

Wild dog/dingo conservation, control and management: The impact beyond the paddock

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ABSTRACT

The impact of predation by dingoes/wild dogs on livestock creates extreme amounts of stress, angst and anger within rural communities. How do we return to a well-managed landscape and once again have positive communication between stakeholders? Wild dogs attack livestock. Dingoes attack livestock. This is the reality. Livestock predation has impacts that extend far beyond the animals that are attacked. It affects people. The basic tools for controlling dingoes are simple, traps, guns, fences and poison. Dingo control fails when these tools are not applied correctly, or one tool is relied on and overused. Proactive management is the only way to avoid generational problems. All stakeholders must invest in the issue. To me, this dilemma is not about the dingoes. It's not just about the sheep and cattle, it's about the people and our communities.

Key words: failed wild dog/dingo conservation; emotional stress; traps, guns, fences and poison; dingo control; pest animal; dog attacks.

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Introduction

Wild dog/dingo management is a complex and emotive issue. Wild dogs/dingoes often sit in purgatory of species definition with no clear answer; are they native or a pest animal? Should they be conserved or controlled? Do they play an important ecological part in the environment or are they a feral pest?

While the debate continues, the impact of predation by these carnivores creates extreme amounts of stress, angst and anger within rural communities. It creates tension between farmers and government land managers. This one animal has had the ability to impact on generations of land managers within our communities. Why?

Wild dog working groups were instigated according to "Plans of Management" to proactively implement strategies and resources to prevent livestock predation by these animals whilst enabling a "top order predator" to exist in the natural environment. These plans bring all stakeholders together as equal partners to understand the objectives of differing land management obligations, both conservation and agricultural production. With proven results of this model in areas of south-eastern New South Wales, positive proactive management has had lasting positive results both for conservation and agricultural production.

Why has there been a shift away from this model? Why have successfully managed areas reverted to reactive control programs? Why have the conversations around wild dog/dingo management returned to being arguments? How do we return to a well-managed landscape and once again have positive communication between stakeholders? How

do we plan and prepare for the future to ensure that the next generation does not live through the pain of failed wild dog/dingo conservation, control and management? How do we protect the objectives and wellbeing of all involved?

Who is controlling dog control?

I live in a farming community, part of the Monaro in south-eastern New South Wales. It's the area between the ACT and Victorian border, the snowy mountains and south coast. The Monaro landscape is predominantly sheep and cattle grazing surrounded by national parks and forestry, which contain present populations of dingoes and wild dogs. Livestock attacks have been an issue in this area since European settlement and the level of control waxes and wanes.

I own and run a sheep and cattle property that backs onto dingo habitat. In addition to the farm, I worked as a trapper across the Monaro for several years and, having involvement in wild dog working groups across the region, I'm fortunate to have had mentors with lifetime's experience in this field. I'm currently employed by the ACT government as the Director of Biosecurity and Rural Services, so some may consider me a double agent.

It is through these varied roles that I've gained my experience in this topic, but today I'm speaking as a farmer and a former trapper. I will alternate between the term dingoes, wild dogs and dogs. In my experience, these terms refer to the same animal but keeping in the theme today, I'll predominantly use the term dingo.



It is impossible to tell the difference between wild dogs and dingoes visually. Photo by Warren Schofield.

Dingo or wild dog. Does it matter? What do we want the dingo to be? What should it look like? What should it sound like? Does it need to be a dingo, or just look like a dingo?

As a trapper I was often asked, how do you tell the difference between a dingo and a wild dog? My response is

Dingo or Wild dog?



The result of a dingo attack Photo by John Coman

simple, “*wild dogs are the ones you catch and kill, and dingoes are the ones that are still out there*”.

It’s that simple. As a trapper you can’t tell, and it doesn’t matter. Your job is to stop them – dingoes or wild dogs – killing livestock.

I don’t blame the dingoes for what they do, they are wild animals acting on instinct. To a dingo, sheep are the equivalent of a three-minute microwave meal, they are easy prey.

Does this top order predator need to be a pure dingo? The answer is no. If their function is to keep the natural balance and manage the population of native herbivores, purity of genetics, or colour doesn’t matter. What is currently in the environment fits the bill, but they will attack livestock if left uncontrolled.

Does it matter, as a livestock producer? No, it doesn’t matter because the impact is just the same. Wild dogs attack livestock. Dingoes attack livestock. This is the reality.

Livestock producers have a duty of care for their animals and predominantly have greater emotional investment

in their animals than a financial investment. We care for our animals. We have significant pride in their health and quality of care our animals are provided. We take pride in how we manage our piece of the landscape. We are protective of our animals, our environment and our communities. This care and emotional investment is ingrained and it is generational.

The mistreatment or neglect of animals is not tolerated in our industry, by our people, or our communities. If this harm is caused by dingo (a native animal) does it make it acceptable? And who is responsible?

This impact is very real

Livestock predation has impacts far beyond the animals that are attacked. It impacts the people. It impacts farmers, pest animal controllers. It impacts government land managers and all their families. It impacts our whole community.

Farmers are very resilient people. The Australian environment ensures this. If you are not tough, you don't survive. Prolonged livestock attacks have an extreme psychological effect on farmers.

Trappers are the thin steel line that stands between conservation and agriculture, the meat in the sandwich. The meat that is often stretched far too thin to adequately service the landscape.

Public land managers, their staff, they wear the brunt of frustrated dog-affected farmers. They are the face of conservation and they're often placed in impossible, unpleasant positions.

The Aboriginal community sees dingo control as impacting on the cultural heritage. Is their voice being heard in this

conversation?

This is a complex, emotive issue that has real consequences which reach far beyond the paddock. These are all our people. We must protect our people above all else.

We do have the tools to control dingoes

The basic tools for controlling dingoes are simple, traps, guns, fences and poison. This hasn't changed much but through research and development the way they're used is always evolving and improving.

Controls must be implemented correctly, monitored and maintained. Dingo control fails when these tools are not applied correctly, or one tool is relied on and overused. No one method will work alone.

Long term programs need to be integrated, each method needs to be complemented by others, to achieve its objective. No one method is better than the other and not every method will work in every location.

The reactive dingo cycle is expensive. Experience shows this approach does not work. The reactive cycle breaks down relationships between conservation and agriculture, it causes unnecessary stress and imposes extreme financial pressure on producers and land managers and results in unacceptable animal welfare outcomes.

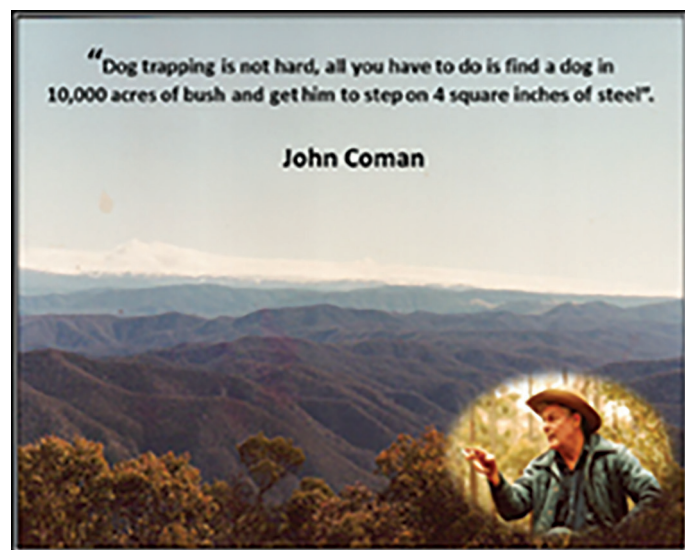
You can break the cycle. The east Monaro wild dog group, where I live, broke this cycle. This resulted in massive decreases in stock attacks, increased monitoring and preventative control measures. Relationships were good and both conservation and agriculture objectives were being met. The pest animal controller was able to undertake additional programs which benefitted

THE BLACK DOG

The emotional stress caused by Dingo attacks not only impacts farmers and their families but also pest animal controllers and land managers and the whole community.



Image by Warren Schofield



John Coman renowned dog trapper in south-eastern New South Wales for over 40 years, mentor to many trappers. Images by Warren Schofield

conservation and agriculture. This also improved local and regional biosecurity. Everybody was winning with this approach.

Unfortunately, our area has reverted to a reactive cycle. Why? Did we have a lack of funding and resources, lack of coordination, communication and succession planning or was it complacency? Simple. It was all of the above. This area was a perfect example of how to get it right and how to get it so wrong. The east Monaro wild dog plan had a very proactive program in place. So good, in fact, that complacency set in and our resources were stretched to cover other areas and funding was eroded. Communication broke down, as did the relationships.

The result; our area is currently suffering the highest dog attacks in almost 20 years and back in reactive mode. The areas that were identified as dingo conservation areas have also been baited. Through poor management over time, our plan has failed, and all stakeholder objectives have been compromised. Our area is feeling the pain of a good program that was not maintained. It was not addressed before it fell apart. This story is unfortunate, it is familiar, and the impact is very real.

The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. By this definition, our approach to dingo management is often insane. I am doing now what I saw my father do 30 years ago. Having the same dingo problems, having the same dingo arguments. Dingo management is a problem that requires vision, forward planning and investment to ensure that the mistakes are not repeated. I don't want my son to be standing here in 30 years repeating the same message. It is often said we need to leave a better environment for our children; personally, I'm trying to leave a better child for our environment.

So why is management so hard?

Why? it's always someone else's problem. I have met farmers who are prepared to do whatever it takes to control dingoes as long as they don't have to do anything. They often don't care much for the ideals of conservationists either.

Government land managers are often totally disconnected from our communities, they undertake control but it's often a reluctant process, only brought about by political pressure. Government land managers see dingo control as a negative. Public land managers get nothing out of dingo control. They get no financial return.

Financial investment in dingo management is important, but emotional investment is more important.



Understanding all the important assets allows better holistic management. Image by Warren Schofield

Biodiversity

Biodiversity is the variety of plant and animal life in a particular habitat, a high level of which is usually considered to be important and desirable. Who says this can't include agriculture? Agriculture is also a variety of plants and animals that is important and desirable. Agriculture is important, part of our environment and our communities, and is desirable and it also needs to be included and conserved.

Proactive management is the only way to avoid generational problems. All stakeholders must invest in the issue. Invest financially and emotionally and be able to identify the needs of other members of the community as equally as important as their own. Identify their place in that community and identify the important assets that are at the core. The environment we occupy is a modified environment. Modified for our purposes, agriculture, urban development, tourism and conservation. We have modified our environment and therefore must play a part in its management.

There are several things that need conserving in our landscape. Our natural environment, our agricultural industry, our heritage and culture, our people and community. They all hold equal value and they all must be managed together to conserve the most important thing, our future. To me, this dilemma is not about the dingoes. It's not about the sheep and cattle, it's about the people and our communities.

The impacts are very real.