinea singing dogs and separately from most contemporary domestic dog reference groups (8).

Dingo management in NSW should be based on current genomic evidence rather than outdated assumptions about visual appearance, skull shape, coat colour or simple purity thresholds (2, 3, 5). Earlier ancestry approaches used fewer genetic markers and could mischaracterise geographic structure or shared ancestry within dingoes as domestic dog ancestry (2, 3). Modern genome-wide studies use far larger genetic datasets and provide a stronger foundation for policy decisions (2, 3, 5).

Contemporary research challenges the idea that Australia's wild-living canids are mostly feral domestic dog hybrids (2–5). Cairns et al. (2023) found limited evidence of domestic dog admixture in wild dingoes and identified distinct dingo populations across Australia (2). Weeks et al. (2025) argued that genetic structure and common ancestry expose the dingo-dog hybrid myth where earlier approaches misread population history (3). Ravishankar et al. (2026) used paleogenomics-informed methods to reassess European dog admixture and support scalable dingo conservation (5).

For policy purposes, any free-living canid identified through genome-wide testing as predominantly dingo ancestry, clustering with a recognised dingo population, or forming part of an established wild dingo population should be classed and managed as a dingo for conservation purposes (2, 3, 5). Where some domestic dog ancestry is detected, animals that remain predominantly dingo in ancestry, population context, ecological function and cultural meaning should not be treated as having no conservation value (2–5, 9).

The term “dingo-dominant” should be used only to describe genetic context; it must not be treated as a separate management category or used to deny conservation value. Rigid ancestry cut-offs risk punishing populations for the effects of historical persecution, fragmentation, bottlenecks and human-caused disruption (2–5).

Hybridisation risk should also be understood in context (3–5). Stable dingo family groups and intact populations can help maintain social and genetic integrity, while lethal control and fragmentation can disrupt territories, alter population density and increase social instability (3–5, 10). NSW should not assume that lethal control protects dingo genetic integrity where the same control may contribute to disruption, isolation and population decline (3–5, 10).

The Wilkerr population demonstrates why this matters (2–6). Available evidence indicates that Wilkerr are a small, geographically isolated and vulnerable dingo population, with the spatial capture-recapture preprint estimating approximately 77 dingoes across the study area (6). Their isolation and inbreeding occur in a landscape shaped by historical land clearing, fragmentation and lethal control. These pressures may have compounded the population’s demographic and genetic vulnerability (2–6).

(B) LEGISLATIVE, REGULATORY AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS GOVERNING THE MANAGEMENT OF DINGOES IN NSW NATIONAL PARKS

NSW policy currently relies heavily on the broad “wild dog” framework (11, 12). NSW material defines wild dogs as including feral dogs, dingoes and hybrids, which demonstrates the policy problem because a native animal can be absorbed into a pest-control category without clear public distinction (1, 11–13).

The legal framework is also inconsistent (13, 14). NSW environment material states that all native birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals, except the dingo, are protected under the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016. Dingoes are expressly excluded from the protected animal framework under Schedule 5 of that Act, so they do not receive the same baseline protection as other native mammals (14).

At the same time, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service policy states that NPWS manages wild dogs under biosecurity obligations while also aiming to allow the conservation of dingoes in areas of parks and reserves with low risk of negative impact (13). This creates a policy tension that should be resolved in favour of conservation within national parks unless a specific, verified and exceptional risk is demonstrated (13, 15).

National parks require a fundamentally different policy starting point from agricultural land. In national parks, the starting presumption should be the conservation of native ecological processes and culturally significant native species (9, 15, 16). Routine or broadscale lethal control of dingoes in national parks risks conflicting with the purpose of conservation land unless it is supported by specific, verified and independently reported evidence.

Recent NSW parliamentary answers show a significant transparency problem. For the 2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25 financial years, NPWS reported 160, 106 and 68 dingoes or wild dogs trapped or shot within NSW national parks by NSW Government employees or contractors. For the same financial years, NPWS reported 1080 bait deployment in the national parks system that included 27,776 ground baits and 380,986 aerial baits in 2022-23, 30,310 ground baits and 391,614 aerial baits in 2023-24, and 34,746 ground baits and 344,148 aerial baits in 2024-25 (17).

These figures are directly relevant to dingo conservation regardless of the stated target species because 1080 fox baits are not species-specific. Fox baits can and do kill dingoes, including adults; a standard fox bait contains 3 mg of 1080, while the estimated lethal dose for an adult dingo is 1.65 mg (18, 19).

The same parliamentary answer states that NPWS does not have an estimate for the number of wild dogs and dingoes in NSW national parks. It also states that expenditure on wild dog management, including dingoes, is not recorded separately from other integrated feral animal management programs. These answers show that NSW can report very large baiting programs while still lacking basic public information on population size, distinct dingo expenditure, conservation status and species-level consequences of control (17).

(C) THE ECOLOGICAL ROLE OF DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS

Dingoes should be managed as native apex predators with ecological functions, not as default pest animals. Top-order predators can influence trophic cascades, mesopredator activity, prey behaviour, carrion use, herbivore pressure and wider ecosystem processes (15, 20–22). The strength and direction of those effects vary among ecosystems and with prey availability, human pressure and management history, which is why local ecological evidence matters (15, 22, 23).

Dingo removal can be counterproductive for biodiversity where it weakens the predator that helps constrain introduced predators (15, 20, 24). Hunter and Letnic (2022) found that baiting was the best predictor of activity for both dingoes and foxes, with dingo activity typically lower and fox activity higher at baited sites (23). They concluded that removal of dingoes may be counterproductive for biodiversity conservation because it may lead to higher fox activity.

Dingoes can also influence large herbivore populations and grazing pressure (15, 20, 25). Evidence from Australian ecological research indicates that dingoes can influence large-herbivore populations, particularly kangaroos, with potential flow-on effects for grazing pressure, vegetation and soil condition (15, 26, 27). Those outcomes should still be tested in the local landscape because ecological effects are context-dependent.

Local diet research from the Big Desert-Wyperfeld-Ngarkat landscape also found that dingoes primarily consumed large native herbivores, while foxes and feral cats disproportionately consumed smaller prey, including native mammals (28).

Diet evidence is especially important in NSW because threatened species predation should be measured rather than assumed from the “wild dog” label. In the Northern Rivers region of NSW, Glen et al. (2006) found that mammalian prey dominated the diets of both red foxes and “wild dogs”, while foxes had a more diverse diet and northern brown bandicoot appeared in fox scats but not dog scats (29). In two subtropical forests in north-eastern New South Wales, McLean et al. (2023) analysed 512 dingo scats and concluded that, under prevailing conditions, dingo predation did not appear to threaten the persistence of the threatened macropods and some other threatened mammals assessed, although the risk to the black-striped wallaby could not be determined (30).

Claridge et al. (2010) recorded threatened native species in canid scats from coastal and near-coastal landscapes in south-eastern Australia, but scat evidence must be interpreted carefully because it can indicate predation, scavenging or consumption (31). Allen and Leung (2012) cautioned that predator scat data should be interpreted with care when assessing predation risk to threatened fauna (32). These studies support targeted ecological assessment rather than automatic broadscale killing.

In Wilkerr habitat, Big Desert Dingo Research camera monitoring and field observations have documented resident dingoes using large home ranges, maintaining social relationships, breeding in family contexts and interacting with fire-affected landscapes. Those observations reinforce that dingo management decisions have ecological consequences beyond the individual animals removed.



Photo 1 Trail-camera image showing multiple Wilkerr interacting as a social group in the Big Desert–Wyperfeld landscape. Dingo populations are socially structured, and the removal of individuals can affect family relationships, territorial stability and dependent young. **Source:** Big Desert Dingo Research & Deakin University.

(D) THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DINGOES FOR FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

Dingo policy should recognise the cultural authority of the relevant Traditional Owners and be informed by their knowledge, priorities and decisions. Dingoes have deep relationships with many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through Country, story, law, kinship, knowledge systems and cultural responsibility (16, 33–35). I do not speak for First Nations peoples or Traditional Owners; this submission draws on published First Nations statements and community-led research and supports direct engagement with the relevant NSW communities.

The National First Nations’ Dingo Declaration states that dingoes are deeply sacred to Australia’s First Nations peoples, are family, and are part of identity, totems, Dreaming, lore, customs, storytelling, ceremonies and songlines. The Declaration calls for a new model centred on Caring for Dingoes on Country and direct involvement of Cultural Custodians in decisions about dingoes (16).

For many First Nations communities, dingoes are not simply wildlife (16, 33, 36, 37). They may be understood as protectors, hunting partners, companions, kin and part of healthy Country (16, 33, 34). The cultural significance expressed by those communities should be central to relevant policy and management, rather than treated as an ancillary consideration after pest-control decisions have been made.

Archaeological and historical research also demonstrates the depth of relationships between First Nations peoples and dingoes. Research and reporting on dingo burials in south-eastern Australia describe intentional burials of companion dingoes and relationships that extended into ceremony, companionship and death (36, 37).

The colonial management label “wild dog” does not reflect the cultural status of dingoes. It can erase dingo identity, cultural meaning and First Nations relationships by reducing culturally significant native animals to a pest-control problem (16, 33).

In my own work, the local population is referred to as Wilkerr, the Wergaia language word for dingo, with permission and engagement through Barengi Gadjin Land Council. Barengi Gadjin Land Council has publicly described Wilkerr as part of Wotjobaluk living cultural heritage, connected to Creation Stories, rock art and the cultural environment, and as more than an animal: a Spiritual Relative (33). I include this as a local example, while recognising that decisions about dingoes in NSW should be developed with the relevant Aboriginal peoples and Cultural Custodians for those places, on terms determined by them.

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

Current government policies and programs can have animal welfare, ecological, genetic and cultural consequences when applied to dingoes in national parks (10, 15, 16, 38, 39). They can also create transparency concerns where dingoes are reported under a generic “wild dog” category and species-level control outcomes are not publicly distinguished (1, 13, 17).

The continued use of lethal control within national parks risks conflicting with the statutory conservation purpose of those lands, particularly where it removes a native top-order predator and disrupts ecological processes (15, 20, 40). Although NSW policy formally recognises dingo conservation, most national-park “wild dog” management programs are expressly aimed at minimising impacts on livestock on adjoining land and are implemented under obligations arising from the Biosecurity Act 2015 (13, 41).

Animal welfare concerns are not theoretical. PestSmart’s National Code of Practice for the humane control of wild dogs identifies ground baiting with 1080, aerial baiting with 1080 and padded-jaw trapping as “conditionally acceptable” methods. The Code explains that conditionally acceptable methods may not be consistently humane and may involve a period of poor welfare before death (42).

PestSmart material also identifies that 1080 baiting can result in a relatively slow death in poisoned animals and that captured animals may be distressed for some time when trapped (42). These acknowledgements should be highly relevant to a parliamentary inquiry into the treatment of dingoes in national parks.

Broad-scale baiting can disrupt dingo social stability and fracture family groups (10). Dingoes are social and territorial animals that form breeding pairs and cooperatively rear young. Removing breeding adults or other key individuals can affect dependent young, pair and territorial stability, dispersal, social organisation and population viability (10, 39, 43, 44). Those risks are particularly serious for small or isolated populations.

Current policy also creates public misunderstanding. If a national park program reports “wild dog” control, the public may not understand that dingoes or dingo-dominant animals are being trapped, poisoned or shot (13, 41). This is especially concerning given that van Eeden et al. (2020) found only 19.1 per cent of respondents knew “wild dog” management included dingoes (1).

(F) DINGO MANAGEMENT INCLUDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCORPORATION OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND LEADERSHIP IN DINGO CONSERVATION IN NATIONAL PARKS

NSW should move towards a dingo conservation and coexistence model rather than simply renaming existing “wild dog” control programs. Management should be evidence-based, transparent, and welfare-conscious, while recognising the cultural authority and chosen participation of the relevant Traditional Owners in decisions affecting dingoes on their Country (16).

Many First Nations peoples have maintained enduring cultural relationships with dingoes and cared for Country over thousands of years (16, 34, 36, 37). Indigenous knowledge systems can provide detailed, place-based understanding of dingo behaviour, ecology, relationships to other species, cultural obligations and

indicators of healthy Country (16, 33, 35). This knowledge should be respected as a valid and important source of evidence and should inform management alongside ecological and genetic research.

The nature and extent of involvement should be determined by the relevant Traditional Owners and their nominated organisations. NSW should provide properly resourced pathways for Indigenous-led and co-designed governance, research, monitoring, management and community education where communities choose to participate.

Reform should be developed transparently with Traditional Owners, researchers, landholders, animal-welfare experts and affected communities. Priorities should include clearer terminology and public reporting, stronger ecological and genetic monitoring, reduced reliance on broadscale lethal control within conservation areas, and greater investment in prevention, coexistence and non-lethal management.

(G) ANY OTHER RELATED MATTERS

NSW wild dog and dingo policy can have consequences beyond individual parks because dingo populations are shaped by landscape connectivity, gene flow and genetic isolation, while policy terminology and long-standing pest framing influence public understanding and management responses (1–3, 5, 7, 45). The Wilkerr population in the Big Desert, Wyperfeld and Ngarkat landscape provides a cautionary case study for NSW.

Wilkerr are a small, isolated and highly inbred dingo population affected by historical lethal control, landscape fragmentation and inconsistent cross-border policy settings (2, 3, 5–7, 46–49). The spatial capture-recapture estimate of approximately 77 dingoes across the Big Desert/Wyperfeld area illustrates the conservation risk when dingoes persist on the landscape but remain small, isolated and vulnerable to further loss (6).



Map 1 The connected Big Desert–Wyperfeld–Ngarkat landscape spans the South Australia–Victoria border. Differing management frameworks across this connected landscape may affect dingo movement, gene flow and the long-term conservation of the Wilkerr population. The red outline identifies the broader landscape discussed in this submission and does not represent a precise population boundary. **Base imagery:** Google; map prepared by Big Desert Dingo Research.

NSW should not wait until its national park dingo populations become isolated, inbred or unrecognised within policy before recognising their conservation value. Genetics, ecology, culture and welfare should be built into management early rather than added after decline becomes difficult to reverse.

Coexistence should not mean landholders are ignored. It should mean public investment is directed toward durable conflict reduction, including improved husbandry, livestock guardian animals, exclusion fencing where appropriate, carcass management, night penning, rapid-response advice and independent monitoring.

Livestock guardian dogs have been shown to be effective in Australian extensive grazing systems. Long-term research by van Bommel and Johnson supports their use as one practical tool for reducing livestock losses to

predators in Australia. Guardian animals should still be deployed with proper support, training, monitoring and animal welfare standards (50).

Public perception is also a related matter. Van Eeden et al. (2020) found that lethal methods for managing dingoes were viewed negatively overall, while non-lethal methods such as fencing and livestock guardian animals were viewed more positively (1). This supports transparent public debate and increased investment in non-lethal options.



Photo 2 Trail-camera image of an adult Wilkerr with a shortened or “stumpy” tail. Physical abnormalities such as this may be associated with the population’s significant level of inbreeding. **Source:** Big Desert Dingo Research & Deakin University.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(A) GENETIC STATUS OF DINGOES AND DISTINCTION BETWEEN DINGOES AND DOGS

1. **Adopt contemporary genomic standards for dingo identification.**
NSW should use genome-wide genetic evidence to assess dingo ancestry, population structure and recent domestic dog introgression, rather than relying on coat colour, morphology, skull measurements, public sightings, outdated limited-marker testing or rigid genetic purity thresholds.
2. **Recognise established wild dingo populations for conservation purposes.**
Free-living canids that are predominantly dingo in ancestry, cluster with recognised dingo populations or form part of an established wild dingo population should be classified and managed as dingoes, including where limited historical domestic dog ancestry is detected.

(B) LEGISLATIVE, REGULATORY AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

3. **Establish a presumption in favour of dingo conservation within NSW national parks.**
NSW legislation and policy should recognise resident dingoes as native animals with ecological, cultural and conservation value. Lethal control within national parks should only occur where a specific, current and exceptional risk has been verified.
4. **Replace blanket “wild dog” terminology with transparent classifications.**
National park policies, operational documents, public communications and reporting should clearly distinguish dingoes, feral domestic dogs, escaped domestic dogs and confirmed recent hybrids.

(C) ECOLOGICAL ROLE OF DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS

5. **Require local ecological assessment before dingo control is authorised.**
Any proposal to lethally control dingoes in a national park should assess local dingo ecology, diet, prey availability, threatened-species interactions, social organisation and the likely consequences of removing resident animals.
6. **Manage resident dingo populations as ecological assets unless evidence demonstrates otherwise.**
Biodiversity-based justifications for dingo control should identify the specific ecological outcome sought, provide local evidence that dingoes are causing the identified harm and explain why their removal is expected to improve that outcome.

(D) CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DINGOES FOR FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

7. **Formally recognise the cultural significance of dingoes in NSW policy.**
Dingo policy should acknowledge the relationships that relevant Aboriginal peoples may hold with dingoes through Country, kinship, story, law, cultural responsibility and living cultural heritage.
8. **Ensure cultural information is used only with appropriate authority and consent.**
Traditional Knowledge, language names and cultural information relating to dingoes should only be incorporated into policy, research or public communications with the permission of the relevant Traditional Owners and under arrangements that protect cultural authority, attribution, confidentiality and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property.

(E) IMPACTS OF CURRENT GOVERNMENT POLICIES

9. **End routine broadscale lethal control of resident dingoes within national parks.**
Lethal control should be limited to verified exceptional circumstances and should be subject to documented necessity, consideration of non-lethal alternatives, animal-welfare assessment and post-control ecological monitoring.

10. Require transparent, species-specific reporting and accountability.

NSW should publish annual data on national park dingo management separately from general pest-animal control, including the location, management objective, target species, methods, bait numbers, costs, animals trapped or shot, non-target impacts and monitoring outcomes.

(F) INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND LEADERSHIP IN DINGO CONSERVATION

11. Develop properly resourced governance arrangements with relevant Traditional Owners.

The form and extent of Traditional Owner leadership, participation or co-governance in dingo conservation should be determined by the relevant First Nations communities and their nominated organisations, rather than prescribed by government agencies.

12. Resource First Nations-led dingo research, monitoring and management.

NSW should provide long-term funding and practical support for Traditional Owner-led or co-designed dingo research, cultural monitoring, Caring for Country programs, community education and management activities where communities choose to participate.

(G) ANY OTHER RELATED MATTERS

13. Consider population connectivity and cumulative regional impacts.

Dingo management should account for movement, gene flow, habitat fragmentation, population isolation and cross-border policy settings rather than treating each national park or control operation as an isolated management unit.

14. Establish a dedicated coexistence and landholder-support program.

NSW should invest in practical conflict prevention for landholders adjoining national parks, including livestock guardian animals, improved husbandry, exclusion measures, carcass management, night penning, rapid-response advice and independent monitoring of livestock losses and intervention outcomes.

CONCLUSION

NSW has an opportunity to move beyond a framework that obscures dingoes within broad “wild dog” control and towards one that protects native predators, respects First Nations cultural authority, supports neighbouring landholders and is accountable to the public. Ending routine lethal control of resident dingoes in national parks does not mean ignoring legitimate livestock concerns. It means investing in prevention, evidence, transparency and coexistence before further ecological, cultural and genetic loss becomes difficult or impossible to reverse.

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