

# The dingo dilemma: cull, contain or conserve: Plenary Session 4

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Plenary session 4.

Speakers: Linda Behrendorff; Guy Ballard; Charlotte Mills; Jack Tatler; Thomas Newsome; and poster presenters: Australian Dingo Foundation and Dan Lunney.

The following is a transcript of the plenary session edited for readability.

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**PAUL WILLIS:** Could I have all of the last session's speakers down the front, please, as well as a representative from the Australian Dingo Foundation and Dan Lunney, who are our two poster presenters for this session. Dan, if you would like to kick off with a brief description, into a microphone, of what your poster is all about please.

**PAUL WILLIS:** You don't have to stand up. It's okay, you can sit down. I understand a man of your advancing years.

**DAN LUNNEY:** Our poster is on the distribution of dingoes and foxes in New South Wales, in three parts. The first is a citizen science survey throughout New South Wales. We found that the dingo was concentrated in the north-east. In the second part we used camera data in the national parks – 200 sites with six years of data. Within the national parks, foxes are widespread with a noticeable gap in the north east, but dingoes are mostly in the northern half of national parks in New South Wales. The third part was to look at the camera data for the time of the movement of dogs without foxes and foxes with dogs. What we found was that there's a slight modification in the behaviour of the foxes with dogs. In contrast, there's a major disruption to behaviour of the dingoes when foxes are present.

**LYN WATSON:** (representative from the Australian Dingo Foundation). I think some of the people in the room know me, because much of the research on dingoes in captivity has come from the things we've learned in our sanctuary. I have been living directly with dingoes for 36 years. I don't come from an academic background, but I do come from an agricultural one because, once upon a time, the breeding and judging of dogs was an agricultural pursuit. And I did learn in my many, many years of becoming an international all-breed dog judge, what made each breed different and what was the form and function of that breed. That's where it all started. And all of our domestic dogs have been a direct result of humans changing them. So, always been fascinated by the dingo, I had to get the laws changed in Victoria before I could even own them and then my late husband, Peter, and I decided to set up our sanctuary and make it

available for closer research and to understand the dingo. And understand how the dingo feels about all of this.

I also worked for vets for many years, so I knew a bit about dogs from the inside, and I knew an awful lot about them from the outside. When I got to live with the dingoes, I had them two weeks after I got those laws changed, and in two weeks from that I realised I'd made one hell of a blue. These were not a breed of dog. These were a damn cat in a dog's suit. And we don't only have captive bred dingoes in our sanctuary, we have a number of dingoes that are wild caught and we've actually been able to tame them. We've never been able to domesticate them, but those dingoes are there in our sanctuary for anybody to come and observe and see the differences.

We believe there's three kinds. Kylie is just about there, but we know there's definitely two kinds of dingoes, and it's all based on their adaptation and evolution. I can invite anybody who wants to come and find out just a little bit more of why they're not dogs, and why they're not ferals, they're really special. They're engineered like no other dog on earth. They're smarter than every other dog on earth. Come and visit us at the Australian Dingo Foundation in Melbourne.

**PAUL WILLIS:** I actually had the opposite problem; I own a Great Dane and it's as dumb as a bag full of hammers. I'd like to finish this plenary by following on from what Tom was doing in bringing it all together with what we've done today. And I'd like to go around the panel. It's been 20 years since this first dingo publication came out and from the discussions and presentations that we've had today, there will be the 20-year update of that fine journal. It will be produced, won't it Dan? Yes, it will.

So I would like some reflection from members of the panel on from what we've seen and heard today, have we come much further from this publication 20 years ago? What sort of progress have we got when it comes to understanding the dingo and also understanding our relationships with the dingo. You've got the microphone in your hand there, Dan.

**DAN LUNNEY:** I helped run the forum last time, 20 years ago, and there were quite clear differences across the audience in attitudes to dingoes, and understanding dingoes, but there was also a considerable amount of new information about the biology of the dingo, the genetic work was just starting. That front cover picture of the publication from that forum is a dingo with a genotyping gel adding colour to the picture. What's happened since is a broader spectrum of opinion, with some new terms turning up in the discussion, such as whether or not it's a wild dog. That depends where you are, in the landscape, as to whether this matters.

What's also interesting now is the vast interest and knowledge about dingoes, partly because of new technology, partly because of skills in tracking, genetics, ecology, all of which has made a fabulous contribution. I'd imagine, in 20 years' time, it will be just as exciting, with new opinions. It's one of the most contentious animals in Australia, along with koalas and kangaroos, wombats and flying-foxes

**THOMAS NEWSOME:** One of the most interesting comments I heard today was that despite all the knowledge that we have about dingoes, even on the potential benefits, that the increasing body of research doesn't seem to be influencing policy in any meaningful way.

**MR .....**: I would say the advances that we've seen today, that have built up over the last 20 years since that previous publication, are that we've got a better idea of what a dingo is. We've got a much better understanding of its ecological role and a greater diversity of ways to manage dingo populations in agricultural settings. And I think that we've also come a long way in the diversity of tools that we've got to be able to manage dingoes. Would that be a fair summation of today?

**GUY BALLARD:** I think it is fair. We certainly have a lot of opportunities now and, to pick up on something Tom said about where we go experimentally, we've got a lot of potential treatments. We can't step backwards in our obligation to run experiments for an issue as important as this, at appropriate scale and intensity. So, it's great for students to trial things, get ideas that they need to feed into larger scale experiments to take advantage of some of the ideas that have been raised, and some of the new technologies. Hopefully, in 20 years' time, we'll see people from this group, cohorts to follow, coming back to the first symposium with some answers from experiments run at genuinely dingo size and landscape scale, and using various treatments that people have proposed to see whether they work or not.

Certainly, in western New South Wales, we could move the fence to allow dingoes in, but we know now that dingoes are reintroducing themselves to western New South Wales, so we may not have to. There's an

opportunity there now with the growing dingo population to say what's happening, and that's something that we're taking advantage of over the next 12 months by investing time and research into the issues. So jump on board and fund the experiments in real landscapes with different treatments and we'll share the data.

**PAUL WILLIS:** I've never had to provide a summary of a forum, or a discussion in science, with ending by saying we've done enough research. There's always more research that needs to be done.

**PETER BANKS:** The big concern years ago was hybridisation of the dingo. Is that no longer an issue?

**MR .....**: If we're happy to call everything a dingo, certainly not, Peter. But in places where there has been integration for decades we're still seeing individuals with high levels of purity in the population. We seem to be set up to keep seeing dingo-like animals and dingoes with relatively high genetic integrity.

**KYLIE CAIRNS:** If we accept that there are two or three genetic populations in Australia, and one of the populations is in south eastern Australia or New South Wales particularly, and apply conservation pressure, what can DPI or other government agencies do to better conserve, preserve the population in a contextually appropriate manner?

**PAUL WILLIS.:** A nice simple one for you.

**GUY BALLARD:** I think the first thing is whether we accept that this is the issue, if the community accepts it and if we progress down the path of having strategic management plans that allow it. If they do not accept it, we won't have it. And I'm not trying to be flippant, that's just the pragmatic way that things work in the real world. If people take on board that there is a south-east dingo and its value, then there's an opportunity under existing legislation to do something about it, because we're only required to manage dingoes where there are proven negative impacts.

**DEB ANDREW:** Do you think we've come far enough in this symposium to say we feel that the dingo is an important component of the culture in many areas and we actually need to conserve the dingo? And that in doing that, we actually have to identify the need to conserve the dingo in legislation because there isn't any legislation that is currently identifying the dingo conservation issue? And at a minimum, that dingoes should be conserved within the national park estate, and that the agricultural industry should also be doing its utmost to look at alternative mechanisms to help control dingo populations or individual dingoes, where they're an issue, and be a bit more adaptive, not running sheep on the boundaries of fenced forest areas?

And it's organisations like this, if they don't foster a discussion about the value of the dingo, well, you'll leave it all to the pastoralists potentially and/or anti-dingo people. So I think it's important for organisations to make some statements about conservation of the dingo.

**PAUL WILLIS:** Wouldn't it be deliciously cruel to field that one to Peter Fleming. But instead Dan do you want to tackle that? Don't be frightened.

**DAN LUNNEY:** Debbie Andrew and I discussed whether this statement should be a resolution at the end of the forum. I said "no", but invited Deb to make a statement from the floor.

**ANGUS EMMOTT:** Question to Tom, in your wrap up of the next 20 years, in my opinion, you left out one important aspect and that is talking to, and working with, pastoralists and looking at cost benefit analysis of what Dave [Pollock] and I do, and people like us, compared to the status quo and actually giving some clear directions for wildlife management.

**THOMAS NEWSOME:** Yes. That's a valid point. My research hasn't been in that area. When considering reintroductions and demonstrating the concept of exerting positive effects on ecosystems, it could be done equally in pastoral areas, and seeing whether there are positive or negative economic benefits. I think when we start to do that, we'll start to think about those effects and possibly create greater change depending on the results. I would advocate reintroducing dingoes into areas that are managed for conservation, like national parks, but if there were adjoining landholders nearby that wanted to join in with that effort, well they could join in too, and we can see what eventuates.

**BELINDA BROWNING:** (representing the Australian Dingo Foundation). The message I'm getting from today is that there's more evidence to suggest that dingoes have a very important ecological role, but on the other hand, we've got more control and more culling and more eradication of the dingo in certain areas. The primary tool is 1080 poison. I suggest that there's not enough research being done on dropping a super toxin from aircraft all over the wilderness areas. It's not about susceptibility figures, it's all about non-

lethal repeated exposure. If you read the 1080 review done in 2008, it is very disturbing. The limited amount of data on repeated non-lethal exposure in laboratory trials is really disturbing. I think that's a critical area where we need a lot of research if we're talking about 40 baits per kilometre, it's a serious issue and it needs to be addressed, and it needs to be well researched.

**PAUL WILLIS:** Do we have any comment from the panel on that, or do we take that as a comment. A little Tony Jones moment there.

**GUY BALLARD:** We remain interested in the impact of toxins on the environment, target and non-targeted animals. Two weeks ago we were looking closely at non-targeting, particularly, of meat baits containing 1080 for a range of fauna that is currently considered to be 1080-safe. We will be doing some of that work over the next five years. I accept, not as much as you would like, because it costs money, but we're already looking at resourcing some of that. We don't have better information for the public and for ourselves about impacts.

**BELINDA RYAN:** I'm curious as to what the panel thinks might be the next 20 years when it comes to our traditional owners of the land, and what sort of discussions we might be having.

**LINDA BEHRENDORFF:** I can speak on behalf of where I work, on K'gari Fraser Island. I know that Queensland Parks and Wildlife has partnerships and collaborations with traditional owners. Dingo management, or human management, around dingo spaces can't occur without collaboration and it was sorely missing for many years. Traditional owners will be part of that dingo management team.

**PAUL WILLIS:** In the interests of keeping everything on time and ship shape, which is my job, we need to bring it to a conclusion there. Now before anybody stands up and moves away, the first thing you've all got to do, is not only put your hands together for all of the speakers today. While you've got your clapping irons handy, how about a big round of applause for the guys who organised today. It's been incredible.

**FORUM CONCLUDED**

# PHOTOGRAPHS



Linda Behrendorff, with powerpoint. (All the photos, except one, were taken by Dan Lunney.)



Linda Behrendorff.





Guy Ballard.



Charlotte Mills.



Jack Tatler:



Thomas Newsome presenting the final paper of the day.





Brad Smith (left) and Chris Dickman.



Panel discussion for final plenary (from left): Lyn Watson (Australian Dingo Foundation), Dan Lunney, Guy Ballard, Thomas Newsome, Jack Tatler, Charlotte Mills and Linda Behrendorff (Photo by Stephen Jackson)



Round of applause for a long day in a dingo forum.