

The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

**CULLING OF LARGE FERAL ANIMALS IN THE
NORTHERN TERRITORY**

**Report by the Senate Select Committee
on Animal Welfare**

June 1991

© Commonwealth of Australia 1991

ISBN 0 642 16282 4

Printed in Australia by A. J. LAW, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

Appointment of the Committee

The Committee was formed on 17 November 1983 and reappointed on 22 February 1985, 22 September 1987 and 9 May 1990.

Members

Senator Bryant Burns, Queensland, *Chairman* (from May 1990)

Senator David Brownhill, New South Wales, *Deputy Chairman* (from July 1985)

Senator Robert Bell, Tasmania (from May 1990)

Senator Paul Calvert, Tasmania (from September 1987)

Senator Barney Cooney, Victoria (from July 1985)

Senator Nick Sherry, Tasmania (from August 1990)

A list of former members of the Committee appears at Appendix 1 to this report.

Committee Secretary

Mr N. Bessell

The Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Tel: (06) 277 3510

CONTENTS

	Page
List of Abbreviations	ix
Recommendations and Major Conclusions	xi
Preface	xvii
CHAPTER 1	
Large Feral Animals in the Northern Territory	1
1.1 to 1.4 Introduction	1
1.5 to 1.7 Water Buffalo	1
1.8 to 1.13 Horses	3
1.14 and 1.15 Cattle	5
1.16 to 1.18 Camels	5
1.19 and 1.20 Donkeys	6
1.21 to 1.23 Pigs	6
1.24 Other Feral Animals	6
Endnotes	7
CHAPTER 2	
Responsibility for Management and Control of Feral Animals	9
2.1 to 2.4 Introduction	9
2.5 Role of the Commonwealth Government	9
2.6 to 2.11 Department of Primary Industries and Energy	9
2.12 to 2.19 Commonwealth — State Co-ordination	10
2.20 to 2.25 Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service	12
2.26 Responsibilities of the Northern Territory	
Government	13
2.27 to 2.33 Legislative Position	13
2.34 to 2.49 Programs for Control	15
Endnotes	18
CHAPTER 3	
The Impact on the Northern Territory of Large Feral Animals	21
3.1 to 3.4 Introduction	21
3.5 to 3.9 Environmental Impact	21
3.10 to 3.13 Horses	22
3.14 to 3.17 Buffalo	24
3.18 and 3.19 Other Large Feral Animals	24
3.20 to 3.28 Impact on Native Fauna and Flora	25
3.29 to 3.31 Land Management	27
3.32 to 3.36 Health Impact	27

3.37 to 3.40	Economic Impact	28
3.41 to 3.44	Research on Impact of Feral Animals	30
3.45 to 3.47	Conclusions	30
Endnotes		31
CHAPTER 4		
Evidence on the Need to Control Feral Animals		33
4.1 and 4.2	Introduction	33
4.3 to 4.14	Views on Control of Feral Animals	33
4.15 to 4.19	Government Policies	35
4.20 to 4.22	Conclusions	36
Endnotes		37
CHAPTER 5		
Current Methods of Control		39
5.1 to 5.4	Introduction	39
5.5 to 5.21	Implementation of Methods of Control	39
5.22	Muster and Transport of Feral Animals	42
5.23 to 5.32	Buffalo	42
5.33 and 5.34	Conclusions	44
5.35 to 5.54	Horses	44
5.55 to 5.60	Conclusions	47
5.61 to 5.78	Helicopter Shooting	48
5.79 to 5.84	Conclusions	51
Endnotes		53
CHAPTER 6		
Concerns about Helicopter Shooting		57
6.1 and 6.2	Introduction	57
6.3 to 6.10	Training of Shooters	57
6.11	Conclusions	59
6.12 to 6.15	Accreditation of Shooters	59
6.16 to 6.20	Conclusions	60
6.21 to 6.23	Supervision of Shooting	60
6.24	Conclusions	61
6.25 to 6.32	Strategies for Control	61
6.33 to 6.35	Conclusions	63
6.36	Operational Matters	63
6.37 to 6.39	Firearms and Ammunition	63
6.40	Conclusion	64
6.41 to 6.46	Wounding of Animals	64
6.47	Conclusions	65
6.48 to 6.53	Fly-Back Procedures	65
6.54 and 6.55	Conclusions	66
Endnotes		67

CHAPTER 7		
Long-term Control Methods: Fertility Control		69
7.1 to 7.5	Introduction	69
7.6 and 7.7	Fertility Control	69
7.8 to 7.12	Feasibility of Fertility Control	70
7.13 to 7.16	Drugs and Techniques	71
7.17 to 7.20	Delivery Mechanisms	72
7.21 to 7.25	Population Dynamics	72
7.26 to 7.29	The Need for Research	73
7.30 to 7.34	Conclusions	74
Endnotes		75
CHAPTER 8		
National Perspective on the Control of Feral Animals		77
8.1 and 8.2	Introduction	77
8.3 to 8.11	Co-ordinated National Approach	77
8.12 to 8.18	Existing and Proposed Mechanisms for Co-ordination	79
8.19 to 8.22	Conclusions	81
Endnotes		82
APPENDICES		
Appendix 1	Former Members of the Committee	83
Appendix 2	Individuals and Organisations that provided the Committee with Submissions	85
Appendix 3	Witnesses who appeared before the Committee	87
Appendix 4	Maps showing national distribution of large feral animal	89

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAC	Australian Agricultural Council
ANZFAS	Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies
ANPWS	Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service
BRR	Bureau of Rural Resources
BTEC	Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign
DPIE	Department of Primary Industries and Energy
NCCAW	National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare
RSPCA	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
SCAW	Sub-Committee on Animal Welfare
VPC	Vertebrate Pests Committee

RECOMMENDATIONS AND MAJOR CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 2: Responsibility for Management and Control of Feral Animals

Recommendation 1: that the Department of Primary Industries and Energy publish Model Codes of Practice on Animal Welfare in a more compact, durable and professional format. The Committee further recommends that the Department, in conjunction with State and Territory Governments, ensure that these Codes are readily available to interested parties, including government and non-government personnel. (paragraph 2.18)

Chapter 3: The Impact on the Northern Territory of Large Feral Animals

Conclusions: On the basis of evidence presented during the inquiry, the Committee is left in no doubt that feral animals pose a major problem. In particular, horses, buffalo and other large feral animals have a significant adverse impact on the environment of the Northern Territory. This manifests itself in degradation of the landscape and destruction of vulnerable Australian species of flora and fauna. Feral animals also have the potential to exacerbate problems arising from the introduction of exotic diseases.

Although in many instances the impact of feral animals is patently obvious and widely recognised, the Committee considers that quantitative research should be undertaken on the agricultural and environmental damage caused by individual species of feral animals. Specifically, the Committee considers that research should investigate the densities of feral populations, impacts and concomitant economic effects. In the Committee's view, such research would provide a better understanding of the damage caused by feral animals and might result in more practical and humane strategies of control. (paragraphs 3.45 and 3.46)

Recommendation 2: that the Commonwealth Government, through its various research and funding agencies, extend research into the agricultural, environmental and economic impact of feral animals. (paragraph 3.47)

Chapter 4: Evidence on the Need to Control Feral Animals

Conclusions: The Committee agrees with the overwhelming opinion expressed in evidence that feral animals and, in particular, large feral animals in the Northern Territory, such as horses, buffalo and donkeys, must be controlled. Ideally, total eradication should be the goal of control programs.

In the Committee's view, animal welfare considerations must be taken into account when programs are developed to control or eradicate feral animals. In particular, the Committee considers that specific methods of control must be implemented in a manner that causes a minimum of suffering to animals. (paragraphs 4.20 and 4.21)

Chapter 5: Current Methods of Control

Muster and Transport – Buffalo

Conclusions: The Committee recognises that the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service places considerable importance on animal welfare considerations. Nevertheless, the Committee is of the view that the Service must take a more positive role to safeguard the welfare of feral animals and, in particular, buffalo removed by private contractors from Kakadu National Park. (paragraph 5.33)

Recommendation 3: that the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service let contracts for removal of feral animals only to those private contractors who can satisfy the Service that they pay due attention to the welfare of animals. Additionally, contracts for the removal of feral animals should contain provisions for immediate termination if there is evidence of maltreatment or inattention to the welfare of stock. (paragraph 5.34)

Muster and Transport – Horses

Conclusions: On the basis of evidence presented during the inquiry, the Committee registers strong concerns about the welfare of feral horses being transported, particularly over long distances. The Committee considers that the prolonged stress and trauma associated with this practice is unconscionable and cannot be condoned. The inherent welfare problems involved in handling, transporting and holding feral horses are sufficient to raise serious questions about their continuing use in the export horse meat trade. (paragraph 5.55)

Recommendation 4: that the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, in consultation with other members of the Australian Agricultural Council, review the continuing use of feral horses in the export horse-meat industry, with particular regard to animal welfare issues associated with this industry. (paragraph 5.56)

Conclusion: If feral horses continue to be transported and used for commercial purposes, the Committee considers that the study by the Bureau of Rural Resources entitled **Welfare of Horses Being Transported** contains positive recommendations on improvements to the welfare of feral horses being transported. (paragraph 5.57)

Recommendation 5: that the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, in consultation with other members of the Australian Agricultural Council, consider, and where appropriate, implement the recommendations contained in the working paper by the Bureau of Rural Resources on the **Welfare of Horses Being Transported**. (paragraph 5.58)

Conclusion: If feral horses continue to be transported and used for commercial purposes, the Committee reaffirms its view that **the Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals: Destruction or Capture, Handling and Marketing of Feral Livestock Animals** should be published in an authoritative format and made readily available. (paragraph 5.59)

Conclusion: The Committee places on record its strong concerns about the use of double-decked vehicles to transport feral horses. The Committee intends to address this matter in greater detail in its forthcoming report on Transport of Livestock within Australia. (paragraph 5.60)

Helicopter Shooting

Conclusions: Having observed the rugged and inaccessible terrain that feral animals inhabit in the Northern Territory, the Committee recognises that the preferred and most humane method of shooting from the ground is seldom a feasible method of controlling large populations of feral animals. Under these circumstances, the Committee considers that shooting from helicopters is the only practical method of control. In the Committee's view, helicopter shooting represents the most humane method of controlling feral animals in inaccessible locations.

This conclusion weighs heavily with the Committee, as several witnesses recognised that helicopter shooting will invariably result in the inhumane death of some animals. This reality, however, must be weighed against the threat feral animals pose to native flora and fauna, the environment and public health. It must also be balanced against the distressing and agonising death of thousands of feral animals occasioned by drought and starvation.

Having considered all the evidence, the Committee is convinced that helicopter shooting of feral animals should continue. Nevertheless, it recognises, as was suggested in evidence, that "it is the best of a bad lot".

It is the Committee's view that procedures associated with helicopter shooting must be improved. These improvements will ensure a professional, responsible approach to helicopter shooting and in turn reduce the possibility of animals suffering. (paragraphs 5.81 to 5.84)

Chapter 6: Concerns about Helicopter Shooting

Training of Shooters

Conclusions: The Committee is satisfied that the Northern Territory Government recognises the importance of proper training and testing of personnel involved in the shooting of feral animals from helicopters and conducts specific programs to achieve this objective. The Committee considers that the Northern Territory Government and its agencies should maintain the highest possible standards in training and marksmanship, in order to minimise the suffering of animals. The Committee encourages similar training programs in other States involved in feral animal control by helicopter shooting. (paragraph 6.11)

Accreditation of Shooters

Conclusions: The Committee is of the view that only personnel approved by government authorities should shoot feral animals from helicopters. This should apply to government officers and private individuals. The Committee's conclusion on this matter is based on two considerations.

Firstly, evidence to the Committee confirmed that there are considerable risks and dangers associated with helicopter shooting. In order to ensure the safety of all personnel, it is highly desirable that only shooters with appropriate skills and experience are involved in these operations.

Secondly, in the Committee's view, it is essential that the welfare of animals, and in particular the elimination of woundings and associated suffering, should be a primary objective of helicopter culling operations. This objective can only be achieved if responsible and highly skilled personnel are used.

In order to ensure that only properly trained and authorised shooters are involved in helicopter culling operations, the Committee considers that a system of accreditation or licensing is necessary. Such a system would enhance safety and animal welfare considerations and foster a professional and responsible approach to helicopter shooting. (paragraphs 6.16 to 6.19)

Recommendation 6: that the Commonwealth, Northern Territory and other State Governments introduce accreditation or licensing schemes for government and non-government personnel involved in helicopter culling operations. (paragraph 6.20)

Supervision of Shooting

Conclusions: The Committee considers that all helicopter shooting of feral animals must be supervised and co-ordinated by government authorities. In the Committee's view, this supervision should include appropriate notification, approval, monitoring and reporting mechanisms. (paragraph 6.24)

Strategies for Control

Conclusion: The Committee concludes that programs to control feral animals should be planned, systematic and sustained. In the Committee's view, strategies with these features will result in more effective control and will heighten awareness of animal welfare responsibilities. (paragraph 6.33)

Recommendation 7: that the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, in consultation with other members of the Australian Agricultural Council, examine ways in which feral animal populations, reduced by activities associated with BTEC, may continue to be controlled following the completion of BTEC in 1992. (paragraph 6.35)

Firearms and Ammunition

Conclusion: The Committee endorses the view that only firearms and ammunition that are suitable for the species and appropriate for the task should be used in the culling of feral animals. (paragraph 6.40)

Wounding of Animals

Conclusions: The Committee recognises that the shooting of feral animals, particularly from helicopters, may result in injury and suffering to some animals. It is imperative that this suffering is kept to a minimum. The Committee considers that a professional and responsible approach to helicopter shooting will achieve this objective. The Committee also considers that data should be compiled on apparent cause of death, particularly when field post-mortems are conducted on feral animals. (paragraph 6.47)

Fly-Back Procedures

Conclusions: In the Committee's view, prompt follow-up procedures are necessary to ensure that feral animals shot from helicopters have been killed.

The Committee accepts that existing instructions and codes on helicopter shooting recognise the need for this procedure. However, the Committee considers that procedures to supervise helicopter shooting and, in particular, reporting mechanisms advocated by the Committee, should include confirmation of fly-back procedures by the pilot and shooter involved in the operation. (paragraphs 6.54 and 6.55)

Chapter 7: Long-term Control Methods: Fertility Control

Recommendation 8: that the Commonwealth Government, through relevant Departmental, industry and research agencies and inter-governmental arrangements, accord priority to research into non-lethal, humane and long-term methods of control of feral animals. (paragraph 7.34)

Chapter 8: National Perspective on the Control of Feral Animals

Recommendation 9: that the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy assess current and proposed mechanisms for national co-ordination of measures to alleviate the problems associated with vertebrate pests, including feral animals. (paragraph 8.21)

Recommendation 10: that the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, in consultation with relevant Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers, consider the establishment of a national committee or task force to provide a concerted and co-ordinated approach to the control or elimination of feral animals. (paragraph 8.22)

PREFACE

Terms of Reference

In November 1983, the Senate established a Select Committee to inquire into and report upon the following matter:

the question of animal welfare in Australia, with particular reference to:

- (a) interstate and overseas commerce in animals;
- (b) wildlife protection and harvesting;
- (c) animal experimentation;
- (d) codes of practice of animal husbandry for all species; and
- (e) the use of animals in sport.

To date, the Committee has presented seven reports to the Senate. These are:

Export of Live Sheep from Australia	1985
Dolphins and Whales in Captivity	1985
Kangaroos	1988
Animal Experimentation	1989
Sheep Husbandry	1989
Intensive Livestock Production	1990
Racing Industry (Interim Report)	1990

On 31 May 1990, the Senate resolved that the Committee inquire into and report upon the implications for animal welfare of the culling of large feral animals in the Northern Territory. The Senate also resolved that the Committee should present its report on or before the last sitting day of the Autumn sittings in 1991.

Conduct of the Inquiry

Following the referral of the inquiry to the Committee, advertisements calling for submissions were placed in major national and metropolitan newspapers.

The Committee received 16 submissions. A list of individuals and organisations that made specific submissions on the culling of large feral animals in the Northern Territory appears in Appendix 2. The Committee also considered relevant sections of the 593 general submissions lodged with the Committee since 1983, and in particular relevant evidence presented to the Committee's concurrent inquiry into the transport of livestock within Australia.

The Committee held six public hearings. These were as follows:

Darwin:	21 November 1990
Alice Springs:	22 November 1990
Sydney:	30 November 1990
Canberra:	10 December 1990
Melbourne:	14 December 1990
Canberra:	17 December 1990

The witnesses who appeared before the Committee are listed in Appendix 3.

Members of the Committee inspected buffalo habitats in Kakadu National Park, the Gagudju Association's buffalo project in the Park and received briefings on the management and control of feral animals in Kakadu from officers of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Jabiru. Committee members received briefings on feral horses from officers of the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory in Alice Springs and inspected habitats of feral horses in central Australia. The Committee also visited the abattoir at Peterborough in South Australia where feral horses are received and processed for the export horse-meat trade.

Acknowledgments

The Committee expresses its appreciation to those who made written submissions to the inquiry and who co-operated with the Committee by giving public evidence. Those who made submissions but did not appear before the Committee may be assured that their submissions have been taken into account in the writing of this report.

The Committee is grateful for the assistance of those who arranged inspections and conducted briefings. In particular, the Committee wishes to thank Mr Andrew Skeat, Director-North, Kakadu National Park, Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Mr David Lindner, an adviser to the Gagudju Association and Dr Ken Johnson, Mr David Berman and Mr Ross Bryan, officers of the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory in Alice Springs.

Bryant Burns
Chairman

The Senate
Canberra
June 1991



*Members of the Committee at Kakadu National Park.
(LtoR) Mr Andrew Skeat (ANPWS), Senator Bryant Burns, Mr David Lindner (Gagudju Association) and Senators Paul Calvert, Robert Bell and Barney Cooney.*