

# The Dingo: still a very elegant animal

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Editors'  
Note

This paper was presented with slides, which have not been reproduced here. An explanatory caption has replaced the slide so that the text can be read without the slides.

## Elegant but controversial

The title of my book “*A Very Elegant Animal – The Dingo*” (Angus and Robertson, 1988) came with the help of Captain Arthur Phillip. As far as we know, he was the first European to keep a dingo as a pet. He kept it for only a few months before deciding that although it was very elegant it was also “on the whole, fierce and cruel”. So there you have it - since our earliest interaction with the dingo, opinions about it have been divided and controversial.

I left school fairly young and worked on cattle stations in North Queensland. Although I had a deep interest in wildlife I soon became part of the scene up there. Dingoes were regarded as pests. Most of the stockmen had a little bottle of strychnine and after we killed a bullock for the stock camp every fortnight we would bait a few bones and make some extra money by poisoning dingoes for their scalps.

From this experience of working on cattle stations I saw the dingo from the perspective of people who do not look at it with great affection. Then about 15 years ago Gary Steer, a wildlife film maker, asked me if I would like to work on a film with him on dingoes and of course I said, “Yes, sure, I’m the person you are looking for”.

We kept some dingoes ourselves for filming close-ups; we traveled far and wide to observe them in the wild; we found ourselves in outback camps and pubs talking about dingoes. It was this travel and talk and direct experience from another point of view that provided a more rounded view of the dingo than the one obtained as a sixteen year old up in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

While doing the script research for the film it occurred to me that I might as well write a book

at the same time. That book was published in 1988 and since then dingoes have never quite gone away. Of course, I’ve got lots of good dingo stories to tell you, but one that might put this theme very much in context was when Gary and I took one of our young dingoes to Central Australia. We were going to be away for six weeks and we wanted to keep this pup accustomed to people.

Just outside Adelaide we stopped at a big supermarket and since the poor dingo had been in the car all day we decided to take it for a walk. I entered the supermarket with the dingo on the lead. This big bruiser came up - you know what it’s like, don’t you, you’re probably quicker witted than me - I never get it right, it’s usually about four hours’ afterwards that I think of the quick and pointed reply that I should have made at the right moment. Anyway he approached me and said, “Get that dog out of here.” Quick as a flash - I was surprised at how quick it was - I said, “It’s not a dog, mate, it’s a dingo.” Without hesitation he said, “That’s all right then.” Yet another example of our very different view on the dingo.

### **Slide 1. A very beautiful russet-red female dingo from the Simpson Desert.**

This is one of the prettiest dingoes I have ever seen in the wild. Even though it was a wild dingo the photo was taken without a telescopic lens. It was taken from the window of a vehicle. In Central Australia, where you can get away from trees, you can get dingoes habituated to you very quickly and actually film wild dingoes quite successfully. This dingo is in perfect condition even though its main diet will be grasshoppers and lizards. That is the main point to be made – it’s the adaptability of the dingo to a wide

range of prey. It can successfully live on species as small as insects as an individual and then just as quickly team up with its family group and hunt in a pack for game as large as a kangaroo.

**Slide 2. The same dingo but shown together with a black and tan male dingo.**

One of the myths about dingoes is that black and tans aren't pure dingoes. But about 14 per cent are black and tan. There are paintings by the artists who often accompanied the early explorers that clearly show black and tan dingoes. These paintings were completed long before domestic dogs could interbreed with the wild dingoes.

**Slide 3. A dingo jumping out of a melanesian canoe.**

The first dingo jumped from a boat onto Australia between 4000 and 6000 years ago. The dingo is most likely a variety of semi-domestic dog found throughout South East Asia. They were most likely brought here by Indo-Malaysian seafarers who probably carried dogs as a live food source as much as for companionship.

**Slide 4. New Guinea wild dog.**

This New Guinea Wild Dog is probably one of the closest relatives to the Australian dingo. With a better diet and more abundant game the dingo in Australia developed into a larger, more robust animal. We know that it took the fox some 70 years to cross from Victoria into Western Australia. Chances are the dingo spread throughout Australia very, very rapidly, and into every type of environment from the tropics to the alps and from the coast to the arid inland.

**Slide 5. Dingo pups eating a dead seal on the east coast.**

This slide of young dingoes right by the sea makes the point of how it spread across Australia and to reinforce the concept of its adaptability. This slide was taken at Nadgee Nature Reserve, south-eastern New South Wales, where these pups were feeding on a dead seal. We watched them for about a fortnight. There were two pups, a black and tan and a ginger. They never ate at the same time and even at that age they would fight over the turn to eat. One would sit back up in the shade and wait for the one that was eating to finish before it would come near the carcase. Perhaps, this dead seal washed up by the tide meant the difference between survival and death for these young pups at the critical

weaning stage.

**Slide 6. Dingo in the arid zone.**

One of the big questions is whether there are different varieties, breeds, subspecies or types of dingo within Australia. Put simply: is there an alpine dingo, a desert dingo, a tropical dingo and so on? Occam's razor would give you an outright no! Why? Because if the dingo has only been here for a few thousand years and it has developed into these distinct sub-species then why, for example, has the grey kangaroo that evolved here long before the dingo arrived not developed into a separate alpine kangaroo species. And how about an alpine wombat? alpine emu, and so on. This has not occurred with any of the large native species that evolved in Australia so it is most unlikely that it has taken place with the dingo.

The range of the North American Wolf extends from the cold Arctic circle down to Mexico and it is the same species all the way. The only notable difference is that those in the cold arctic grow a little bit larger.

This view may not be welcome to those who believe they are own, or are involved in protecting, "the rare Alpine Dingo" but I doubt that such a subspecies exists.

**Slide 7. Gould painting of the Thylacine.**

What happened when the dingo got here? Again, a contentious issue, but the Thylacine disappeared from the mainland soon after. I know there are lots of people who still "see" them on the mainland, and I wish it were true. Notwithstanding, it is widely and reliably believed that the extinction of the Thylacine on the mainland was because it could not compete with the dingo. The chances are that part of this competition included the dingo preying on the Thylacine as a food source. It is highly likely that dingoes killed and ate thylacines and regarded them no differently to any other game.

**Slide 8. Dog eat dog – slide of dead dingo.**

That was a dingo that we found dead one afternoon at the Moomba gas field dump. You can see it has only just died and there is not even any sign of deterioration. We don't know what killed it but suspect it was contaminated waste at the dump or botulism from decomposing waste.. Anyway, cause of death unknown. Gary, the filmmaker, put a tent as a hide up nearby

to watch what happened to the carcase. We suspected that a few curious dingoes might come in to smell it and he may therefore get some close-up footage of wild dingoes. Our pilot and sound recorder and myself took to more comfortable accommodation back at Moomba. When we arrived back next morning to tell Gary how well we had slept he told us that there was a continuous commotion all night because there were about 20 to 30 dingoes fighting over the carcase.

**Slide 9. The few bones and scraps of skin left in the morning.**

This is all that was left of the dingo from the day before. This experience of dingoes eating an already dead dingo was broadened to witnessing dingoes in Central Australia kill a strange dingo that entered their territory or home range and eat it. The dingoes we kept in the compound on our farm had no hesitation in killing and eating the pups of a subordinate female even though they were well fed.

**Slide 10. Aboriginals with a dingo.**

It is still commonly said that dingoes were used by Aboriginals as hunting dogs. They were certainly incorporated into Aboriginal life very, very rapidly but they were given the sack just as rapidly as soon as a better model came along. Aboriginal people have been quick to replace dingoes with beagle hounds, greyhounds, you name it, the moment they became available. Look at the photos in that wonderful book, "The Aboriginal Photographs of Baldwin Spencer" for a fascinating view of Aboriginal life, but also take a close look at the dogs – hardly a dingo to be seen yet it's almost first-contact period.

In the research for my book I could find no substantial evidence whatsoever for Aboriginals using dingoes as hunting dogs. I think they had a very, very convenient relationship. It seems that most Aboriginal language groups had two names for the dingo. They had one name for the tame, camp dogs and another for the ones in the wild. Pitjantjatjara people call the camp dogs "papa". However, they call the wild dingoes "papa inura". This use of two names for camp dingoes and wild dingoes is common throughout Australia.

Aboriginals clearly differentiated between camp dingoes and those running wild. However, it is probable that some dingoes lived in the camp for a while and then tried life on the wild side and came back when convenient. There was probably

quite a free interchange between wild dingoes and camp dingoes with a very blurry distinction between the two. Aboriginals also ate dingo pups when they were available, regarding them as a delicacy and highly portable food source. There is not the time or need here in this talk to substantiate all this with references but I have done so in my book.

Despite this convenient relationship between Aboriginal and the dingo, there was obviously also deep affection for those that became pets. There is a great photo in my book, which I found in the National Library. It is of a group of Pitjantjatjara women carrying big, full-grown adult dingoes around their waists, head to toe. They are loaded up with babies, coolamons and food gathering tools – the entire family belongings and then there are these big dingoes around their waists being carried through the heat of the day. So it was obviously a complex relationship, that could also be a very affectionate one, but there was no evidence that I could find to show that they were used for hunting.

To the contrary there are records, in the journals of the explorers who made early contact describing how the Aboriginal men going out to hunt chased the dingoes back to camp so that they were free to move quietly to stalk their quarry and get within spear throwing distance.

In Australia the dingo remained a semi-domesticated dog just as it did in the agrarian societies in south-east Asia. They had no reason to train them and develop the multitude of varieties that were developed in societies that developed cities and the specialisation of labour and production. Not to mention those that became richer and developed a leisure class to devote to pursuits that required a particular shape of dog for their particular leisure. This is a big story and too big to tell here. I am simply trying to say that it appears to me that Aboriginal people did not exert selection pressure on the dingo and it remained a semi-domesticated dog.

**Slide 11. Dead dingoes hanging on a gate in sheep country on the Monaro.**

The white invaders brought their sheep and it had a disastrous impact on Aboriginal people and the dingo. The Aboriginal people were hunted off their traditional Monaro lands long ago. The dingo has hung on in the hills but 'The very elegant animal, the dingo', becomes a very

inelegant decoration on a front gate. That slide is not a set-up. It was taken as we drove along one of the back roads near Kybean. The photo faithfully records what happens.

However, this is also not a simple story. Time and time again, sheep graziers will tell you that if dingoes only killed to eat, then there would be no problem. They could simply budget and manage for a certain number of losses related to the number of dingoes and their ability to control those numbers. The problem is that dingoes, like many higher order mammal carnivores, frequently kill or maim prey far in excess of their food requirements. It is the number of sheep that a single dingo, or any dog on the loose for that matter, can maim that makes it incompatible with the sheep industry.

**Slide 12. Dingo at the end of the dingo fence where it meets the Great Southern Ocean.**

One of the main responses to dingoes killing sheep are the dingo fences. They are incredible human artifacts in Australia. Although some attempts, such as the enclosure of all of central Queensland, was too ambitious, they are very successful. Costly to maintain, but nevertheless successful.

A fence crosses Australia. The old Queensland dingo fence went to the base of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Then, of course, they enclose areas, national parks, which no longer have dingoes. The main predators of kangaroos were Aboriginals and dingoes, and we've effectively eradicated both from western New South Wales. A question you all know very well, do those national parks really represent natural ecosystems without the two main predators being there?

**Slide 13. Wild dingo among cattle at a waterhole.**

The attitudes of cattle producers to dingoes vary enormously. One pastoralist may run a breeding herd and does not like to risk any loss of calves. However, the next door neighbour may fatten bullocks and does no dingo control in the belief that dingoes keep the kangaroos down. There are also quite a few graziers who do run breeding operations and also do very little dingo control.

With sheep it is a very different story. Research completed in the Fortescue River region of Western Australia demonstrated this very well. Pastoralists were asked not to control dingoes on a number of holdings and the government

compensated them for all losses caused by dingoes. Over a three-year period, 28 dingoes were soft-trapped, radio collared and then regularly monitored. Every one of them was involved in killing and or maiming sheep over that three-year period. Of course, it's not only dingoes, it's any dog on the loose that kill sheep. It's just that dingoes are dogs on the loose - that's the issue there.

**Slide 14. Sheep country up against the Great Dividing Range on the eastern edge of the Monaro.**

The classic conflict occurs in south-eastern Australia where there are rugged, national park areas fronting sheep country. The really interesting debate here is: "who shares the blame and how do you treat these issues equitably"? Another equity issue arises when one person, whose property borders forested land where there are dingoes, is carrying out control at some personal cost but in the process is holding a 'front' that protects other graziers, even those right next door.

Just spend a moment contemplating what would happen if our society lifted all dog control - and dog control in rural areas is very high. Any dog that walks through someone's farm is very fortunate not to be shot if it is seen. The situation is even more strict in urban areas. And without this level of control, dogs - be they dingoes or domestic- would be a serious health and safety problem.

So while those of us who want to see the dingo protected also have to get involved in the complexity of the management systems that are yet to be devised. Each possible strategy raises interesting and difficult social issues. All contemporary wildlife management recognises that we are never dealing with a purely biological problem. It is just that much harder with a species such as the dingo.

**Slide 15. An electric dingo fence bordering forested country.**

An example of how a shared and equitable solution may be developed. The materials for this electric fence were paid for from the taxes raised from people throughout Australia, urban and rural, and directed to this situation by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. The group of graziers whose property border Wadbilliga National Park in this area paid for the construction of the fence and also maintain it.

**Slide 16. Dingoes on leads at an obedience school.**

The future of the dingo? St Bernard of Australia, don't know, but they have been kept as pets by a lot of different people over the years. I still get phone calls, two or three a year, can I find a home for someone's dingo after they have got tired of it. Dingo pups are like all baby animals, cute, cuddly and totally captivating. But they also grow up into something that can be hard to handle. Again a long story, and one with exceptions. But give me a reason for having a dog and I will give you twenty varieties of domestic dog that will suit your purposes better than a dingo. If you really, truly and desperately 'need' a dingo and are prepared to look after it properly then that is another story.

**Slide 17. A dingo/dachshund cross.**

The crossbreeding issue. Dingoes cross readily with all breeds of domestic dog. It is also quite possible, indeed highly likely that with experimentation and heavy selection pressure, the dingo will become a more fully domesticated dog. There is absolutely no doubt that one thing we are incredibly good at is animal breeding and selection for desirable traits. Europeans have a long history of amazing results in animal breeding. Once we get to play with the dingo it will certainly change.

**Slide 18. Elegant dingo in the wild.**

But this still leaves the future of the semi-domesticated wild dingo that is part of the Australian ecosystem. Hopefully the dingo as we now know it has a future in the wild. That's the real issue we've got to face and how to manage it. It has come to the stage that unless some action is taken fairly soon, then the pure dingo will almost certainly be bred out of existence.

Domestic dogs are being found further afield in the wild than they have ever been before. Abandoned or lost hunting dogs of all shapes and sizes are now common because good roads and good vehicles have put the outback in easy distance from urban centres. Dogs are now used out on far flung cattle stations more than in the past because the cost of human labour is now so high and mustering is easier with helicopters and motor bikes. Therefore, the long days on horseback where a dog could not keep up are replaced with mechanization where a dog can be used very effectively. Better roads better transport; more people in the bush – the reasons are many. But the result is the same, the dingo as we know it is under threat.

The time is right to start a stud book to start keeping very accurate records of dingoes of known origin, and work towards the time when they may be genuinely threatened in the wild because, as all you biologists know, commonness can be very, very temporary!!

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**Editors' note: There was no question and answer session with this paper.**