CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The sheep, *Ovis aries*, evolved in the mountains of Eurasia about two and a half million years ago and was one of the earliest species to be domesticated.[1] For 12 000 years, sheep and man have lived in a symbiotic relationship. The sheep has provided man with food and clothing; man has provided the sheep with nourishment and protection from predation.

1.2 Feral sheep are known to exist in parts of the world, although it is unlikely that they do so in Australia. Australian sheep raised in the pastoral zone have frequently been described as semi-feral.[2] It can be assumed, however, that most Australian sheep are essentially dependent on man for their well-being.

1.3 By domesticating sheep, man has asserted his control over them. He has removed most freedom of choice in essential matters from them. He has changed their genes, their behaviour, their ability to fare for themselves, their environment. Present-day sheep in Australia cannot readily escape from man's dominion: they must adapt to the conditions provided, or die. More sheep are polled than not; the only defences left to them are flocking and stamping their feet. Man, as a moral agent, is therefore morally obliged to exert responsible stewardship over them.

1.4 Man's responsibility towards sheep was generally accepted by those who gave evidence to the Committee. The RSPCA (Australia) spoke for most witnesses when it said:

> It is generally accepted that when we keep animals for purposes of our own (as pets, for work, for recreation or for production) we acquire a responsibility for them ... we accept our obligations to look after them, keep them healthy and in some senses 'happy' and to avoid cruelty and suffering whether deliberate or not.[3]

1.5 What was less clear was what was encompassed by the term, "sheep welfare", and which, if any, current husbandry practices ran counter to that term.

1.6 Sheep welfare has been described as a state of complete mental and physical health in which the sheep lives in harmony with its environment. The Sub-committee on Animal Welfare of the Standing Committee on Agriculture stated:

> ... with due regard to their species and breeds, animals in the care of man should be protected from suffering and husbanded in a manner appropriate to their physical and behavioural needs in accordance with established experience and scientific knowledge.[4]

1.7 Unfortunately, in the case of sheep, the "scientific knowledge" concerning evidence of the existence and extent of suffering is far from complete. Indicators of well-being or of suffering have included biochemical and behavioural measures, the presence of disease, and productivity indicators.

1.8 Biochemical markers, such as cortisol levels, have been advanced as the most useful objective indicators presently available of distress in sheep, despite the fact that cortisol levels also rise in association with pleasant stimuli, such as exercise, copulation, or feed expectation.[5] Other biochemical indicators such as beta-endorphins and other peptides have also also been considered valuable as distress indicators in welfare investigations.

1.9 Behavioural indicators have been advanced as a necessary corollary to biochemical indicators as pointers to sheep well-being. By studying normal species-specific behaviour, such as flocking preferences in Merinos, aberrations from the norm can be identified and rectified if necessary. Guidelines for the recognition of pain in sheep have been published, and include signs such as a depressed appearance, little interest in surroundings, teeth grinding, grunting.[6] Preference tests and behavioural measures of aversion assist in clarifying what the sheep thinks about husbandry practices.

1.10 It is certain that sheep can experience pain, but pain threshholds vary from sheep to sheep.[7] The Committee considers there is little to be achieved in attempting to establish pain threshhold levels for any given husbandry procedure, because of the subjective nature of the phenomenon which is being dealt with.

1.11 Good physical health is equated with the absence of disease and is clearly a pre-requisite for sheep well-being. Obvious disturbances of physical health, such as lameness or lice infestation, are generally agreed to be signs of suffering. Yet short-term suffering may not have visible effects on physical health, and apparently healthy animals may exhibit physiological and behavioural abnormalities.[8]

1.12 Productivity measures such as wool growth, bodyweight, or reproductive success have sometimes been advanced as objective indicators of a sheep's well-being. However, sheep in a satisfactory welfare situation may exhibit a wide range of individual production levels. The rate of clean wool growth of adult Merinos, for example, may vary from 1.6 grams/day to 20.2 grams/day.[9] Suffering may be reflected by a fall in productivity, but it would be an oversimplification to consider that it always is.[10] Growth is not inconsistent with periods of acute, transitory, physical suffering; growth can, on occasions, be a pathological symptom.

1.13 While the precise parameters of sheep welfare are difficult to define, the Committee was left in no doubt about the features of sheep production which were deemed by certain groups and individuals to be inimical to the well-being of sheep. Practices which attracted attention included surgical procedures such as tail-docking, castration and mulesing; rearing and shearing practices which allow sheep and lambs to be exposed to extremes of heat or cold; deficient nutrition; inadequate supervision; unpreparedness for natural disasters. The desirability of raising sheep in the semi-arid zones of Australia was questioned on both welfare and ecological grounds. These, and related issues, are considered by the Committee in this report.

1.14 Production methods have to be viewed in the context of the economics of the industry. Economic considerations do influence production, and it is necessary to recognise that. The Australian sheep and wool industry has a long and proud history, but one that has been plagued by uncertainty, by the vicissitudes of nature and of international trade.

1.15 Wool has been a major Australian export industry since 1807, to the extent that we as a nation have been frequently described as "riding on the sheep's back". Generation after generation of Australian schoolchildren have learnt of the introduction of the first 26 Spanish Merinos from the Cape of Good Hope in 1797; of Captain John Macarthur's advocacy of wool as a suitable fledgling export commodity; of the success of his exports of it to England from 1807 onwards; of the subsequent expansion of settlement and sheep inland; of the development of fencing when labour vanished at the onset of the gold rushes; of the romance of the riverboats and bullock drays bearing bales of wool to market.

1.16 The significance of the sheep and wool industry to Australia cannot be understated, and it is a significance which goes far beyond monetary value. As Dr Rose pointed out:

> The values of rural life are an integral and important component of Australian culture. We all benefit and our lives are enriched by values derived from the relationship between the farmer, his livestock and the land. We would all be that much poorer if that component of our social matrix was lost.[11]

1.17 In March 1988, Australia's sheep population numbered 161.8 million. In the 1987-88 financial year, Australia produced its largest ever wool clip of 851 mkg, 97 per cent of which was exported, and the value of which was $5.7 billion.[12] In international terms, the Australian sheep flock represents about 20 per cent of the world's sheep and produces over 28 per cent of the total annual production of wool.[13] In addition, 153 286 tonnes of lamb and mutton were exported in 1987-88, at a value of $298 million.[14]

1.18 The sheepmeat and wool industries are of economic significance domestically, as well. Eighty-two per cent of lamb and 43 per cent of mutton produced in 1987-88 were consumed by the Australian market, with per capita consumption averaging 14.9 kg for lamb and 7.1 kg for mutton.[15] Australia's per capita domestic consumption of wool in 1987-88 was one of the world's highest, at 2.09 kg.[16]

1.19 In 1987-88, the sheep and wool industry was Australia's largest single export earner.[17] The above statistics reinforce the pre-eminence of the industry. Yet the other side of the coin is the fact that wool enjoys only a five per cent share of the world's textile market, and is constantly under threat from improved synthetics. Sheepmeat too lags behind beef, poultry and pigmeat in the apparent consumption stakes.[18] Sheep producers are constantly reminded that, unless their industry remains highly competitive, it will cease to be viable. If the industry ceases to be profitable, there will be few sheep left to be concerned about.

1.20 It is against this backdrop of constant pressure to remain viable in the face of fluctuating commodity demand and value, rising costs, and uncertain and unpredictable climatic conditions that sheep welfare must be viewed. But as the Committee noted in its report on live sheep exports:

> ... society has a duty to see that undue suffering is not caused to animals, and we cannot accept that that duty should be set aside in order that food may be produced more cheaply. Where unacceptable suffering can be eliminated only at extra cost, that cost should be borne or the product foregone. On the other hand all methods of domestic livestock rearing entail some loss of freedom, and where an imperfect but not unacceptable system can be improved only at disproportionate cost, it may be unreasonable to insist that this be done.[19]

1.21 In this report, the Committee has been concerned to weigh up the extent to which economic considerations should influence production methods, when those methods may adversely affect the welfare of sheep in the short or long term, and to strike a balance between welfare and economic considerations as compassionately yet as objectively as possible.

1.22 The Committee is concerned that the sheep welfare debate has been seen as yet another example of the rural/urban dichotomy existing in affluent western societies. It has been pointed out that more than 80 per cent of Australians now live in towns or cities.[20] These are people whose values about animals and their appropriate treatment are formed with reference to companion animals; and who, it is asserted, are separated from groups using sheep to provide their livelihood by a great cultural divide.

1.23 This explanation has sometimes been advanced to show that persons calling for changes to the methods of sheep production could not possibly know what they were talking about, and that such decisions were best left to the farmers themselves.

The Committee was, however, impressed with the overall awareness of welfare considerations and their consequences by all groups and individuals who appeared before it, whether or not they had a pecuniary interest in the industry.

1.24 As the Committee's inquiry progressed, it became apparent that both sheep producers and sheep welfare organisations realised that if their debate remained polarised, sheep welfare would suffer. Producers came to accept that welfare groups had legitimate concerns about sheep. They further acknowledged that some of their own practices could be improved. Animal welfare groups acknowledged that some of their proposals were unreasonable, and were prepared to modify them. While complete agreement has not yet been reached, it has nevertheless been heartening for the Committee to see that the protagonists are now prepared to engage in constructive debate on the issues which still separate them.

1.25 The Committee is aware that many of the sheep welfare issues raised in this inquiry are not within the Commonwealth's jurisdiction. A number of groups and individuals clearly considered this to be an unfortunate aberration on the part of the drafters of the Australian Constitution.[21] Nevertheless, the Committee inquired into these matters because they were of concern to the wider community and because it was perceived that no other appropriate forum existed for their airing.

1.26 One area in which there is federal responsibility is in research funding. The government has a commitment to match the sheep and wool industry contributions to research and development up to 0.5 per cent of the gross value of production,[22] although at present the wool industry's contribution is only 0.35 per cent.[23] Much research work stems from grants from the industry's two major funding bodies, the Wool Research and Development

Council of the Australian Wool Corporation and the Australian Meat and Live-stock Research and Development Corporation. Federally-funded agencies, such as CSIRO and the universities, carry out the bulk of the research work, often in conjunction with the state departments of agriculture.

1.27 The importance of research was acknowledged by the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, the Hon. John Kerin, when he opened the World Sheep and Wool Congress in Hobart on 1 March 1989:

> The key to further productivity gains ... lies in effective research and development(R&D). A strong, market-oriented R&D effort, coupled with the effective uptake of new technology by industry, is essential ... In order to sustain a major R&D research effort resources both human and capital must be further developed and the effective and timely translation of research results into industry practice is vital.[24]

1.28 Throughout this report, the Committee has recommended further research on a number of matters. The Committee is convinced that research on issues which affect sheep welfare is essential and should be strongly supported. Given the productivity gains which would also result from improved sheep welfare, this makes good economic sense as well as meeting ethical concerns. It is important that the appropriate research agencies are adequately supported financially to carry out the research recommended in this report. The industry may need to take a more proactive role and seek out worthwhile research projects, if indeed a lack of them has been the explanation for the build-up of funds in the Wool Research Trust Fund to over $70 million at 30 June 1988.

1.29 From the beginning of this inquiry, the Committee has considered not only the specific welfare issues raised but also the concomitant problem of what to do when flagrant breaches of acceptable welfare standards occur. Each State has legislation

which deals with cruelty to animals, legislation which varies somewhat in the detail of offences and in the scale of penalties. It is generally accepted that such legislation is useful to cover cases of gross cruelty to, or neglect of, sheep. The number of cases which reach the courts is probably more a reflection of the resources of the RSPCA and other bodies employing inspectors empowered under the respective acts, than of the frequency of abuses. Furthermore, husbandry practices such as mulesing are specifically excluded from the cruelty to animals legislation.

1.30 There are clearly limitations as to what legislation can achieve. It is unlikely to do much to change human behaviour or to affect human motives. In this report, the Committee considers the respective roles and strengths of legislation and codes of accepted welfare practice, bearing in mind that sheep welfare depends on the interaction of the stockman, the sheep and the environment, and while advice can be proferred to the stockmen, it is most difficult to control the implementation of that advice.

1.31 It is not misguided to concern ourselves over animals which are bred to die, some at a tender age. The moral issue is the quality of life, while that life exists. The Committee is convinced that humane stewardship of sheep, allied with ecologically sensitive land management, is the key to ethically sound sheep production. In this report, it considers how best that can be achieved.