

CHAPTER 10

ENDANGERED SPECIES OF KANGAROOS

Introduction

10.1 In a report published in 1984, the Working Group on Endangered Fauna of the Standing Committee of CONCOM considered six of the 48 species of kangaroo to be extinct, although it did not exclude the existence of pockets of one or more of those species. Another seven species were regarded as endangered. In all, 38 species are fully protected by law throughout Australia.

10.2 The National Plan of Management for Kangaroos, which was approved by CONCOM on 30 May 1985, has as its first aim the maintenance of populations of kangaroos over their natural range. Some species of kangaroo are widely spread over the continent while others exist in one or more regions or in small pockets. In maintaining populations over their natural range, species can be regarded as being endangered locally or nationally. For example, a species may be regarded as endangered in one State where there is a small population but not nationally because it is quite prevalent in other States.

Causes of Endangerment

10.3 With the exception of the toolache wallaby and perhaps of the bridled nail-tailed wallaby, habitat destruction rather than shooting contributed mainly to the demise of those species now thought extinct or endangered.¹ The destruction of habitat was caused by the development of human land use, such as agriculture, as well as the release of exotic animals, such as

the rabbit. Exotic predators, such as the fox, have wreaked havoc among small native animals in some areas. Mr Best of the SA NPWS told the Committee he thought that in the early part of the century, when the rabbit population suffered a decline in South Australia, the high fox population turned on the smaller native animals instead.²

Conservation of Endangered Species

10.4 In its submission, the NSW NPWS addressed the issue of the conservation of kangaroo habitat:

Protection of habitat is a complex matter. First we need a general understanding of what "habitat" means; for a species it can conveniently be defined as an area with characteristics that will support the natural dynamics of a population of that species. The area can be considered adequate if it will maintain a viable population of the species (i.e. one that can withstand a full range of natural events). Only for a few species are habitat requirements sufficiently well identified to set aside reserves that will adequately cater for the species' needs; these are usually rare species or species of high public interest. For other wildlife the knowledge is simply not available; in the interim efforts are made to preserve large samples of each natural system in the hope that the suite of species dependent on that system will survive. Knowledge is at a premium and the research resource is the most limited compared to the task in hand.

Adequate size is not the only criterion for an area of habitat; it must be of adequate quality, and potential impacts on that quality must be assessed and understood.³

10.5 Because of the specificity of the habitat of certain species, purchase of habitat as reserves may be appropriate in particular cases. The bridled nail-tailed wallaby in Queensland

was cited as an example where this approach had been employed.⁴ The yellow-footed rock wallaby in New South Wales also falls into this category:

Nearly all of the habitat in New South Wales is now in a reserve or is in reserves. There is another part of the population within that area contiguous to the reserve which is not yet reserved but we are working on that.⁵

10.6 Re-establishment of kangaroos has been undertaken with success with the forester kangaroo (eastern grey) in Tasmania by the Tasmanian NPWS.⁶

10.7 There may be difficulties, however, in such operations. Discussing this possibility with respect to the yellow-footed rock wallaby, Dr Giles noted:

... we may, when we are satisfied about the genetics of the animal, seek to re-establish it in some areas where we knew it was ... But we are cautious because we know that this species has a distinct distribution and maybe the population in South Australia is genetically different from the population in New South Wales.⁷

10.8 The importance of predator control in the management of reserves was underlined by the officers of the Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management. Although it is reasonably easy to keep islands with small populations of wallabies free from predators, it is difficult to control predators on the mainland. Some predator control programmes are undertaken at specific localities where there are populations of rock wallabies, tammar wallabies, woylies or brush-tailed bettong, numbats and other species.⁸

Research

10.9 The National Kangaroo Monitoring Unit has interpreted its brief as going beyond the management of species harvested under approved management programmes. It has consulted with State and Territory wildlife authorities to consider 'conservation status of other species including rare and endangered macropodoids'.⁹ The areas of research interest identified by the Unit include:

... ecological studies to determine factors affecting distribution and abundance and to identify management needs, especially for rare and endangered macropodids' and the 'recolonization and range extension of rare species'¹⁰

10.10 The Advisory Committee on Kangaroos also includes among its terms of reference the responsibility for advising the Federal Minister on 'national programs to assist the conservation of endangered species and the protection of their habitats'.¹¹

10.11 The need for a substantial increase in research into endangered species was made by a number of witnesses. Speaking of endangered species, Mr McNamara of the Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management, emphasised that:

Our basic research knowledge, our knowledge of the fundamental biology and ecology of those species and their distribution and abundance, is in most cases lacking. In all cases there is a need for that sort of fundamental information.¹²

Focussing Resources on Endangered Species

10.12 The viewpoint was expressed by the National Farmers Federation that the concentration of the resources of wildlife

authorities on the commercially harvested species was to the detriment of the more endangered species.

10.13 It was argued in other submissions, however, that this position is fundamentally misconceived.

All macropod species are granted the status of protected wildlife under State and Territory legislation, not just the rare and endangered species. Basically this elitist argument, most often used by the government wildlife authorities themselves, simply states that Australian authorities are not prepared to adequately fund or support all wildlife conservation programs.¹³

10.14 Professor Ovington, Director of the ANPWS, commented:

Much of the limited financial and staff resources of wildlife authorities is being concentrated on the commercially harvested kangaroo species which are demonstrably widespread and abundant. Regrettably, resources are not available for the whole range of more critical nature conservation problems, including endangered species and habitat conservation. However, the argument has tended to suggest that if more money became available to wildlife authorities, it should go upon those species which are endangered. But you also must appreciate that wildlife authorities have an even broader context and may well also have to look at other priorities.¹⁴

10.15 If this is in fact the case then a reduction in funds devoted to the management of commercial kangaroo killing would not necessarily lead to an increased focus on research and management of endangered species of kangaroo.

10.16 Fauna authorities have a responsibility to conserve endangered species of kangaroo. This responsibility involves protecting the habitat from human development; keeping predators,

especially introduced species, under control in the habitat of the endangered species; and conducting research into the ecology of those species to assist in their conservation.

10.17 The degree to which the fauna authorities have been able to undertake programmes to conserve endangered species has been a function of the human and financial resources available for such tasks, among the plethora of other responsibilities those authorities have had. The authorities have had limited resources and, consequently, not as much has been done to conserve endangered species as those authorities would have liked to have done.

10.18 It is not simply a question of transferring funds from, say, the management of species of kangaroo subjected to killing to the management of endangered species. Both areas require a certain level of funding, as do the many other areas administered by fauna authorities. The allocation of additional funds rather than a re-allocation of current funds is required if those authorities are to effectively carry out their mandate.

10.19 The conservation of endangered species is vital as is the management of kangaroos generally throughout Australia.

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