

This *Symposium on the Dingo* publishes the outcome of a surprisingly successful conference to discuss whether the dingo qualifies as a threatened species under the NSW *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* and, more importantly, if it does qualify on biological grounds, what practical issues does it raise in wild dog control. The format of this set of transactions follows the agenda of the conference, which was convened by the Royal Zoological Society of NSW and held at the Australian Museum on 8 May 1999. The printing costs were subsidized by the NSW Scientific Committee and NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. The Service, and particularly the Scientific Committee appointed under the NSW *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995*, were keen to promote public discussion of a nomination the Committee received for the dingo to be placed on the schedule of NSW vulnerable species. As we go to press, the Scientific Committee is yet to make its decision. It is listening to public submissions and weighing new scientific evidence from genetics laboratories, field researchers and managers.

The spoken papers were submitted in written form and were subject to standard refereeing procedures, except that opinions and judgments were allowed to stand, and viewpoints remained untouched. Each manuscript was subject to normal editing practice to produce a readable document. The vital question and answer sessions were all professionally recorded (by Spark and Cannon) and are presented here, edited only for the clarity required when converting the spoken to the written word. The discussion from a packed audience in the Museum theatre was lively, well-informed and presents a picture of a rapidly changing world of conservation, management and decision-making. During the symposium, Alan Newsome, a CSIRO researcher with almost 40 years' experience in this field, remarked to one of us (CD) that this kind of meeting would not have happened 20 or 30 years ago and it was really good to see that it had succeeded so well on the day. For the few in the audience who had not seen a dingo before, a treat was in store. Mr John Hogan, who is hearing-impaired, arrived and displayed "Donna", his hearing-aid companion dingo, indeed the only dingo so trained in Australia.

The focus of this symposium on the new dilemma of managing a species fading from existence as a result of hybridisation while still regarded as a pest to stock means that it is not a competitor to other recent books on the dingo. Indeed, there is a significant overlap of authorship between the symposium and these books. Roland Breckwolfdt's (1988) elegant, but now out of print, enquiry into the dingo is a skilled combination of conservation and rural concerns reflecting Roland's life path. This is complemented by Laurie Corbett's (1995) authoritative but accessible text which demonstrates that a life as a scientist is no deterrent to a clear presentation of a complex yet incomplete scientific story into one neat book. As we were going to press, Fleming *et al.* (2001) provided a recently completed CD-ROM and a book that brings everyone up to date on the science and management of wild dogs. It is set to become a major text and we were fortunate to see it in preview and are happy to advertise its existence. All these books have an Australian scope, whereas this symposium has a NSW focus because the matter is a question for NSW authorities. It seems odd to some, but the land in Australia is administered by State and Territory governments. The "land" is a generic term and includes land use, rural matters, wildlife conservation, logging, soil erosion and a system of management that is centred on State authorities. The history of land-use decisions in NSW reflects the federal Constitution, which put land-use and management matters in State hands. It is the reality for all those interested in conserving biodiversity and managing the land.

Almost everyone has an opinion about the dingo. The bizarre case involving the allegation that a dingo took baby Azaria Chamberlain from a tent at a camping ground near Uluru on 17 August 1980 resulted in sensational and enduring public discussion that still retains an element of mystery. Here the dingo is cast as the villain, although

more informed discussion automatically includes wild dogs in any discussion of dingoes, including hybrid dingoes and domestic and farm dogs. This is but one case, yet it exemplifies the high profile of this species, the division of opinion on its role in Australia and the immense difficulties there are in its control and, more recently, in the conservation of pure dingoes.

If it occurs, the listing of the dingo as a vulnerable species or a series of endangered populations, in NSW would also be sensational, but that will only be in keeping with its spectacular history. There will be those who support it and those who are opposed to it, and there will be great public debate. There will also be a pressing need to manage the competing interests cooperatively and with a skilled scientific base and a rural focus. All these skills are present in the community as this symposium shows. Read on, form an opinion, and continue with the debate. As is evident from the recent batch of books, the topic is alive and your voice will count in the discussion about this fascinating subject.

Chris Dickman and Daniel Lunney (Editors), June 2001.

References

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Postscript

“Warning ignored on killer dingo.” This headline in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 1 May 2001 appeared as this publication on the *Symposium on the Dingo* was in the final phases of production. It stated that: “Authorities failed to respond effectively to a spate of attacks involving an aggressive dingo before the animal and its mate mauled a nine-year old boy to death on Fraser Island yesterday, residents and visitors claim.” The article continued: “The tragedy sparked a debate about whether dingoes on the World Heritage-listed island should be exterminated.” This matter is not covered in this symposium; it has yet to be properly investigated and in the first place is a matter for the Queensland government. However, it will have ramifications across Australia and some of the material in this symposium is likely to be germane to future management options which seek a balance among the competing interests for managing this controversial animal and the land it occupies.