

INQUIRY INTO DINGOES IN NATIONAL PARKS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Introduction:

I, Zeph Thomson, am more than keen to write a submission to the NSW parliamentary inquiry into dingo management in national parks. This is a great opportunity for NSW to get their act together and see that the current management for dingoes is extremely outdated and unsustainable for our native biodiversity / ecosystems and our food systems for generations to come.

a) The Genetic Status of Dingoes: Distinguishing Dingoes from Dogs and Recent Research into NSW Dingoes

Current dingo management policies in New South Wales are largely based on outdated genetic research that relies on only 23 genetic markers. In contrast, contemporary studies now utilise up to 195,000 markers, providing a far more precise understanding of wild canid populations. These advancements reveal that the overwhelming majority of Australia's wild-living canids are dingoes, with hybridisation being relatively uncommon in stable, undisturbed populations.

In New South Wales specifically, [one study](#) showed that three-quarters of sampled wild canids exhibit over 93% contemporary dingo ancestry. This genetic evidence underscores the importance of recognising dingoes as a distinct species, shaped by the Australian environment over thousands of years.

As a dog trainer, I understand the significance of genetics in shaping behaviour. However, the obsession with 100% genetic purity in wild dingo populations is both unrealistic and unfair to dingoes, especially considering [historic hybridisation](#) caused by widespread lethal control. This focus shifts attention away from their ecological function—the critical role they play in maintaining healthy ecosystems.

For millennia, domestic dogs have been selectively bred by humans for specific functions, appearances, or traits. In contrast, dingoes have evolved naturally within Australia's unique and diverse ecosystems, developing behaviours, adaptations, and ecological roles that domestic dogs simply cannot replicate.

Australia is home to a vast variety of climates and environments, from arid deserts to lush rainforests. Over thousands of years, dingoes have bred to be best suited to the

specific regions they inhabit, giving rise to different ecotypes across the continent. These ecotypes are not random variations—they are testaments to the dingo's adaptability and resilience, shaped by the demands of their environment.

The fixation on genetic purity distracts from the bigger picture: dingoes are apex predators and keystone species, and their ecological function—not their genetic makeup—should be the primary focus of conservation efforts. Policies that prioritise genetic purity over ecological health undermine the very qualities that make dingoes irreplaceable in Australia's ecosystems.

Having trained hundreds of dogs across various breeds, I can attest that nothing compares to the complexity of the dingo. Yet, dingoes are often unfairly lumped into the same category as domestic dogs under the misleading misnomer 'wild dog'. This conflation is detrimental for several reasons:

1. It diminishes the ecological value of dingoes as apex predators, whose role in maintaining ecosystem balance is irreplaceable.
2. It fosters misconceptions about dingo ownership and care, creating the false impression that dingoes can be treated like domestic dogs. This is extremely dangerous, as dingoes have entirely different needs, behaviours, and legal restrictions.
3. It shifts blame unfairly onto dingoes for conflicts that are often caused by uncontrolled domestic dogs.

The Issue of Hybridisation: Shifting Responsibility

During my work with landholders in rural areas, interactions with dingoes—often labelled as “wild dogs”—were frequently discussed, with hybridisation cited as a primary concern. However, the focus was almost always on the dingo as the source of the problem. Rarely was accountability placed on dog owners who allow their pets to roam freely.

Unsupervised domestic dogs pose significant risks:

- To livestock and other pets, through attacks or harassment.
- To wildlife, by disrupting local fauna.
- To dingo populations, by increasing the likelihood of hybridisation with fertile, unsterilised pets.

The responsibility for preventing pet dogs from breeding with dingoes does not fall on the dingo—it lies with the dog owner. Effective management must address human behaviour, not penalise dingoes for the actions of irresponsible pet owners.

Ecological Function Over Genetic Purity

Modern conservation science increasingly recognises that ecological function—including the role of dingoes as apex predators—is a critical consideration when assessing wildlife populations. Lethal control methods such as poisoning, trapping, and shooting can disrupt stable dingo pack structures, leading to social instability and increase the likelihood of interbreeding with domestic dogs.

Dingoes differ from domestic dogs in crucial ways:

- Ecological role: Dingoes are apex predators, playing a vital role in maintaining ecosystem health.
- Social structure: Dingoes live in complex, cooperative packs with distinct hierarchies.
- Breeding patterns: Unlike domestic dogs, dingoes breed once a year and form lifelong pair bonds.
- Behaviour: Dingoes are inherently wild, with instincts and survival skills honed by evolution, shaped and taught by their older pack members.

Australia does not have a continent-wide population of feral domestic dogs living independently across ecosystems. The wild canids occupying these landscapes are overwhelmingly dingoes, performing essential ecological functions. Their presence is not a problem to be solved but a solution to be protected.

I'd like to highlight that, through my ten years working as a dog trainer in regional NSW, I've come to understand that roaming domestic dogs—all of which have owners they return to—are a major issue that fuels negative attitudes toward dingoes. I've witnessed firsthand how these dogs, even when they eventually go home, create problems for local communities. Unfortunately, dingoes often bear the blame for conflicts that are, in reality, rooted in human mismanagement of domestic animals.

Legal and Ethical Considerations for Dingo Ownership

I suggest that we must do away with the 'wild dog' terminology that is used as an umbrella term to refer to dingoes, domestic dogs and hybrids of the two. Dingoes (including those with low-moderate levels of historic domestic dog ancestry) must be categorised separately from domestic dogs in all contexts, including pet ownership laws. In New South Wales, breeding dingoes for commercial or personal use should be illegal or some sort of framework put in place specifically for the dingo in captive settings. Allowing dingoes to be treated as a dog perpetuates misunderstandings about their needs and ecological importance, and it risks further dilution of their genetic integrity.

b) Legislative, Regulatory, and Policy Frameworks Governing Dingo Management in New South Wales National Parks

In New South Wales, the term “wild dog” serves as a broad umbrella category that fails to distinguish between dingoes, domestic dogs, and hybrids of the two. Under current legislation, no differentiation is made between roaming, feral or stray domestic dogs and dingoes, despite their fundamentally different ecological roles, genetic status, and legal protections. This lack of distinction has profound implications for dingo conservation and ecosystem health.

The term “wild dog” also perpetuates the myth that Australia faces a feral domestic dog problem, when in reality, the wild canids occupying our landscapes are overwhelmingly dingoes. I have witnessed firsthand the confusion this creates within the community—many people struggle to identify or separate dingoes from roaming domestic dogs, and the term itself obscures the ecological reality of dingoes as a distinct species.

Legal Exemptions and the Absence of Protection

Dingoes are the only native mammal in NSW explicitly excluded from protections under the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016. This exemption permits lethal control measures—including poisoning, trapping, and shooting—to be applied across national parks and other public conservation lands. Such policies directly contradict contemporary ecological and genetic research, which recognises dingoes as a distinct, ecologically critical species. This management of dingoes is also deeply out of step with the outlined objectives of NSW national parks to conserve biodiversity and Aboriginal heritage.

Classification as Pest Animals

Under the Biosecurity Act 2015, dingoes (referred to as “wild dogs”) are classified as priority pest animals in 11 Regional Strategic Pest Animal Management Plans, which are developed and enforced by Local Land Services. This classification drives control efforts, often prioritising lethal methods over non-lethal, ecologically informed alternatives.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) undertakes dingo control on public conservation land as part of its General Biosecurity Duty under the Biosecurity Act 2015. These actions are justified to manage pest animals and align with the priorities outlined in the New South Wales Wild Dog Management Strategy.

Scale of Lethal Control and Lack of Transparency

Data obtained under the Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009 (GIPA Act 2009) reveals the shocking scale of lethal control targeting dingoes:

- Over 1.5 million 1080 poison baits were deployed by the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) between 2020 and 2025.

This statistic underscores the extent to which dingoes are managed as pests, despite their irreplaceable role as apex predators in maintaining ecosystem balance. Moreover, the time, funding, and resources dedicated to these lethal control measures could be far more effectively allocated to initiatives that align with genuine conservation goals, such as:

- Bush regeneration projects, which restore degraded ecosystems, focus on clearing invasive flora, and support biodiversity.
- Data collection and research, particularly on dingo populations, their ecological roles, and non-lethal management strategies.

Redirecting resources toward these areas would not only enhance conservation outcomes but also align NSW's policies with modern ecological science.

Policy Settings Out of Step with Science

Current policy frameworks continue to treat dingoes within broad pest management frameworks, even as contemporary ecological and genetic research increasingly recognises them as:

- A distinct native species with unique ecological functions.
- Critical to ecosystem health as apex predators.
- Genetically distinct from domestic dogs.

This disconnect between policy and science is not only ecologically harmful but also legally and ethically unjustifiable. Dingoes require management frameworks that reflect their ecological importance, not their misclassification as pests.

Next steps for NSW could include:

- Abolishing the 'wild dog' terminology and distinguishing dingoes from domestic dogs across legislation.
- Reallocating resources from lethal control to non-lethal coexistence tools, bush regeneration, Indigenous-led research, and community education.
- Aligning policies with contemporary science to recognise dingoes as apex predators and cultural keystone species.

c) The Ecological Role of Dingoes in National Parks

Healthy, thriving ecosystems worldwide rely on the presence of apex predators to regulate species populations and drive grazing movements that maintain ecological balance. In Australia, dingoes are the only native canid and are recognised as a critical apex predator and keystone species. Their role in national parks is not just beneficial—it is essential for maintaining the health and resilience of these ecosystems.

Regulating Herbivore Populations

Dingoes play a pivotal role in controlling populations of kangaroos and wallabies, which, if left unchecked, can place unsustainable pressure on vegetation and the wider landscape. By preying on these herbivores, dingoes help reduce overgrazing, allowing vegetation to recover and supporting biodiversity.

Their ecological impact extends further:

- **Goat eradication:** Dingoes have been observed eradicating feral goat populations from certain landscapes. Goats are highly destructive to Australian environments, consuming native flora and accelerating land degradation until landscapes become barren and eroded.
- **Fox suppression:** Dingoes suppress fox populations through territorial competition and predation, reducing pressure on smaller native wildlife. Research suggests that stable dingo populations suppress fox numbers more effectively than poison baiting programs alone.
- **Cat control:** Dingoes also suppress feral cat populations through territorial competition and predation, further protecting native species from one of Australia's most devastating invasive predators.
- **Pig management:** Dingoes help suppress feral pig populations, reducing the ecological damage caused by these invasive animals, which contribute to soil erosion, habitat destruction, and the spread of weeds.
- **Management of their own species:** Dingoes are highly territorial animals and naturally regulate their own populations. Their social structures and territorial behaviour ensure that their numbers remain in balance with available resources, reducing the need for any human intervention.

The Consequences of Apex Predator Removal

The loss of apex predators like dingoes disrupts ecological balance, triggering trophic cascades with far-reaching and often irreversible consequences. Without dingoes to fulfil their role as natural regulators, ecosystems suffer from a domino effect of degradation, including:

- **Vegetation decline due to overgrazing by herbivores.**

- Habitat degradation, as unchecked herbivore populations degrade soil and plant communities.
- Increased pressure on threatened species, which struggle to compete for resources or face heightened predation from invasive species like foxes and cats.

Tragically, over the last 50 years, Australia has witnessed a significant decline in small native wildlife. During this same period, massive amounts of 1080 poison have been deployed in an attempt to address the symptoms of ecosystem collapse—without addressing the root cause. The solution is clear:

- Stop baiting dingoes, which destabilises ecosystems and undermines their ecological role.
- Adopt alternative approaches that recognise and harness the natural regulatory power of dingoes.
- Let dingoes do what they do best: maintain balance, restore ecological function, and protect biodiversity.

(d) The Cultural Significance of Dingoes for First Nations Communities

For many First Nations peoples across New South Wales and Australia, dingoes hold profound cultural significance. They are woven into stories, dance, art, lore, kinship systems, and cultural responsibilities to Country. Far more than a native species, dingoes are teachers, protectors, and integral parts of healthy Country for many Cultural Custodians.

Dingoes are deeply embedded in many Cultural Custodians traditions, serving as:

- Cultural symbols in stories, art, and ceremonies.
- Teachers and guides, embodying resilience, adaptability, and ecological wisdom.
- Protectors of Country, playing a role in maintaining the balance of ecosystems that sustain communities.

The 2023 First Nations Dingo Forum brought together 100 Traditional Owners from 20 nations across Australia. This historic gathering led to the development of the National First Nations Dingo Declaration, which calls for:

- A new approach to dingo management, centred around “Caring for Dingoes on Country”.
- Greater involvement of Cultural Custodians in decision-making processes regarding dingo conservation and management.

Evidence of Deep Cultural Bonds

The relationship between First Nations peoples and dingoes is ancient and sacred, supported by oral histories and archaeological research:

- Companionship and burial practices: Evidence shows that some Cultural Custodians buried companion dingoes in ways consistent with ancestral and ceremonial practices, reflecting the deep respect and affection for these animals.
- Cultural continuity: These practices highlight the enduring spiritual and practical connection between dingoes and First Nations communities, spanning generations.

A Call for Recognition and Collaboration

The National First Nations Dingo Declaration represents a strong Aboriginal perspective on dingoes, advocating for:

- Cultural leadership in dingo management.
- Respect for dingoes as kin, not pests.
- Collaborative approaches that supports Traditional Ecological Knowledge in partnership with modern conservation science.

Recognising the cultural significance of dingoes is not only a matter of justice and respect—it is essential for holistic and sustainable management of these animals and the lands they inhabit.

e) The Impact of Current Government Policies and Programs for Dingo Management in National Parks

Current government policies and programs for dingo management in NSW National Parks rely heavily on lethal control methods, including:

- 1080 poison baiting
- Trapping
- Shooting

While these methods are intended to address conflicts, they fail to consider the ecological and cultural importance of dingoes and undermine long-term conservation goals.

Ecological Disruption Caused by Lethal Control

Lethal control measures disrupt stable dingo family groups and pack structures, which are critical for:

- Social stability within dingo populations.
- Territorial integrity, which helps regulate herbivore and predator populations.

The removal of dingoes from ecosystems triggers trophic cascades, leading to:

- Increases in introduced predators (e.g., foxes and feral cats), which prey on native wildlife.
- Higher herbivore pressure (e.g., kangaroos, wallabies, and feral goats), resulting in overgrazing and habitat degradation.

Moreover, the disruption of dingo family structures can increase the likelihood of hybridisation with domestic dogs, further compromising the genetic integrity of wild dingo populations.

Animal Welfare Concerns

Trapping and baiting, raises serious welfare concerns:

- Trapped dingoes are often left unable to access food, water, or shelter for extended periods.
- The stress and suffering caused by trapping contradicts ethical wildlife management and undermines public trust in government programs.
- 1080 is non selective meaning any animal that ingests the bait can die. This major flaw can put other threatened wildlife at risk as well as domestic animals.

Policy Failures and Lack of Scientific and Cultural Alignment

Current dingo management programs in national parks fail to reflect contemporary ecological science or incorporate cultural perspectives. Key issues include:

1. Misaligned priorities: Management in National Parks is largely focused on agricultural protection rather than biodiversity conservation or ecological balance.
2. Lack of research funding: No dedicated funding is allocated for research and development into non-lethal coexistence strategies for agricultural properties neighbouring National Parks. This omission prevents the exploration of sustainable, science-based alternatives to lethal control that support landholder interests and wild dingo populations.
3. Exclusion of First Nations voices: Cultural Custodians have not been made central decisionmakers regarding dingo management, causing cultural harm.

The Hidden Cost of Dingo Control: Orphaned Pups and a System Failing Them

Government-sanctioned dingo control programs in NSW national parks don't just target adult dingoes—they leave behind a trail of orphaned pups every year. During breeding season, adults are killed through poisoning, trapping, and shooting, often without consideration for the dependent pups left behind. These pups rely entirely on their parents for survival, learning to hunt, navigate their territory, and avoid threats. When their parents are gone, their chances of making it to adulthood are tragically low.

Even when pups are rescued, the challenges don't end. Specialist dingo rescues and shelters—already stretched thin—are forced to take on the burden of caring for animals with complex behavioural and social needs. Most general animal shelters aren't equipped to meet these requirements, as dingoes differ significantly from domestic dogs in everything from diet to social structure. Only a small number of organisations in NSW have the expertise to care for them long-term.

But the system offers these rescued pups no path back to the wild. Under NSW law, releasing a dingo into its natural habitat is illegal and punishable by heavy fines. This means rescued pups are condemned to a life in captivity, with no opportunity to live as they were meant to.

The inconsistency in how dingoes are treated under the law only deepens the problem. Wild dingoes are classified as pests under biosecurity legislation and excluded from protection under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*, while rescued dingoes in captivity are legally considered domestic dogs under the *Companion Animals Act 1998*. This forces a wild animal into a domestic setting that can't possibly meet its needs.

Unlike most native wildlife, dingoes lack species-specific regulations for private keeping—no standards for enclosure design, enrichment, breeding, or even the competency of those who keep them. Most other native species are protected by permit systems that restrict ownership to trained individuals and enforce minimum welfare standards. Dingoes, however, fall into a legal grey area, leaving them vulnerable to poor treatment and exploitation.

The lack of oversight has led to a troubling trend: backyard breeders in NSW openly advertise dingo puppies for sale on platforms like Gumtree, exploiting a loophole that treats wild animals as if they were domestic pets. This unregulated trade not only normalises the keeping of dingoes in unsuitable conditions but also fuels a cycle of breeding that prioritises profit over welfare.

While I want NSW to remain a state where orphaned dingo pups can find sanctuary, the current system fails to protect both the animals and their ecological role. Without a

licensing framework that sets clear standards for care and prohibits breeding and commercial trade, dingoes will continue to suffer the consequences of policies that prioritise control over compassion.

A Call for Reform

The current approach to dingo management is outdated, ineffective, and ethically questionable. To align with modern ecological science, animal welfare standards, and cultural respect, NSW must:

- Shift away from lethal control methods and invest in non-lethal, evidence-based strategies to support landholders neighbouring national parks.
- Fund research into coexistence practices that protect both agricultural interests and ecological health.
- Ensure First Nations peoples are key decision-makers regarding dingo management, recognising their cultural authority and ecological expertise.

Only through holistic, inclusive, and science-based management can NSW ensure the survival and ecological role of dingoes for future generations.

f) Dingo Management: Opportunities for Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge and Leadership in Conservation

First Nations peoples have cared for dingoes and Country for millennia, maintaining deep, ongoing relationships that continue to support healthy landscapes and biodiversity outcomes benefiting all Australians. These relationships are built on place-based knowledge, cultural responsibility, and a holistic understanding of ecosystems—knowledge that remains vital today.

Indigenous knowledge systems offer detailed insights into dingo behaviour, ecology, and their role in ecosystem function, complementing and strengthening western scientific approaches. This knowledge includes:

- Traditional ecological practices that have sustained dingo populations and their ecological roles.
- Culturally informed monitoring techniques, such as tracking, storytelling, and seasonal observations.
- Holistic perspectives that recognise dingoes as kin, teachers, and essential components of Country.

Across the continent, including in NSW, Indigenous ranger groups are increasingly leading monitoring and management programs for dingoes on Country, providing critical on-ground insights into populations, behaviour, and ecological interactions. This leadership is particularly significant given the existing gaps in comprehensive, statewide data on wild dingo populations. Indigenous rangers are ensuring:

- Culturally grounded data collection, ensuring that management strategies align with community values and ecological realities.
- Long-term monitoring that reflects the seasonal and cultural significance of dingoes.
- Community engagement, fostering trust and collaboration

Dingo conservation and biodiversity outcomes would be benefited by:

- Expanded roles in National Park governance and decision-making.
- Co-design of management plans that prioritise Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) alongside scientific research.
- Cultural burning and land management practices that support dingo habitat and prey availability.

Ensuring Cultural Custodians are key decision makers would improve cultural, ecological, and conservation outcomes, with flow-on benefits for ecosystem health and biodiversity. Indigenous leadership ensures that management strategies are not only scientifically robust but also culturally appropriate and sustainable.

Co-management approaches offer a practical framework to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems with western science in National Parks management. This collaboration improves:

- Governance, by ensuring decisions are inclusive, transparent, and accountable.
- On-ground effectiveness, by combining traditional practices with modern techniques.
- Cultural legitimacy, by recognising and respecting First Nations peoples as custodians of Country.

The principles outlined in the National First Nations Dingo Declaration provide a relevant foundation to inform future policy development and support more inclusive and effective dingo management approaches. By aligning NSW dingo management with this Declaration, the government can:

- Honour Indigenous rights and responsibilities to care for Country.
- Enhance ecological outcomes through culturally informed practices.

- Build trust and reconciliation with First Nations communities.

Next steps for NSW could include:

- Expanding Indigenous ranger program funding to include dingo conservation.
- Establishing co-management agreements for National Parks where Cultural Custodians can lead dingo management.
- Funding research that centres Indigenous knowledge alongside scientific methods.
- Developing policy frameworks that formally recognise dingoes as cultural and ecological species.

(g) Other Related Matters

Despite decades of lethal control measures, the risk of predation on farmed animals persists. In fact, some studies suggest that broad-scale 1080 baiting of dingoes may even exacerbate the risk of calf predation. So why keep this current practice up when all that seems to be happening is a continued loss of Australian threatened species and potential predation on livestock.

Currently, there is no extension services in New South Wales to support landholders in implementing non-lethal predator coexistence strategies. This gap leaves farmers without the guidance or resources needed to adopt coexistence practices. Redirecting funding from broad-scale 1080 baiting, trapping, and shooting in National Parks could instead provide critical support to neighbouring landholders through:

- Education and training on non-lethal deterrent methods.
- Financial incentives for adopting proven coexistence strategies.
- Technical assistance to implement and maintain these systems.

Proven Non-Lethal Solutions

Research and landholder experiences demonstrate that Livestock Guardian Dogs (LGDs) are highly effective in reducing or eliminating predation on livestock by dingoes. Beyond their primary role, LGDs provide additional benefits, including:

- Deterring macropods (kangaroos and wallabies) from grazing paddocks.
- Protecting livestock from foxes and birds of prey.
- Acting as a psychological deterrent to potential predators.

Similarly, there is widespread anecdotal evidence from landholders that donkeys are effective guardians against canid predators. Given their potential, there is a strong opportunity for the NSW Government to:

- Support robust trials into the use of livestock guardian donkeys, particularly for properties neighbouring National Parks.
- Invest in research and development to refine and scale these strategies.

A Path Forward: Investment in Coexistence

To ensure landholder interests are protected while retaining dingoes in the environment to fulfil their ecological roles, NSW must prioritise:

1. Research and development into scalable coexistence strategies.
2. Funding for extension services to support landholders to successfully implement coexistence strategies.
3. Incentives for adopting non-lethal deterrents, such as LGDs and donkeys.
4. Collaboration with agricultural sectors to integrate these solutions into broader land management practices.

By shifting the focus from lethal control to coexistence, NSW can reduce conflicts, protect biodiversity, and honour the ecological and cultural significance of dingoes.