

Managing the Grey-headed Flying-fox as a threatened species in NSW: finding a balanced solution

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Editors' Note

What follows is the opening address given at the forum on 28 July 2001, including the question and answer session. It was taken from the transcript recorded on the day and has been edited only to render the spoken word into the written form.

PAT HUTCHINGS: It is my great pleasure to introduce to you Brian Gilligan, the Director-General of NSW National Parks and Wildlife, who will open the meeting.

BRIAN GILLIGAN: Thanks, Pat. Could I acknowledge that we are gathered in the Australian Museum thanks to its hospitality. We are also gathered on the traditional lands of the Eora people and I would like to acknowledge that it is traditional Aboriginal land; acknowledge them as custodians of the land, and custodians who also had a particular interest in some of the fauna that we are going to discuss today, I might add. I would particularly like to thank the Australian Museum and the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales for hosting today's function. It is an important function for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The Grey-headed Flying-fox was listed as a vulnerable species in New South Wales on 4 May this year [2001]. That judgment was made by the independent Scientific Committee established under the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* and it was based on the science, as we know it, for Grey-headed Flying-foxes. That determination triggers a process that requires the National Parks and Wildlife Service to undertake the preparation of a Recovery Plan for the species, and in doing that, the Service must find a balanced solution to the management of the species. While the Scientific Committee's deliberations are based appropriately purely on the science, the Service has to take into account not only the ecological and environmental

considerations, but also the social and economic issues that are relevant to our interaction with this species and its ongoing management.

I therefore welcome the opportunity that is provided today to debate and seek solutions to some of the very complex issues that are associated with the management of flying-foxes. I am pleased to see that there is such a gathering of people and that there will be such a wide cross-section of speakers covering many different issues and expressing many different points of view, because that is what we need to advance this process.

To start we shall hear from Chris Dickman, the chair of the Scientific Committee who will explain the reasons for the Committee's judgment on the species. We shall also hear from the horticultural industry to discuss some of the issues that they are trying to deal with in coming to terms with the threat that flying-foxes pose to commercial fruit crops. Obviously, community groups, scientists, and Service representatives will then discuss the various issues pertaining to the conservation and management of the species that are relevant to where we go from here.

The forum is intended to provide an opportunity for people with knowledge, experience and opinions to publicly debate the management of Grey-headed Flying-foxes and arguably of flying-foxes in general. The problems with flying-foxes are typical of many conservation dilemmas. The primary threat identified by the Scientific Committee was the loss of habitat, with the removal of habitat then concentrating the remaining populations in reduced areas. Being a

highly adaptable species, of course the flying-foxes then seek out alternative food sources when natural resources are limiting, and that means that the impact on crops will be variable, depending on localities but also on seasons and whether alternative natural foods are available or not. What we all know is that loss of habitat often results in increased contact between agricultural and urban areas and flying-foxes and it means that there are innocent victims on all sides of the issue.

Following the listing by the Scientific Committee, the Service is required to develop a revised licensing policy for the management of Grey-headed Flying-foxes, which meets the *Threatened Species Conservation Act* requirements. Previously, the species was listed as a protected species under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*. I do not think we can escape an acknowledgment of the shortcomings of the existing regulatory system and the licensing arrangements that we have had in place. They were put in place in recent years in an attempt to acknowledge and address the issues of the impact of flying-foxes on the horticultural and orchard industries. We must come up with a better system and that is part of what we are working on at the moment.

The Service recognises that this is a difficult issue in which conservation interests may conflict with those of horticulturalists. It is also an issue where a limited amount of information gives rise to debate about that information in all facets. There is debate about the accuracy of the numbers and estimates of total populations. There is debate about the accuracy in numbers of animals that are shot in crop damage mitigation activities. There is debate about the numbers that are supplied to National Parks and Wildlife Service in returns as required under licence conditions. We can obviously have debate about all of those numbers and we have to address the inadequacies of our information and make sure that we are working to address that in any new system that we put in place.

I'm pleased to advise the forum of some of the initial steps that the Service has taken to conserve the species and to address some of those information gaps. Prior to the finalisation of the listing and the final determination, the Service worked collaboratively with Dr Peggy Eby to map the known roost sites of the Grey-headed Flying-fox in New South Wales so that this information could be used in the conservation planning strategy for

the species. In addition, the Service has been investigating options for licensing flying-fox control by orchardists. We very much seek to strike a balance between protecting the orchardists' livelihood and ensuring the conservation of the flying-foxes.

Our preferred option, which you will hear outlined in more detail a little later, is to proceed with licensing crop damage mitigation activities under section 120 of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* as is provided for under section 91 of the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* in situations where there is a threat to property. We acknowledge that we must make sure that the new licensing regime is an improved regime on the one we have had and that there is a tighter and improved monitoring of the population as well as the impact on the population of those crop damage mitigation activities so that we can ensure that this action does not lead to any further long term decline of the species.

It is our intention that the interim policy will be in place for a three year period, for three seasons, during which time it is expected that all reasonable attempts will be made by orchardists to adopt other non-lethal deterrents. Further advice regarding the detail of the interim policy will be provided by Kelly Waples a little bit later. I would just like to stress that I think if we are going to continue with any licensing regime beyond a three-year period well then, within the next three years we are going to have to have the very best basis for any such scheme that we possibly can have and we must have filled the gaps in our current knowledge, the critical gaps. Anyone who expects to be licensed beyond three seasons from now is going to have to be able to demonstrate that other crop damage mitigation measures are in fact not available and not workable.

To facilitate finalisation of the damage mitigation policy, we intend to establish a flying-fox consultative committee, which will enable the incorporation of community views into the conservation strategy as it develops. It is expected that that committee will transform itself over time into the recovery planning team to undertake the preparation of the recovery plan for the species. A further task of that committee, as part of the recovery planning, will be to consider the issue of roost site management, which is a major challenge in its own right, as opposed to the crop damage issue.

I am also pleased to announce that, following discussions with the New South Wales Farmers Association, we are working to formulate a pilot program aimed at developing Property Management Plans as an alternative to licensing, with a focus on immediately rating the impacts and identifying ways to develop non-lethal deterrents for flying-fox control. Property management planning is at the moment a relatively unused provision with the *Threatened Species Conservation Act* as a means of regulating and ensuring conservation outcomes, without having individual licensing.

Finally, I wish to thank the members of the New South Wales Royal Zoological Society for organising today's events, particularly Pat Hutchings and I would like to thank the forum organisers, Dan Lunney and perhaps particularly Dr Peggy Eby who has been a tireless advocate for the conservation of this species. Thank you all for coming, I hope your deliberations today are useful, are informative and valuable both for you and for the Service in terms of the work that we have to do from now on to proceed with formulating rigorous and robust arrangements for the conservation of the species and at the same time recognising the difficulties that some people in the community have. Thank you.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

PAT HUTCHINGS: Thank you very much, Brian.

GWEN PARRY-JONES (Wambina Flying Fox Education and Research Centre): Irrespective of what happens, it looks like the shooting is going to go on for the next three breeding seasons. Is that right?

BRIAN GILLIGAN: We believe we cannot avoid the situation of having to acknowledge the difficulties that some primary producers are having. Our licensing scheme will be focused on shooting to scare as far as possible, and absolutely minimising the impact, but we are acknowledging that some licensing to harm flying-foxes is unavoidable in the short term. Our focus is to make sure that we are limiting any such licences and limiting the impact they might have. So, for the first time, as you will hear a little later today from Kelly Waples, we are proposing to put an absolute ceiling on the total number of flying-foxes that can be harmed. Our notion, at the moment, subject to discussion over the next month or so in forums such as this, is that that ceiling ought to be a maximum of one per cent of the lowest numbers for the estimated population of Grey-headed Flying-foxes in New South Wales. We believe that if we can restrain it to that over the next three seasons, then we shall have a management regime which legitimately addresses the social and economic issues and, at the same time, ensures the conservation of the species.

GWEN PARRY-JONES: Has the National Parks and Wildlife Service received sufficient finance to police this?

BRIAN GILLIGAN: We believe we have the resources that will be needed to do the job. It is a case of focusing the existing resources that we have, it is about making sure that our licence conditions are tight, and that our reporting requirements are tight. It will require a very diligent response by licensees in reporting information back to us, and it will require a rigorous audit regime to ensure that we can have confidence, that all of us can have confidence, in those figures and that regime.

GWEN PARRY-JONES: Thank you.

CAROL BOOTH (Queensland Conservation Council): What have you identified as the current problems with the licensing regime?

BRIAN GILLIGAN: Some of that will become evident in the papers that are presented later this morning, but from my point of view the concern is firstly that we have had to launch into a licensing regime as it was originally set up with very limited information about the species. We have now gathered more, so we are in a better position. It is still not good, but it is a better position than where we started off. Secondly, I think some of the licence conditions were not as tight and enforceable as they might have been. Thirdly, I think the reporting regime was not robust and we have not managed to get the compliance with the reporting regime that we need. We need a better audit regime to be able to make sure that the system is robust.

PAT HUTCHINGS: Thank you, Brian.

BRIAN GILLIGAN: Thank you.