The Dingo as a management tool on a beef cattle enterprise in western Queensland

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The advantages of maintaining Dingoes as a management tool on a beef cattle enterprise in western Queensland are discussed. As elsewhere Dingoes reduce kangaroo and feral pig populations and eradicate feral goats. This is of significant economic importance to our family business. As a cattle producer interested in sustainability nationally, I am concerned that the current research and public debate fail to discuss the economic and environmental benefits of maintaining Dingo populations.

Key words: dingoes, wild dogs, cats, foxes, goats, guard dogs, kangaroos, lethal control, pigs

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Background

I am a third generation grazier on our family property, Noonbah Station, in western Queensland. This paper sets out our approach to Dingoes as an integral and positive part of our cattle operation. From the view of a producer interested in sustainability I also discuss and critique the current research and both sides of the current public debate on the role of Dingoes. These views are based on my observations as a grazier, and my experience as an ecologist and zoologist. I have closely studied the Noonbah landscape and its wildlife since my boyhood in the 1970s, and have compared those observations with the research literature on the ecological and economic impacts of Dingoes.

Noonbah Station is fairly typical of many Outback cattle stations. It lies 130 km south-west of Longreach in western Queensland. The station is 52,000 hectares in size. Its lands include extensive treed and grassland floodplains on black soils of the Thomson River and Vergemont Creek (major tributaries of Cooper's Creek), and Mulga, Gidyea and other shrublands and low woodlands on red-earths and laterites. The station is part of the vast Lake Eyre Basin catchment which covers 17% of Australia. As elsewhere in the district, virtually no clearing of native vegetation has occurred on Noonbah, and there are few weed species, so our cattle feed almost entirely on native grasses, herbs and shrubs. The climate is semi-arid, with a nominal average of 300 mm of rain annually. However, annual rainfall varies enormously, and the productivity of the ecosystems, and therefore the amount of feed for stock, is very much a boom-bust scenario.

We run a beef cattle operation, selling into a range of markets. Our stocking levels on the station vary greatly, from close to zero to 3,000 depending on rainfall and stock prices. For much of its history, Noonbah was largely run with sheep for wool production, but changing terms of trade and a preference for managing cattle meant we converted to solely cattle in 2001.

Dingoes and kangaroos at Noonbah

Dingoes are now an integral part of our operation because of the immediate production outcomes and the short and long term environmental and sustainability benefits. There has been progressive conversion from sheep to cattle on many properties in our region over the last 25 years. This has meant overall less killing of Dingoes in the district. When my wife and I took over sole ownership of the property in 2001 we ceased persecution of Dingoes. We now appear to have a small stable population of probably three families of Dingoes. From our observations this has had major positive benefits for the landscape.

Prior to 2001, Dingoes were essentially eradicated from the property during my lifetime. By the 1990s, kangaroos—Eastern Greys, Reds and Euros were abundant. Any attempt to rest paddocks by removing stock simply created grazing opportunities for the abundant kangaroos, with consequent loss of feed for cattle, consistent over-grazing, and declining environmental conditions. Feral pigs were abundant along the river channels. I recall seeing at times up to 300 pigs running away when I appeared at a waterhole. In addition, there was a small mob of feral
goats—descendants from escaped milking goats. There were around 20–30 in the 1990s which were breeding. I regularly saw foxes and cats and their tracks at this time.

With the presence of a stable Dingo population here the kangaroo populations are now consistently low, regardless of season. Feral pigs are still present, but the population is much reduced. A hunting friend, working for the Western Australian Department of Agriculture, told me that they would typically see 30–40 pigs a day at Noonbah. He would keep going until the dogs gave up exhausted from the number of chases. He now averages just one pig a day when hunting. The feral goats from the previous feral flock have been eradicated. In addition, around 15 years ago, significant numbers of goats escaped into the district from a nearby property that had been stocked with goats. These quickly disappeared from the landscape when the killing of Dingoes through aerial and ground baiting approximately 2009 and I rarely see their tracks. Cats are still present, but appear to be at lower densities in recent years.

Our observations fit with the experience of other cattle producers such as David Pollock at Wooloone Station in Western Australia, which has somewhat similar floodplain and Mulga country to ours (Pollock 2019).

We spend zero time and resources seeking to control our Dingo population. The financial outcomes we obtain I believe are much better than cattle producers who spend considerable time and resources seeking to persecute Dingoes. The environmental outcomes I think are outstanding — the reduced number of kangaroos and pigs, and the economic and environmental benefits from having this top-order predator in the landscape.

Dingoes or Wild Dogs? As a cattle producer with an interest in sustainability nationally, I am highly concerned about the relatively recent, deliberate and misleading marketing spin of calling Dingoes and Dingo hybrids ‘Wild Dogs’ (Kreplins et al. 2019). From a number of discussions off the record with people in the pest industry I believe that this has been deliberately introduced into the vernacular to attempt to make the public more comfortable with the killing of Dingoes through increasing the size of the target and making them appear visually to be pure-breed Dingoes.

I find the current polarised debate about the economic gains in reducing kangaroo numbers, and in Attacking adult cattle is quite dangerous for such a small animal with the lack of knowledge and understanding about Dingoes and their history and their ancestry (Cairns et al. 2019). I know of no records of any self-sustaining, totally wild populations of any canids that exist in Australia. This is despite 200 plus years of abundant opportunities for this to occur. On the available evidence it would appear that domestic dogs may interbreed with wild Dingoes, but they do not survive and breed in the wild themselves.

My observation of all animals at our place is that they look like Dingoes, sound like Dingoes and act like Dingoes—whether they are pure Dingo stock or Dingo hybrids. I have never seen on our property a canid that looks, sounds or acts like anything but a pure Dingo. My observations at Noonbah indicate that when Dingoes are removed from large areas—domestic dogs and rabbits are released. Dingoes do not survive and breed in the wild themselves.

My experience is that the Dingo numbers were very low originally during my lifetime, from the 1960s to the 1990s, due to targeted trapping, shooting and baiting by a variety of pastoral producers who spend considerable time and resources seeking to persecute Dingoes. The environmental outcomes I think are outstanding — the reduced number of kangaroos and pigs, and the economic and environmental benefits from having this top-order predator in the landscape.

To give one significant example. In their paper ‘A Road Map to Dingo Conservation, Allen et al. (2017), state as a ‘Fact’— ‘There is no consensus on the ecological roles of dingoes (of any description) or the ecological consequences of lethal dingo control, and evidence for both is equivocal and/or debated.’

In my opinion, this is incorrect as the significant ecological impacts of Dingoes on some medium-sized herbivores, especially kangaroos and feral goats, has been widely observed and well documented.

To briefly detail these impacts, firstly on kangaroos. In semi-arid and southern pastoral areas it has been well established that Dingoes control over-abundant kangaroo populations (e.g. Caughey et al. 1985; Newsome et al. 2021; Pople et al. 2000; Letnic et al. 2012). This is most easily seen along a road crossing any Dingo fence - abundant live (and road-killed) Red, Eastern Grey and Western Grey Kangaroos on the side of the fence where Dingoes are present and inter-breeding and lethal control, whereas on the other side of the fence, Dingoes are released and dingoes are absent. Kangaroos on the side of the fence where Dingoes are removed from large areas—domestic dogs and rabbits are released. Dingoes do not survive and breed in the wild themselves.

My experience is that when family groups are mostly or partly killed by lethal controls, then there are individual Dingoes wandering around the landscape looking for mates without the control of a structured family group. After 40 years of indiscriminate, systematic and extensive aerial and ground baiting, there are now more hybrid animals coming into the population, and more extensive damage to stock, with inexperienced animals attacking cattle.

Current debate not highlighting proven impact on herbivores

I find the current polarised debate about the economic and environmental benefits of Dingoes largely misses the point of the issue for cattle producers from both the current ‘Dingoes should be protected’ and the ‘Dingo should be persecuted’ perspectives.

Researchers from the ‘Dingo persecution’ side of the camp are largely funded for their research by the sheep and goat industry (Kreplins et al. 2019). As I note above, obviously smaller stock–sheep and goats—cannot co-exist at the paddock scale with Dingoes (or any form of hunting canals). Authorised protection measures are required, either through lethal control or targeted persecution of individual Dingoes or feral dogs, by protective fencing, or by providing guard animals.

However, I find that research and advocacy institutions promoting persecution, such as Meat and Livestock Australia and the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions routinely lump together the impacts of Dingoes on small stock with impacts of Dingoes on larger stock. I believe that this is incorrect as the significant ecological impacts of Dingoes on some medium-sized herbivores, especially kangaroos and feral goats, has been widely observed and well documented.

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The focus needed

Rangelands managed for cattle cover about 30% of the continent, a vast area. This covers most of the area where Dingoes are still killed indiscriminately across large landscapes. Research and information outreach is required to cattle producers on the benefits as well as potential costs for their businesses in maintaining Dingoes. The economic information that is currently available for producers unfortunately, and seemingly deliberately, usually muddles together the impacts of Dingoes on sheep/goats with their impacts on cattle, implying that Dingoes will allow cause major costs to cattle producers without lethal control. We need research, advocacy and outreach that provides accurate information to more cattle producers on the potential benefits of lower total grazing pressure that are provided by Dingoes, as well as the possible costs of call predation.

I understand and respect that for sheep and goat producers having Dingoes or any type of feral dog in the landscape can be enormously impactful on their business, as well as creating significant personal stress and heartache in trying to protect their stock from attack. However, lethal control of Dingoes is increasingly and demonstrably not working in many districts. In some regions I would argue that landscape level baiting in cattle producing landscapes, outside sheep localities, is exacerbating problems for sheep and goat producers. It potentially builds populations of bait-shy animals which may then successfully invade sheep country. It will also imbued whole of landscape degradation impacts from over-abundant kangaroos and feral goats.

Dingoes will always cause major costs to cattle producers as creating significant personal stress and heartache in trying to protect their stock from attack. However, lethal control of Dingoes is increasingly and demonstrably not working in many districts. In some regions I would argue that landscape level baiting in cattle producing landscapes, outside sheep localities, is exacerbating problems for sheep and goat producers. It potentially builds populations of bait-shy animals which may then successfully invade sheep country. It will also imbued whole of landscape degradation impacts from over-abundant kangaroos and feral goats.

I do not understand why Meat and Livestock Australia, the Centre for Invasive Species Control and other researchers funded by the sheep industry focus on researching and promoting lethal control, rather than reallocating significant research and extension funding to increasing the effectiveness and uptake of non-lethal control. For example, extension of the use of guard dogs and other non-lethal methods has the potential to both protect stock from Dingoes, and maintain the ecological and financial benefits of low kangaroo, feral goat and feral pig numbers.

We would all be much better served by a more thoughtfully and nuanced approach to Dingoes. Indiscriminate killing across large areas is not serving the best interests of our agri-businesses, nor is it keeping our landscapes healthy. We really need to rethink the sustainable long term use of our ecosystems, and our role in them.

References


The Emmott family own and run cattle at Noonbah Station, on the Thomson River, south of Longreach in Western Queensland. The property has been home to the Emmotts for three generations. Angus Emmott is a naturalist and zoologist as well as a cattle producer, and has closely studied wildlife in the region since boyhood.

Photo by Matt Pennisi

The station is perhaps typical of many Outback cattle stations. It is 52,000 hectares in area. The landscape has a diverse mix of floodplain country and Mulga and Gidyea woodland.

Photo by Angus Emmott

Cattle numbers at Noonbah vary from close to zero to 3,000 depending on seasonal conditions and markets. Like most Outback stations, Noonbah has had virtually no clearing of native bushland. Cattle graze on native grasses and shrubs.

Photo by Angus Emmott

Dingoes were absent from Noonbah until 2001, when the Emmotts stopped poisoning and shooting. Since then Dingoes have recovered in numbers and there are stable Dingo family groups on the property.

Photo by Angus Emmott

Prior to Dingoes coming back numbers of Red and Grey kangaroos were consistently high. Native pastures were over-grazed. The Emmotts could not rest paddocks from grazing to allow regeneration, as while the cattle could be removed from a paddock, over-abundant kangaroos would jump the fences and still strip paddocks for feed.

Photo by Angus Emmott

Since the re-establishment of Dingo predation, kangaroo numbers have been consistently low. Here a Grey Kangaroo has escaped its pursuers by going into a waterhole. Being taller gives kangaroos an advantage over Dingoes in water: they can fend off or drown attacking Dingoes swimming at them. These Dingoes are wise to this and are waiting it out, hoping to have a chance if the ‘roo makes a bolt out of the water.

Photo by Angus Emmott

Dingoes have also eradicated feral goats at Noonbah, and greatly reduced the numbers of feral pigs, foxes and feral cats.

Photo by Angus Emmott
Angus Emmott believes that cattle producers throughout Australia should strongly consider the business and sustainability advantages of maintaining Dingo populations. The benefits of reduced grazing by kangaroos and feral animals at Noonbah Station greatly outweighs any occasional lost calves. He is conscious that for sheep and goat producers co-existence with Dingoes is much more difficult; protection by guardian animals or Dingo proof fences is needed to safeguard these smaller stock.

Photo by Angus Emmott