

The problems with keeping dingoes as pets and dingo conservation

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the problems associated with keeping dingoes as pets, and describes the lobbying efforts undertaken by the Australian Dingo Conservation Association (ADCA) to address the noxious status of the dingo and recent legislative changes that allow dingoes to be kept as pets in New South Wales. It also describes the efforts that have been made to conserve the dingo and to highlight the threat of hybridisation that is swamping the gene pool of dingo populations across Australia. There are four problems associated with the management of dingoes in the wild and in captivity under the new legislation. This paper outlines the problems and offers some solutions for the future of the dingo, and describes some of the very valuable work which has been done by dingo conservation groups. It is vitally important that any remnant wild populations are maintained and captive breeding programs are continued to deliver a positive outcome for the future of the dingo.

Introduction

Pure dingoes are notoriously difficult to keep in domestic or captive situations. The very wild nature of the dingo that makes it so fascinating is diametrically opposed to the suburban dictates of backyards, restraint and domesticity. The dingo is now seen as an ancient, interesting, valuable and living link between the wolf and the domestic dog, albeit one that is fast disappearing. Human activities threaten the pure dingoes' genetic survival and the extent of hybridisation is increasing at an alarming rate. The Australian Dingo Conservation Association is committed to addressing these issues using skull morphology developed by CSIRO scientists and collaborating in DNA research in order to identify dingo hybrids and to establish breeding programs for scientifically proven pure dingoes.

The threat of extinction through hybridisation and the recent changes to legislation in NSW to allow dingoes as pets is perceived to be the two factors which will bring about the demise of the dingo in the wild and in captivity in this state. I discuss these factors in detail and offer solutions for the conservation of the dingo in future.

Dingoes as pets

Experience over many years of dealing with dingoes shows that these animals make lousy pets when compared to domestic dogs. These wild canids are not like other domestic household companion animals. However, dingoes can and have made good pets for responsible people who commit to caring for the animal for its lifetime, for people who respect the wild nature of the dingo. This animal is, by nature, governed by instincts in every situation, be it survival, mating, whelping, hunting, play and dominance. Even if born in captivity it will maintain these true wild traits. The captive dingo, despite socialisation with people and its environment, is easily frightened by the unexpected and by a lack of security either real or perceived. The dingoes' tolerance of fear is very low and a panicked animal is naturally unpredictable. Fear and survival override all other instincts.

Unlike domestic dogs, dingoes have one breeding cycle per year. Many people are ignorant of this fact, even some veterinarians. The breeding period, March to July, can be very stressful for the animal and its owner. Some males lose a third of their body weight and can become extremely

aggressive. Dingoes are far more vocal during this period, especially if the males and females are separated. The females for their part can prolong oestrus if not mated.

People who do not have the correct facilities for housing more than a pair of dingoes during the breeding period are confronted with the reality of dingo social structure. This is based on aggression and owners will experience the real trauma of the animals fighting, which can result in serious injuries or deaths. Dingoes are also famous for their Houdini acts of escape if their enclosures are not suitably constructed. This can result in neighbourhood conflict when the dingo returns home, being very territorial, invariably carrying the local chook or cat to be consumed on the front lawn.

With this psyche and complex behaviour the dingo is entirely unsuitable for the backyard pet enthusiast. People may be attracted to a cute yellow dingo pup bought at a price between \$900 and \$1900, but often watch it grow into a sensitive, difficult and hard to manage animal that is more like a cat in temperament than a dog. Inexperienced dingo owners do not understand these traits. This results in frustration and, in too many cases, abuse towards the animal, which will alienate it for life.

How the political arena and the dingo's legal status affect conservation work

ADCA targeted Government policy as a major barrier to dingo conservation in 1992 and began lobbying for change. A brief outline of the history of events that led ADCA to target government policy is useful to understanding the present situation. Firstly there was a tangled web of legislation surrounding dingo management that needed to be unraveled. The legal status of the dingo relies heavily on which forum it is being managed in, for instance:

1. Commonwealth laws protect the dingo as native fauna in National Parks, as do the laws of some States and Territories.
2. Legislation in the ACT and NT protects dingoes as native fauna, and individuals can keep dingoes under wildlife permits.
3. In all other places the dingo is listed as vermin, with the exception of NSW, which removed the dingo from the noxious list and now allows dingoes to be kept as pets under the NSW *Companion Animals Act 1998*.

All these States have a permit system that allows some individuals to keep dingoes, the exception being South Australia. This State prohibits the keeping of dingoes in suburbia (inside the dingo fence) and protects the dingo outside the fence.

In 1992 an opportunity for forcing change presented itself when captive dingoes were under threat of destruction in NSW from a somewhat zealous interpretation of the law from the then conservative Minister for Agriculture. The ADCA picked up the chance to lobby the government to protect the dingo, the result of these efforts being that dingoes were given amnesty by the government of the day. This action saved the last remnants of a small gene pool of captive South Eastern Highland Dingoes (Alpine) from extinction. Some of these individual animals are still alive today.

The Government also allowed dingo ownership under permit after a dingo summit in late 1992 and agreed to review the regulations for the dingo for removal from the noxious list. The permit system remained in place until 1998. Concurrently the ADCA was lobbying the ACT and Victorian Governments to make similar changes to laws on dingoes in those legislatures. These changes took effect in 1995 and 1996 respectively.

In 1998 the NSW Government placed the management of the dingo under the NSW *Companion Animals Act 1998*. This Act is designed for the management of domestic pets in suburban situations. It is not entirely suitable for dingoes. It gives a completely wrong impression to the community that dingoes can be lumped together in the same management category as the domestic dog.

ADCA argues that unless regulations are placed within the Act for the dingo, or the dingo as a breed is specifically removed from the Act and placed under a more appropriate conservation Act, there will be an increase in the exploitation of the animal. The “fashionable” status of the dingo, with price tags between \$900 and \$1900, would contribute to the situation. Exploitation could be expected to include a proliferation of backyard breeders, with subsequent cross-breeding and the abuse and abandonment of misunderstood animals.

The new legislation, although restrictive, as the dingo is still declared vermin in some places, has allowed the ADCA to proceed with educating the public about the dingo. Our other aims

include; establishing a captive breeding program for dingoes, and promoting dingo ownership to select individuals willing to keep dingoes under a permit system and, most importantly, ADCA aims to commence research programs to define what a dingo is and to also attempt to eliminate hybrids from the dingo population

The implications of the changed status of the dingo in New South Wales

The prognosis for survival of the pure dingoes under the *Companion Animals Act 1998* is poor. The Act may contribute to the extinction of pure genetic stock of the species. The Act allows the dingo to be kept as a pet with no restrictions on individual ownership. This deregulation will allow cross-breeding that will exacerbate hybridisation in captive populations. This is already occurring. Pet shops are already trying to source dingo pups for commercial purposes. Wild pig hunters want to use the dingo to cross-breed with their hunting dogs. As a result dingoes will be caught in the wild to keep as pets, thus depleting the wild gene pool and conversely hybrids will be caught and sold as pure dingoes, possibly leading to contamination of the pure gene pool of captive animals. In the wild the animal is still noxious under wild dog classification and so at risk from pest control. The risk of hybridisation and pest control in both the wild and captivity means protection is a concept rather than a reality.

Another threat comes from well-intentioned efforts to have the dingo recognised as Australia's own dog breed. In 1992 it was adopted as Australia's National Dog. This recognition has provided little in real terms towards the conservation of the dingo, and will surely lead to a move by canine groups to have the animal accepted into the show ring. Nothing then can save the animal, for it will be changed from nature's animal to one that has to fit the human whim.

ADCA is concerned that human ignorance of the special wild characteristics of the dingo will bring about increased abuse and dumping of erstwhile pets. This will further increase pressure on animal welfare organisations and conservation groups to rescue these animals. It may also increase the wild dog problem with the inadvertent dumping of these animals in the bush. It diverts ADCA's conservation focus and limited resources to what ADCA considers a secondary issue.

Conservation groups such as the Australian

Dingo Conservation Association and The Australian Native Dog Conservation Society have structured their organisations to enhance the protection of the animal in captivity to the maximum, offering education and owner support as part of their ethics. These groups will be impacted by the legislation with declining membership and diminished support for the research programs and conservation breeding programs already in place. The resources of the people in these groups will be increasingly required to meet the growing problems with captive dingoes. These resources are limited and should be focused on conservation. Instead there will be increasing pressure to provide space to house dumped or rescued animals in a safe, secure environment. There will also be the impact on the limited financial resources of these organisations with transport costs, veterinary fees, extra feed and medications being required to care for these extra animals over and above the expenses related to their own conservation efforts for dingo populations.

The problems of dingo conservation in NSW

The problems of dingo conservation in NSW are relatively typical of the conservation issues facing the dingo nationally. The variability of legislation across Australia exacerbates the difficulty of promoting the conservation of the dingo anywhere. This is why the ADCA has focused primarily on lobby and legislative change. These bureaucratic problems are increased by natural facts. Even if the dingo is protected in the wild, the animal is not safe, because there is no safe environment presently in existence. All animals in the wild are threatened by hybridisation.

In captive dingo populations hybridisation is also a problem and difficult to detect given the dominance of the dingo genes especially in a 3/4 dingo or 1/2 dingo. Hybridity is subtle and difficult to determine, especially in young animals.

As skull morphology was the only available scientific tool to identify a dingo as pure, until very recently, ADCA has used this test on dead captive animals. The President of the ADCA consulted with Dr. L. Corbett and was tutored by him to do the testing. To determine the extent of hybridity in captive population, 40 dingoes were tested during the period 1996 to 1999. These samples were obtained from animals

Table 1. Skull morphology results from 1996-1999, carried out in accordance with methodology developed by CSIRO. (L. Corbett, personal communication).

Type of Dingo	Hybridity%	Number tested
Wild born stock	50	11
Zoos and Fauna Parks	95	11
Private Collections	33	18

which died from natural causes, such as old age, injury, snakebite, and also from unlawful baiting. The origins of these samples were: 11 samples were from wild born parents from Western Australia and South Australia, 11 samples were acquired by ADCA members from animals bred in fauna parks and zoos in NSW and 18 samples were from private individuals who had kept generations of captive animals. The result of the testing on these animals or their offspring are shown in Table 1 and it demonstrates a very high percentage of dingo hybrids in Zoos and Fauna park stock (95%), wild born dingoes (50%) and in private collections (33%).

This population sample is very small in comparison to the sample of 1,611 skulls from wild dingo populations tested by CSIRO Scientists from 1966-1990. (Corbett 1995). ADCA decided to pursue DNA testing as a means to identify pure dingoes given the overall alarming percentage of hybridity and ADCA's confirmation of the extent of hybridisation in southern Australia.

In 1994 sample collection and negotiations with Dr Margaret Matthews (then with the Victorian Institute of Animal Science), began to conduct DNA testing. However, the cost was a major inhibitor to beginning the procedure as ADCA resources had previously been allocated to the political struggle. In 1996 Dr. Peter Christie of Western Plains Zoo invited the ADCA to discuss the possibilities for carrying out DNA testing on dingoes at the Zoo. Shortly after this meeting Dr. Alan Wilton, Senior Lecturer at the School of Biochemistry and Molecular Genetics at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, asked the ADCA to participate in DNA research on dingoes. In 1999 a collaborative Industrial Research Grant was awarded to Dr. Alan Wilton, with the ADCA and ANDCS as collaborators, to assist the DNA testing and research on dingoes.

Conscious of the responsibility and the implications of DNA testing for dingoes, we compiled the following scientific criteria to guide the research.

Scientific objectives for dingo DNA research

The overall objective of the research is to protect the pure Australian Dingo and to ensure the propagation and longevity of the species into future millenia. ADCA views the objectives as a blueprint for future research for conservation and management of the dingo and understands that co-operation between conservation societies, statutory Zoos, scientists and others will be required to achieve all the criteria. Specific aims are:

- To eliminate any hybrid influence on the genetic framework of the dingo,
- To establish a viable gene pool of pure dingoes with as diverse a population as possible,
- To allow natural selection between dingoes in breeding programs as much as possible,
- To discover the relationships if any to: Alpine, Desert and Northern Dingoes in Australia, the New Guinea Singing Dog, Thai Dog, Pale Footed Wolf of India and the Arabian Wolf, the Grey Wolf, and the wild canids of the African Continent,
- To establish a scientific program with the ADCA and specific scientists to achieve the approved aims and
- To recognise that the results of this research must be jointly acknowledged.
- Based on the findings from the research, a long term plan will be provided to secure the future of the dingo which will include:
 - A professionally and scientifically managed breeding program,
 - Efficient records and stud books to be maintained,
 - Optimum and spacious, secure housing to achieve a natural effect,
 - The provision of safe habitats for the release of dingoes into the wild.

The problems arising from this blueprint, apart from establishing the research and finding funding, are:

- Acquiring enough genetically variable dingoes for the breeding program, and
- Expanding housing requirements and fencing to adhere to the aims.

Achievement of the blueprint is not an impossible task but it is beyond the financial resources of most private individuals and zoos that have a passion and commitment to the dingo.

The Australian Species Management Program for Dingoes has been commenced by the ADCA in collaboration with Healesville Sanctuary as the Studbook keeper. It encourages participation by private individuals, zoos, and fauna parks to record their animals on a database as an interim Conservation Register until results of DNA tests are known. The DNA testing has been accelerated by a research grant, however unless concurrent strategic support is forthcoming, the exercise will be in vain.

Supporting the conservation ethic is the main goal for the dingo associations, but this is obscured by bureaucracy, public apathy and myths about dingoes. To conserve the dingo we must have a process in place. In summary, the following activities are crucial to achieve protection for our dingo:

1. The Government of NSW must be convinced

to amend its decision that places the captive dingo under the control of the Companion Animals Act, despite the possible confusion this may cause to the conservation of the pure dingo within NSW.

2. The DNA testing and research program must be prioritised and funded to identify the existence, or not, of localised variants within NSW and whether any remnant wild pure dingo populations exist.
3. A significant, well organised scientific breeding program using captive and wild born “pure” dingoes (if any still exist) should be put in place utilising the knowledge, facilities and skills of dingo conservation organisations.
4. It is essential to have strong organisational support from conservation groups with interested and committed people who will lobby against the process of endangerment for the dingo and effect solutions to the problems that are causing the rapid demise of the species.

Notes: The Australian Regional Association of Zoological Parks and Aquaria (ARAZPA) has stated that “until an objective and scientific method for determining dingo forms is available, all dingoes held are to be managed as one unit and should only be bred with known pedigree lines.” (Regional Census Plan 1996 p 284.)

Acknowledgements

Australian Species Management Program (administered by ARAZPA) Dingo Studbook

Keeper, Carla Srb, Healesville Sanctuary Victoria.

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²Regional Census Plan (1996), Captive Breeding of Purebred Dingoes in Queensland, Discussion Paper.