

HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF KANGAROO MANAGEMENT

Part 2: Development of Current Attitudes towards Kangaroos

(Extract from “Red Kangaroo Arid Zone Studies” Report to Australian NPWS by Martin Denny, 1980)

1. First Settlers’ Perception

When European man first settled in Australia, this country bore little resemblance to Europe, either culturally or geographically. In Europe between 1770 and 1800, works by Beethoven, Mozart and Hayden were performed publicly, Balzac, Hugo, Pushkin, Sheridan, Scott and Austen were popular authors of the time and the works of Byron, Blake and Keats were widely read. The culture of Australia belonged to the Aborigines. The land itself was alien to a literate European, such as John Martin (after whom Martin Place was named), who wrote in 1838:

“...rare conservatory plants were commonplace, the appearance of light green meadows lured squatters into swamps where sheep contracted rot, trees retained their leaves and shed their bark, the more frequent the trees, the more sterile the soil, the birds did not sing, the swans were black, the eagles white, the bees were stingless, some mammals had pockets, others laid eggs, it was warmest in the hills, and coolest in the valleys, even the blackberries were red, and to crown it all, the greatest rogue may be converted into the most useful citizen.”

In 1819, the Sydney Supreme Court Judge, Barron Field, expressed in verse the attitude that the kangaroo was Australia’s only redeeming feature.

The Kangaroo

Kangaroo, Kangaroo!
Thou spirit of Australia,
That redeems from utter failure,
From perfect desolation,
And warrants the creation
Of this fifth part of the Earth,
Which should seem an after-birth,
Not conceived in the Beginning
(For God bless’d His work at first,
And saw that it was good)
But emerg’d at the first sinning,
When the ground was therefore curst;-
And hence this barren wood!

2. Early Attitudes towards Wildlife

This perception of Australia was reflected in the attitude towards the wildlife of the continent, “The whole continent of Australia was found not to possess a single animal worthy of perpetuation” (Illustrated Sydney News, 12 July, 1879). The apparent barrenness probably inspired the formation of several acclimatization societies within the colony. The aims of these societies were to introduce new species of plants and animals into Australia. The consequences of such actions are well-known today. However, in the 19th Century, acclimatization societies believed the fulfilment of their aims would prove beneficial. For example, an address by the president of the New South Wales Acclimatization Society in 1864 stated the aims of the Society as:

“Stocking our waste waters, woods and plains with choice animals, making that which was dull and lifeless become animated by creatures in full enjoyment of existence, and lands before useless, become fertile with rare and valuable trees and plants.”

Acclimatization societies still exist in NSW, where their main purpose is to stock streams with the introduced Brown and Rainbow Trout.



3. Kangaroos – a Novelty

Kangaroos must have been difficult to describe for the early observers; most related the size and shape of the smaller wallabies to rats and cats and the larger kangaroos to dogs (particularly greyhounds). For example:

“..here we killed an animal which is the shape of a dog smaller than a greyhound..”

“We found in these islands large numbers of a species of cats, which are very strange creatures; they are about the size of a hare, their head resembling the head of a civet-cat. Its tail is very long, like that of a long-tailed monkey...”

Descriptions of kangaroos refer to “deer-like” eyes, and early illustrators depicting kangaroos, tried to force this animal into the shape of a more familiar animal, the dog (see drawing of kangaroo by Barrington in 1810 on the preceding page).

However, kangaroos were attractive to the early settlers and were kept as pets by Governor Phillip. Joeys taken from shot kangaroos were sold as pets in Adelaide for one pound. After several attempts, a kangaroo was exhibited in London in 1790.

THE WONDERFUL
KANGUROO,
 FROM
BOTANY BAY,
 (*The only One ever brought alive to Europe*)
 Removed from the HAY-MARKET, and now exhibited at the LYCEUM,
 in the STRAND, from 8 o'Clock in the Morning, till 8 in the Evening.

THIS amazing, beautiful, and tame Animal, is about five Feet in Height, of a Fawn Colour, and distinguishes itself in Shape, Make, and true Symmetry of Parts, different from all other QUADRUPEDS. Its Swiftness, when pursued, is superior to the Greyhound: to enumerate its extraordinary Qualities would far exceed the common Limits of a Public Notice. Let it suffice to observe, that the Public in general are pleased, and bestow their Plaudits; the Ingenious are delighted; the Virtuoso, and Connoisseur, are taught to admire! impressing the Beholder with Wonder and Astonishment, at the Sight of this unparalleled Animal from the Southern Hemisphere, that almost surpasses Belief; therefore Ocular Demonstration will exceed all that Words can describe, or Pencil delineate.....Admittance, ONE SHILLING each.

4. Kangaroos – a Valuable Source of Food

At the same time, the kangaroo was an important part of the first settler's diet, as there was little fresh meat for the colony apart from fish from Port Jackson

Harbour. Thus, we find many authors referring to the eating of kangaroos. For example, John Hunter states that:

“We ate its (kangaroo) flesh with great relish and I think it is good mutton,” and

“The kangaroo frequently supplied our colonists with fresh meals...”

Bradley mentions a shooter employed by Governor Phillip to hunt kangaroos and Collins refers to convicts shooting kangaroos for public consumption.

Governor Phillip was critical of the taste of kangaroo (“Its flesh is coarse and lean nor would it probably be used where there was not a scarcity of fresh provisions”); however, kangaroo meat was included on the menu of His Majesty’s Birthday Dinner on the 4th June, 1788. Other settlers accented the importance of kangaroos to the colony:

“Where no other animal nourishment is to be procured, the kangaroo is considered as a dainty.” and “.....their presence (predators) would deprive us of the only flesh meals the settlement affords, the flesh of the kangaroo.”

I have purposely accentuated this particular attitude towards the kangaroo (in fact towards anything edible) by the early settlers as kangaroos gradually became synonymous with food and were no longer regarded as a curiosity.

5. Kangaroos – Sporting Game

As the colony became more substantial, those settlers familiar with the sport of coursing in England, substituted the kangaroo for the hare or fox, and hunting became popular in the colony. Clubs were formed for the sport of hunting dingoes and kangaroos, using the same rules as coursing clubs in England, e.g. Cumberland Hounds near Homebush.

There are many descriptions of kangaroo hunts in the literature; however, I have chosen only one reference, as this gives the best impression of attitudes towards kangaroos in the early 19th Century. It not only describes a typical kangaroo as quite an unusual animal (‘mild-looking murderer’), but conveys the enjoyment the early settlers derived from this sport. The extract is from *Experiences of a Colonist 40 Years Ago* by G. Hamilton (1880).



“...and one morning we decided on a kangaroo hunt. As many of the party as could find horses were mounted, and, with some of the dogs, we set out for a day’s sport; I rode my thoroughbred. Some of the party rode bare-back, as we had no spare saddles with us. In a very short time we came upon our game; the dogs (collies) were hallooed on, and off we set after a large mob of big kangaroos. Of course my horse took the lead, and away I sped at full speed with my eye on a kangaroo I had singled out.

Away we went through the scrub, over sandy hills and stony rises, over creeks, down gullies in which the long grass hid from us the dead trees lying in our pathway, over which the thoroughbred leaped as if he had wings. One by one the kangaroos separated, turning to the right and to the left, until only four were left with the one I had selected. I now pressed them hard, and endeavoured to turn them back to where my fellow-hunters were following. Pressing my horse to his full speed, I dashed on in one wild, reckless delightful gallop – mad with excitement and heedless of consequences; I saw the trees pass by me in quick succession.

I entered the scrub and got my face well scratched by the mallee branches, rattled down the stony slopes, flew over the dead logs in the gullies, floundered round the edges of swamps, bounded over the grassy rises, and went anywhere and everywhere in following my game. At last he came to a standstill with his three companions, and looked me in the face. Hunting in the old country always delighted me, but there you knew something of the nature of the country you had to ride through; but here in the antipodes you must leave all to chance, as you do not know one inch of the land you may have to go over.

In a short time I heard my followers behind me. The kangaroos also heard them, and made off, I followed them. But they were evidently done, and it was an easy matter to keep them in view. At last a couple of horsemen and three dogs joined me, and, after a short burst, the kangaroos came to bay again. I now dismounted, and picking up a stick I went to the nearest to me with the murderous intention of killing him, but my heart failed me as I saw his beautiful mild eyes look upon me, and I almost decided to let him go and live, when he approached me. I moved out of his way, but he followed me. I then struck at his head with the stick in my hand; it was rotten, and broke. The kangaroo then placed his two fore paws on my shoulders and drew me to him, placing me in a most dangerous position, for the next move would be to hug me, and then rip me up with his hind legs. His eyes still wore a sweet, innocent, amiable expression, but there was a savage snort proceeding from his nostrils that was ominous. To be disembowelled by the amiable-looking innocent was anything but pleasant, and yet that would have been my fate had not the three collie dogs attacked his haunches, and thus diverted him from his attention to me and turned his regards upon them.

My two companions dismounting, we dispatched this marsupial, mild-looking murderer, and cut off his tail, his companions had deserted him in his need, and saved their lives. The chase was over the excitement subsiding, but while it lasted the rapturous feeling was beyond description, exciting to a madness of delight, like the ghost's ride of the poet:

“Tramp, tramp, across the land they went;
Splash, splash, across the sea.
Hurrah, the dead can ride apace,
Dost't fear to ride with me!”

The general opinion of the many authors that provide hunt descriptions was that kangaroo hunting provided as good a sport as that of England, for example:

“...a kangaroo hunt affords the best kind of sport to be had in Australia”

“It affords such excellent sport in a run across country”

“Thus with rabbit trapping, kangaroo hunting, wildfowl shooting, fishing and leach getting one may vary one's occupation according to the locality”

“I think that most fastidious sportsmen would have derived ample amusement during our day's journey. He might have seen the truest coursing from the commencement of the chase to the death of his game without moving, and tiring of killing kangaroos he might have hunted emus with equal success”.

However, not all authors were pleased with the sport; “On the whole, Australia is one of the worst countries for sport that could be imagined. There is no big game of any kind, except the kangaroo...and it is poor fun” (1885)

Hunting of all sorts had been developed by the 19th Century. In a volume of New South Wales published in 1886, sport on the Blue Mountains is described as the shooting of koalas, kangaroos, wallabies, birds (for their wings) and possums. On the plains (near Dubbo), platypus, birds, particularly brush turkeys, and kangaroos were hunted.

Dogs became an important part of the kangaroo hunt and a special breed of kangaroo dog was developed. This was a cross between a greyhound and a more powerful dog such as a mastiff, the deerhound or the lurcher i.e. a swift running dog with powerful jaws.



6. Kangaroos – a Pest Species

With the spread of settlement, the kangaroo came to be regarded as a pest, challenging the rights of domestic stock to graze. By the late 19th Century, kangaroos were in high numbers in settled areas. The Border Watch, on the 9th October, 1863 stated:

“It is becoming daily more apparent that some system of wholesale destruction will have to be devised for checking the rapid increase of kangaroos. So much have these animals increased of late years, that if measures are not speedily taken against them, they threaten to overrun the district. At present they swarm in every part of it.

“Many of the sheep-farmers believe that have nearly as many kangaroos on their runs as sheep. We should therefore preach a crusade against kangaroos.”

This passage from a Mount Gambier newspaper is noteworthy as it shows that an increase in kangaroo numbers had started by the 1860s and that kangaroos were considered to be in plague proportions when their numbers equalled sheep numbers.

Other authors in the 1860s complain of high numbers in South Australia:

“Some sheep farmers in the south-west district (of S.A.) are said to have as many as 10,000 upon a single run”. Kangaroo ‘plagues’ were mentioned in Queensland in 1877 and 1880.

7. Reasons for Increases in Kangaroo Numbers

Numerous causes have been suggested for this increase in kangaroo numbers; today we explain it as a change in the environment due to grazing by domestic stock, increased supplies of water and the clearing of land. These explanations are possibly valid, but it is difficult to demonstrate sequential increase in improved water supplies on properties and kangaroo numbers in the 1860s. In Queensland and western NSW, little improvement in water supplies was undertaken before the 1860s, except to ensure that water holes on creeks were kept cleaned of silt. In 1866, a property owner near Bourke began sinking wells and the government commenced the establishment of tanks along the important roads in the district in 1872. In the late 1860s properties in the Bourke district were being deserted because of lack of water; the distance between reliable watering points being up to 60 miles.

Further north in the Cunnamulla district, dams were erected on creeks in the 1870s, but many properties were still abandoned for want of water. During the drought in 1876, the only water available in the area was in Cooper’s and Kyabra Creeks and the Paroo and Bulloo Rivers.

Other states developed water supplies earlier; irrigation was developed in Victoria in the 1850s. In NSW, the ‘corner’ region serves to illustrate the natural water supplies available during a drought in the 1860s. 1867 was considered a period of drought in the interior. At that time, W. Tietkins managed a property in the Tibooburra region. During the drought he covered the region looking for water for the sheep. He found four viable water holes

with an average distance between these water holes of 60 km. As Red Kangaroos have been recorded travelling more than 100km in this region, it is possible for this species to survive during a drought on natural water supplies.

Thus water supplies were probably not as important a limit on kangaroo numbers in western NSW and Queensland as has been postulated. Correspondents during the 19th Century had their own views on the causes of the increase in kangaroo numbers in the latter part of the century. This viewpoint was best expressed by the famous zoologist, Gerald Krefft, in 1871:

“The main cause of this prolific increase is no doubt the destruction of the Native dog and the absence of the aboriginal hunting parties”.

Many contemporary authors expressed the same opinion, and added that the decimation of eagles was another cause of the increase in kangaroo numbers.

The knowledge that dingoes chased and killed kangaroos made the above conclusions attractive and many graziers regretted their early reaction to dingoes. In 1896 Rolf Boldrewood wrote:

“It more than once occurred to me that I was interfering with a natural law, of which I did not then foresee the consequences”.

8. Pest Eradication

A new attitude towards kangaroos developed, one of hunting not for sport but for the business of pest eradication. All Eastern States eventually enacted legislation encouraging the destruction of these marsupials. The *Pastures and Stock Protection Acts* of NSW 1882 stated:

“Whereas the depredation of rabbits, native dogs and marsupials in many districts of this colony have inflicted serious damage and loss on stock-owners it is necessary....to encourage the destruction of such animals...”

By 1902, it was a bit stronger. The *Native Dogs Destruction and Poison Baits Act no 19* 1902 states:

“It shall be the duty of the owner or occupier....of any land from time to time to suppress and destroy all rabbits and noxious animals”. Noxious animals included kangaroos.

Traditional methods of coursing were no longer viable when it was important to eradicate large numbers of kangaroos. A technique which was borrowed from the aborigines gave greater kills. This technique was called a ‘battue’ and consisted of an organised roundup with the aim of heading the quarry in the direction of an ambush which could be a dead end, a fenced enclosure or a pit. Once contained in a small area, kangaroos could then be clubbed to death or shot.

Numbers killed this way were frequently high; at one property in Victoria approximately 1,000 kangaroos were driven into a fenced enclosure in one day. Here the animals were met by horsemen armed with waddies, who killed 500, retired for refreshments, then killed the rest (Geelong Advertiser, 18th January 1860). At another property in Victoria, about 1,000 kangaroos were killed in “A picturesque and animated scene....the grotesque movement of the kangaroos being most amusing” (Illustrated Australian News, 26th February 1867).

In Queensland, battues were introduced about a decade later with the same results. On one property, a battue continued for six weeks with 12 to 14 people shooting daily. A total of 20,000 kangaroos were killed during that period. Another property on the Darling Downs used 14 shooters and killed an average of 340 kangaroos daily (the maximum was 547). During one drive, 288 kangaroos were shot in about 30 minutes. Some properties destroyed from 40,000 to 60,000 kangaroos over a few years.

It was during this period that many of the current attitudes towards kangaroos were formulated. These include the idea that kangaroos eat more than sheep. It has been stated that a kangaroo will eat as much as one and half sheep, two sheep, even three sheep. Kangaroos were also thought to be highly intelligent. A story told during the 1888 drought recounts how a kangaroo took a bucket, filled it with water and carried it to two old female kangaroos. Kangaroos were also believed to transmit parasites, particularly intestinal worms to horses and finally, wallaroos were attributed with five to six times the strength of man. Here are the conclusions of a man attacked by a wallaroo:

“Kelly (the victim) had travelled through India and heard of the perils of the wild animals in that country, but maintained that nobody could be in more danger than when in an encounter with an old man wallaroo”. Many of these attitudes persist today.

9. Commercial Exploitation

About the 1850's, another aspect of man's attitude towards kangaroos developed; that of commercial exploitation. Previously, few kangaroo skins were sold, although Governor Macquarie placed a landing tax on kangaroo skins in 1802. Meat and young had been commercially exploited. However, in 1849, 12,000 skins were exported from Western Australia and from that year onwards, the demand for skins grew. In 1880, one forming America received 6,000 kangaroo skins weekly and could have used more. Kangaroo skins were used as leather “For the best class of boots”.

It is possible to obtain some estimate of the numbers of kangaroos used commercially and their value from 1850 onwards. Prices of kangaroo products and the numbers of kangaroos killed for commercial and non-

commercial reasons are given in the following table (the information is from many sources and references are given in the original report):

a. Prices of kangaroo products					
Scalp		Skin		Meat	
1886	4-6d	1819	3/-	1838	1/- lb
1888	3-8d	1851	3-4/-	1866	4d lb
1889	1d-1/-	1866	1/9		
1890	8d	1890	10/-		
1899	3-6d	1898	18/-		
		1899	7/6-10/-		

b. Numbers of kangaroos killed for scalps			
New South Wales		Queensland	
1881	581,753	1877-1902	7,407,863
1882	1,452,829		
1883	750,846		
1884	1,403,233		
1885	855,676		
1886	1,106,478		
1887	476,438		
1888	667,436		
1889	495,673		
1890	271,172		
1891	402,053		
1892	428,295		

c. Numbers of skins sold		
Year	Port	Number
1849	Melbourne	500,000
1849	Western Australia	12,000
1862	Warrnambool, Victoria	30,000
1889	Adelaide	216,051
1890	Adelaide	147,734
1892	Australia	500,000

It is interesting to note that it was more lucrative 140 years ago to shoot kangaroos than it is today (1980). The price of a carcass (meat plus skin) today is about 10 cents per pound, whereas a shooter in the 19th century could obtain up to 1/- (equivalent to 10 cents) per pound, whereas a shooter in the 19th Century could obtain up to 1/- per pound for the meat, plus about 3/- for the skin and maybe 5d for the scalp.

It is difficult to obtain an idea of the harvest of kangaroos in Australia in the last century. However, the Melbourne market for skins was relatively steady at 500,000 per year during the last half of the century. This figure, plus an annual scalp harvest of about 1 million (most kangaroos shot for scalps were not utilized elsewhere) possibly gives an idea of the recorded annual harvest i.e. about 1.5 million animals.

However, many more were not officially recorded, as properties employed shooters to kill kangaroos. These shooters were paid from funds established by the land owners. For example, one property owner in 1884 engaged nine

men to shoot kangaroos at 1/- a head. Other landholders paid 9d a kangaroo scalp, which was obtained from a levy of 1/- per 100 sheep or 20 cattle. Unfortunately, there is little record of scalp returns from this method and the total annual kangaroo harvest rate must remain some unknown figure around two million.

This figure is greater than the numbers of kangaroos harvested annually between 1966 and 1972, when the total number of kangaroos harvested annually in Australia has only once reached one and half million.

By the middle of the 10th Century the kangaroo was regarded as a pest, a source of food, then of sport and an animal of commercial value. With fear of their survival being expressed as early as 1822 and gathering momentum into the 20th Century, the kangaroo must be considered from all aspects of wildlife management.

Thus the management of kangaroos moves simultaneously in three directions:

- Destroying a pest
- Harvesting a resource, and
- Conserving a species.

Little wonder the kangaroo holds such a controversial positioning our community!