

Kangaroos can be assets rather than pests

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For landholders on whose properties kangaroos exist, commercial harvesting is not an option. The result is poorer animal welfare outcomes than if the kangaroo industry were stronger. In recent years a lack of demand has meant that most of the annual kangaroo quota for commercial use has not been taken. Therefore, graziers seek other means to lower numbers of valueless kangaroos so that more income-earning stock can be carried.

Non-commercial kangaroo control also has poor animal welfare and biodiversity outcomes. Non-commercial harvesting is occurring within government-sponsored clusters of exclusion fences. Shoot and let lie means that regulators cannot assess how many kangaroos are actually taken. Regulators cannot monitor either shooter accuracy and skill, or compliance with welfare codes.

Several issues currently faced by landholders, can and should be rectified by increasing the value of kangaroos, support for a stronger kangaroo industry and integrating conventional livestock industries with kangaroos.

Unintended consequences from animal rights campaigns

Animal rights campaigners are achieving their aim of reducing demand for kangaroo products both internationally and in Australia. The consequence is an increase in animal suffering where populations are higher than the environment can support, and unregulated, inhumane control mechanisms ensue. Kangaroos are herded along fences and shot by amateurs resulting in wounding, evidenced by lead contamination and muscle stress myopathy in the few carcasses that do subsequently enter the commercial harvesting industry.

Low value means pest status

In 2018 an average kangaroo is worth \$0.65 kg in the field, carcass weight-. If it were as valuable as a feral goat \$2kg or even a wild deer \$1.50 kg, landholders would have an incentive to co-produce kangaroos alongside conventional livestock and make greater use of commercial harvesting. Doing so would also help address the falling sustainability of many rangeland production systems and strengthen economic activity in rural towns. Overseas landholders in a similar situation have been able to convert wildlife on their properties from a liability into an asset (Wilson, 2018). Wildlife on their properties are used for beneficial outcomes for themselves, their communities, and wildlife species; some examples are red deer in Scotland, springbok and impala in southern Africa and bison in the United States of America. In all these cases, landholders have a form of proprietorship that encourages them to play a role in management and promoting products and creating greater demand.

A stronger kangaroo industry is needed

A stronger kangaroo industry would give land holders the capacity to play a role in raising the quality of kangaroo products, obtaining sustainability certification, tracking provenance and integrating production with other grazing animals. Raising the market value of kangaroo products requires emphasising their positive attributes; including meat that is high-protein and low-fat, low greenhouse gas, lower water use, efficiently produced, and high boning-out percentage compared to cattle and sheep (Chudleigh et al., 2008, Ampt and Owen, 2008, Wilson and Edwards, 2008).

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Innovation in kangaroo management

Kangaroo management could be much improved. Research, coordinated investment and champions are needed to achieve a higher valued better differentiated product. Meat and Livestock Australia, Australian Wool International, plus government departments, both State and Federal responsible for industry development and agriculture, could help. Landholder proprietorship would be encouraged if more responsibility were devolved to them. Populations could be managed with much clearer objectives. Current kangaroo harvesting quotas are set by governments as a proportion of existing (variable) populations. An alternative would be to set population targets based on total grazing pressure that takes account of densities of other herbivores.

The objective would be to integrate kangaroo production into other enterprises and reverse the situation where landholders are expected to carry an unstated number of animals that has no relationship to the carrying capacity of their properties, seasonal conditions or competing land uses.

Environment and conservation departments would still have a role. They would monitor populations and set minimum levels for regions as a safety net at which commercial activity would cease – say 5 -10 million for the national population.

Integrating conventional livestock industries with kangaroos.

Co-production could be achieved relatively easily because the kangaroo industry already exists and is relatively efficient (Grigg, 1987, Cooney et al., 2009). Co--production uses less infrastructure and less energy. Australia needs more professional harvesting, not less. Taking kangaroos in the field might be ugly, but head shot death is instantaneous and there is no transport of live animals to slaughter and so meat is stress free. Instead of being defensive, a progressive kangaroo industry would emphasize these animal welfare advantages.

I would like to ask animal rights campaigners, “Are you aware of the unintended consequences of your activities.” I would like to encourage vegetarians to become kangatarians. I would also like to appeal to graziers; “Why not get behind and promote commercial kangaroo use?” Stronger prices will be achieved through higher quality product, differentiated on the basis of provenance, species, sex and age.

Better kangaroo management is not a threat to conventional livestock. Australia’s 40 million kangaroos are already on pastoral lands and graziers are their reluctant stewards. Indeed, continuation of the current trend of kangaroos being a persecuted pest with poor animal welfare outcomes, could threaten the social licence to produce conventional livestock. I would also like to ask Meat and Livestock Australia and Australian Wool International to work with the kangaroo industry to address this threat.

An alternative future

Many graziers on the rangelands are under financial stress. Their current solution is to produce more meat and wool, to grow more grass, to clear trees, to remove wild dogs to increase lambing percentages, and to **lower kangaroo numbers**.

The proposals here would provide another option for both Indigenous and other landholders on whose properties kangaroos occur, and to nearby rural communities. They would improve kangaroo welfare, reduce current wastage, and enable sustainability. They are paradigm shifting and could lead to less livestock and more kangaroos of higher value.

I’m working with kangaroo harvesters and graziers to prepare an investment prospectus on the topic. If you support the proposals and can help, I can send more information. Please send your thoughts and suggestions to george.wilson@anu.edu.au

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