

Primary Industry and Native Wildlife

The Issue

Primary industry in this instance refers to industries such as farming, forestry and fishing where wildlife and humans tend to come into conflict.

It has been common practice in these industries to view competing animals as 'pests', 'thieves' or worse, 'vermin'. The animals are usually found guilty and sentenced to death without having ever had a fair trial. The offending animals have been shot, trapped or poisoned in ever increasing numbers since white settlement.

In fact it is this attitude that caused the extinction of the Tasmanian Tiger, and has led to other species being placed on the threatened species list in this state.

Commercialising native wildlife by killing them for meat and food has been touted as a means to give value to the bloodshed caused by this conflict. As you can see in our fact sheet Commercialisation of Wildlife – What Price a Life? Issue Sheet No. 6, the issue is complex. In many cases commercialisation has been shown to cause dramatic drops in species numbers.

It is all a matter of attitude. If we see native creatures merely as opportunistic beings taking advantage of food sources that have effectively been 'laid on', we can change our perspective. These wild animals have no knowledge of ownership. They are simply making use of what has been provided. If we don't want them to take advantage of the tasty morsels that have increasingly appeared in or near their habitat, as the human inhabitants have expanded their range, then we need to think creatively about how to deter or exclude them. Population is directly related to the amount of food available, so by regulating access to the food supply we can regulate the species numbers in a compassionate way. For a little more detail we will look at the issues sector by sector, and how those sectors commonly deal with wildlife problems.

Forestry

The forestry sector experiences browsing damage from Brush-tailed Possums, Tasmanian Pademelons and Bennetts Wallabies on new plantations, both eucalypt and pine. The industry's main response is to sentence the offenders to death en-masse.

Forestry Tasmania shoots large numbers of animals in and around the general vicinity of their plantations and re-growth areas as they are no longer allowed to use the 1080 poison. The private forestry industry can still use 1080, but has not done so in recent years due to public pressure. Forest industries have changed to using shooting as an alternative killing method.

The shape of plantations, in particular the distance from bushland that provides daytime cover for nocturnal browsing animals, is a critical factor in determining the severity of browsing damage.

Although there is no denying that browsing damage to seedlings occurs, seedlings slow their growth or die for a number of other reasons too. Factors such as the time of year that they are planted, the rainfall, the soil type, and insect damage also affect their viability. Sometimes roots are eaten or destroyed by 'bugs' or rot under the ground. The more obvious mammalian herbivores are the ones blamed in most cases.

Farming – livestock

Sheep and cattle farmers may have a problem with a percentage of pasture grass being eaten by Tasmanian Pademelons and Bennetts Wallabies (and Forester Kangaroos, a protected species). This is particularly the case where bushland, that provides daytime cover, is close to pasture. Increasingly farmers are using exclusion fencing to protect pasture. However a majority still prefer to shoot, trap or poison native animals, a far less effective and far more time-consuming option - less effective because animals will breed to the available food supply, and quickly replace those killed. It is the clearing of native bushland for pasture that has led to the increase in the food supply for grass-eating species, and hence an increase in their population. By removing access to excess food, the problem can be removed.

Livestock farmers also kill Forest Ravens. Ravens are erroneously blamed by farmers for killing newborn lambs, when bad management is responsible. Unfortunately, even though research, published in the 1970s, showed ravens were not to blame, old ideas hold on and ravens are still shot for crimes they do no commit, and not praised for the good they do. See Issues Sheet No.4 for more information)

In addition to species that are unprotected or only offered partial protection by law, farmers are also able to kill protected species, such as Forester Kangaroos, Black Swans and Native Hens that may browse in pastures, by getting a crop protection permit from the state government, instead of seeking ways to live cooperatively with these species.

Farming – crops & fruit

The cropping and fruit growing sectors do experience losses due to wildlife. In some cases it is browsing by mammals, in others it is birds that damage fruit and nut crops. Over 60 species of birds across Australia are

regarded as 'pests to agriculture'.

In Tasmania some of the species that are attracted to fruit crops are Eastern and Green Rosellas, Silvereyes, Forest Ravens, Honeyeaters, plus introduced birds such as Starlings and Blackbirds. Not all of these species damage all types of crops.

Ducks, too, are blamed for crop damage, in particular Mountain Ducks and Wood Ducks. (See Issues Sheet No. 3 for more information). Damage is more likely to be severe when natural food sources are in short supply.

The typical 'management technique' has often been to shoot first and ask questions later, without enough knowledge about which species are causing the damage, and what level of damage they are causing. For example, in some cases damage is minimal and the cost of control measures may be more than the harm caused; in others it may be that the wrong species is targeted due to insufficient information on exactly which species is doing the damage. The species targeted may be in the orchard helping to control the bugs, rather than eating fruit!

Bird control issues in particular are very complicated and may change from year to year. Killing birds, as well as being cruel and unnecessary, is unlikely to be a cost-effective method of reducing bird damage. It may also be detrimental in the long term if, for example, beneficial insect predators are removed, causing an explosion in problem insects requiring costly control.

Some studies have shown that only 5% of fields may bear 95% of the overall damage. The characteristics of a property, and the surrounding area, are the most important factors that affect the levels of bird damage. Crops where there are suitable roosting sites, such as powerlines, native or non-native vegetation, are more likely to suffer greater damage. The size and shape of the area is also important, with smaller fields more susceptible, as there is a tendency for birds to feed from the outer edges, so a larger area to edge ratio is helpful. Upper branches usually attract the most damage.

Birds have been shot and poisoned in their thousands by crop and fruit industries, as have possums, in particular, amongst mammals. Fencing and exclusion netting has become a popular non-lethal control in this sector, and other deterrents, visual and auditory, are proving their worth in certain circumstances (see Issues Sheet No. 8).

Fishing

Fur-seals, now fully protected, and two species of cormorant, have suffered the brunt of the fisherman's wrath for daring to eat their own natural diet, thereby competing with humans who are either catching free-living fish, or farming them.

Seals were once commonly shot for the crime of fish stealing. The conflict escalated with the advent of

What can you do?

- 👤 Read Issues Sheet No. 8.
- 👤 Tell people about what you have learnt and question their reliance on killing as a 'solution'.
- 👤 If you live on a rural property, think creatively about solutions to any problems that wildlife may cause and use the resources provided on our website to do research – www.wildlifematters.org.au
- 👤 Lobby the State Government to provide better protection for native animals, and more support for industry in moving towards using non-lethal control methods.

fish farming. For a time they were transported by the Tasmanian Government for their crimes, much like the convicts of an age long gone, to the other end of the state (better than a death sentence, but a long swim home!). Now the fish farming industry itself has responsibility for relocating 'rogue' seals, and a range of deterrents and stronger pen designs are used to solve the problem.

Two species of cormorants, however, are still under attack and remain completely unprotected by law. For more information on this issue see Issues Sheet No. 4.

Other Species

For information on how other species are affected by primary industry, visit the Issues section of our website at: www.wildlifematters.org.au

Just Who is Affecting Who?

Whilst wildlife do affect primary industry, primary industry has an even greater effect on wildlife.

Around one million or more Bennetts Wallabies and Tasmanian Pademelons are shot every year on private land alone, plus there are the huge numbers shot by Forestry Tasmania for which no figures are available. Around 340,000 Brush-tailed Possums are shot annually. These figures for possums and macropods do not include those killed by 1080 poison, with enough laid on average to kill over 300,000 animals. A variety of other species are also killed under crop protection permits. Four-and-a-half thousand Forester Kangaroos were killed in a 12 month period to June 2008. Permits were also issued for Silvereyes, Silver Gulls, Noisy Miners, Black Swans, Native-hens, Wood Ducks and Mountain Ducks, with the numbers killed under these permits unknown. Numbers killed of unprotected Forest Ravens and the Little Pied and Great Cormorants are not collected. We can estimate that well over two million native animals are killed annually in the name of primary industry!