

# Commercialisation of Wildlife – what price a life?

## Wildlife Under Threat

Tasmanian wildlife is under threat from commercial interests. Bennetts Wallabies, Tasmanian Pademelons, Common Brushtail Possums and the Short-Tailed Shearwater are all the targets of commercial industries. In addition to these species which are native to Tasmania, the Emu, native to mainland Australia, is also exploited in Tasmania. The sub-species of Emu native to Tasmania (*Dromaeius noahollandiae diamenensis*) was hunted to extinction around 1850.

These living beings are treated as a 'resource' to be 'harvested' as though they are a crop of lettuces or a mine of iron-ore. No account is taken of the fact that they have their own lives to live and are not living them for human benefit. Notwithstanding the ethical issue of using wild and free animals as though they are an inanimate object, there are objections on the grounds of both sustainability and cruelty.

The three main industries in Tasmania are worth little money, considering the considerable suffering they cause. The possum industry is worth around \$400,000, the wallaby (and pademelon) industry \$750,000 and the short-tailed shearwater (muttonbird) \$425,000. By contrast, the pome fruit industry (apples and pears) is worth \$45 million, and retail trade is worth over \$1100 million.

## Bennetts Wallabies & Tasmanian Pademelons

There are 30,000 to 40,000 Bennetts Wallabies and Tasmanian Pademelons killed in Tasmania for the domestic meat market every year. Their flesh is used for pet food, and sold as 'game meat' in some restaurants. There is no restriction on the numbers able to be killed, under either commercial or recreational licences.

The skins of the wallabies are also used, with federal approval for 30,000 skins to be exported overseas for the international fur trade. The wallaby and pademelon 'season' extends for a full 12 months!

Shooting, whether it be commercially, 'recreationally', or for crop protection purposes, has a direct effect on the structure of populations. Killing wallabies reduces the average age of the populations, as shooters, especially commercial shooters, generally select larger animals, who are older. Commercial interests influence what (or who) is shot. Although Tasmanian Pademelons are more prevalent, Bennetts Wallabies are preferred by operators due to their larger size.

The effect of shooting the larger animals has more of an impact on the males of the species as they

are generally larger than females. This disproportionately affects the population dynamics by changing the gender balance and may have long-term effects on the genetic diversity of populations. Wallabies have also been shown to start reproducing at a younger age in areas where the hunting pressure is high. It is also likely to change the balance of Bennetts Wallabies to Tasmanian Pademelons. With Bennetts Wallabies targeted in preference, more Pademelons will breed to fill the ecological niche left, given many similarities in the diet of the two species.

Some consumers are turning to wallaby flesh in the belief that it is more environmentally friendly or less cruel than factory farmed animals. However, cruelty is a huge issue in this industry. Shooting a moving target will always mean that some animals escape wounded. Shotguns, banned for shooting wallabies and kangaroos in four other states, as they are less accurate and can result in injury rather than death, are widely used in Tasmania.

Dogs are also used during daylight hours to flush animals out from the undergrowth, and to retrieve shot animals. Tasmania is the only state in Australia where it is legal to use hunting dogs for the purpose of flushing out native wildlife. Hunting dogs can cause extreme distress, severe injuries and death to native animals (see the Lethal Control fact sheet for more information).

Female wallabies and pademelons will usually have one pouch young and a joey at foot. The 'Wallaby Hunting Standard' in Tasmania requires that "pouch young of a killed female should be killed immediately, by decapitation or heavy blow to the skull to destroy the brain, or by shooting". No account is taken of what happens to the still dependent joey at foot. No other baby mammal in the world is treated in this manner, except the baby harp seal in Canada.

As for being environmentally friendly, there is no way that kangaroo and wallaby populations in Australia could support large numbers of people altering their diets to consume macropod flesh. It has been estimated that 175 million kangaroos would need to be killed each year to support current levels of meat eating as they produce less flesh per animal than domestic farm animals. For those concerned about the environmental impacts of cloven-hoofed animals, there are plenty of proteins to be found in plant foods.

## Common Brushtail Possums

Tasmania is the only state of Australia to allow the commercial exploitation of Brushtail Possums. Possums are shot, or trapped and then shot, for commercial use. Possum skins and flesh are exported to the

mainland, and an international market for possum fur is being expanded under the *Management Plan for the Commercial Harvest and Export of Brushtail Possums in Tasmania 2010-2015*, signed off by the federal government. Carcasses are used mainly for pet food, but also appear on the menu of some niche establishments. Currently the quota of possums that can be killed for the commercial market is over 60,000 per annum. This is in addition to the numbers killed under crop protection permits (ranging from 135,000-300,000 per annum).

The management plan, submitted to the federal government by the Tasmanian government, did include a proposal to recommence the capture and live transport of these shy nocturnal creatures to an abattoir for the purpose of exporting possum carcasses to Asian countries (this operation ceased in 2004 when the previous management plan lapsed). The federal government chose to disallow this practice on the grounds of animal welfare.

Claims that a commercial industry will help keep possum numbers under control are erroneous. Possum numbers stabilise when they are left alone. They breed to the available food sources, with numbers stabilising once the balance is reached. The prevalence of the Brushtail Possum is a result of habitat modification and the large ecological niche left with the collapse of the Ringtail Possum population. This occurred after half a century of intense commercial hunting culminating in 1934 when almost 1.5 million Ringtail skins were exported. This was followed by a disease epidemic that nearly wiped them out. Ringtail numbers have never recovered.

The Brushtail Possum commercial 'season' now runs for a full 12 months. Possums may only be taken from specified properties with owners' permission, not from crown land. The extended 'season' is a case of the Tasmanian government bowing to pressure from commercial interest groups.

### Short-tailed Shearwaters

Refer to Issues Sheet No. 2 for information on the commercial shearwater industry in Tasmania.

### Why Wildlife is Not a Sustainable 'Resource'

Killing wildlife for commercial profit has been shown repeatedly to cause extinctions or push species to the brink of extinction. Once a viable market has been created for a wildlife product, there is no stopping the insatiable consumer-driven demand. The short-term drive for profit blinds humans to the long-term consequences. Killing animals in high numbers can lead to sudden and dramatic population collapses. This can occur due to killing the key breeding population, sometimes coupled with another event like prolonged drought or incidence of disease (or in the case of the now extinct mainland population of the Tasmanian Pademelon, the advent of foxes).

There are numerous examples in recent human history,

### What can you do?

- Don't buy wildlife products, wallaby, possum or shearwater, including meat and fur
- Write to the State Government, expressing your concerns about the commercial wildlife industry
- Write to the Federal Government which approves international export of wildlife products, expressing your disapproval. Keep an eye on the government website for any plans that might be on show for comment: [www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/trade-use/index.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/trade-use/index.html)
- Talk to people about what you know – be an advocate for the animals!

not to mention the well known example of the Tasmanian Tiger. Here are just a few:

- Overfishing of many species due to commercial interests. The Southern Bluefin Tuna, a particularly long-lived (40 years) and slow growing species, is now listed by the World Conservation Union as critically endangered, with the population having undergone a reduction of 80% over three generations. Schools of the long-lived species, the Orange Roughy, or Sea Perch, have been reduced to 10% of their original size, and are under serious threat (these fish live up to 150 years!)
- The Bridle Nail-Tailed Wallaby was pushed to the brink of extinction due to the demand for its fur. This species, from Central Queensland, was thought to be extinct until re-discovered in the 1970s.
- The population of Tasmania's own Forester Kangaroo, now a protected species, plummeted in the 1950s and 1960s, due to shooting and landclearing. By 1970, Forester Kangaroos were to be found in only two areas; parts of the Midlands and the far north-east of Tasmania. This was less than 10% of its range at the time of European settlement, and there were concerns expressed for the Forester's long-term survival. The Forester has since been re-introduced to other parts of the state, but its numbers remain relatively low. It is still killed under the guise of 'crop protection permits', with 15-18% of its total population killed in the twelve months to June 2008.
- Tigers have been hunted both for their pelts and body parts for Asian medicine, and due to conflicts with farmers, in Asia. Of nine sub-species of tiger, 3 are extinct, and all are endangered. Tigers continue to be killed for the illegal wildlife trade.

Allowing the commercial use of native animals only serves to financially benefit a few. In contrast, the suffering to individual animals, and species as a whole, is enormous.