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Wildcare Perspective on the BNTS Kangaroo Debate

Wildcare is a small, not for profit volunteer organisation that has been licensed for many years by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW to rescue and rehabilitate injured and orphaned Australian wildlife in a geographic region of some 20,000 square kilometres surrounding the ACT. Recently, it has found itself involved in a 'cull or not to cull' debate raging over the wild but 'captive' population of kangaroos living at the Belconnen Naval Transmission Station (BNTS).

As an organisation, Wildcare has found itself wandering tentatively through more than its share of 'minefields' over the last couple of weeks as the debate about the Belconnen roos has raged. We have spoken out to ensure that proper dialogue about the protection and welfare of native wildlife includes actual – as opposed to theoretical – expertise in the management and husbandry of kangaroos. In our view, expertise in dealing with kangaroo populations is a commodity that has been in (regrettably) short supply in the debate about the BNTS kangaroos to date.

The original proposal by the Department of Defence for dealing with the fenced in kangaroo population at BNTS was to shoot them. Wildcare became involved with the decision process at this point by providing Defence with an alternate range of viable non-lethal options, which included relocation as an element within an overall ecosystem-wide management strategy for the site.

In due course, Defence acted on that advice and called tenders for the relocation of 'as many as possible' of the kangaroos. However, after the contract had been awarded to Cumberland Ecology (who have experience in the relocation of kangaroos), the ACT Government, acting on the recommendations of a report into ACT grasslands, declared that it would not issue the piece of paper that would permit the transfer of the kangaroos.

In Wildcare's view (and seemingly to a good-sized swathe of the Canberra population), an ACT Government undertaking to review options for the long-term management of the native flora and fauna on the BNTS should have meant just that. Instead, by dogmatically sticking to policy that was made more than a decade ago (originating, as a point of comparison in policy history, from the same year that smoking was banned on Australian international flights) this 'review' exhibits a circular and contradictory argument.

The report into ACT grasslands concluded that the kangaroo population at BNTS is exerting such an unacceptable pressure on the natural environment that all kangaroos must be removed immediately. The report is curious in several respects. First, it asserts that lethal injection is more humane than relocation for only some of the kangaroos. According to the report, the 100 or so kangaroos at the site that are being used as part of an ACT government research project may be humanely relocated. Second, the report does not address any of the obvious grasslands issues such as:

- finding a way in which the kangaroo can be recognised as a sustainable part of the natural environment;
- the implications of the ACT Government's stated intention to develop a portion of BNTS for residential housing; or

- the implications for kangaroo 'management' of advances in pharmaceutical products and knowledge of kangaroo relocation techniques that have become commonplace since the ACT Government's current policy was developed over a decade ago.

And third, relocation of some or all of the kangaroo population at BNTS is simplistically dismissed, in an exceptional bit of circular and *a priori* reasoning, as 'against policy' or not appropriate or feasible, without even one research citation.

The report has been described by the ACT Government as an "experts' report". But the report does not convince the reader that it contains expert opinion; rather, it seems to present the uninformed opinion of experts. The distinction is important.

Defence understands the distinction which is why it engaged Cumberland Ecology on the basis of their experience with conducting actual relocations of kangaroos. It would appear that the left hand of this argument is stuck inside a pile of out-of-date paperwork whilst the right hand is both willing and capable to get job done.

Relocation is not always going to be the answer but the situation at BNTS is unique, at least to Canberra, and governments are required to be accountable and transparent in their execution of public policy (and even more so, in this age, on policy relating to environmental issues).

The RSPCA ACT role in this issue is rightly a source of some confusion. Along with other parties in the debate, the RSPCA position is based on the assertion that relocation is not humane. Wildcare questions how that position stacks up in the face of real world examples involving large scale relocations of 250 kangaroos with a 95% success rate?

People have said that kangaroos are common, so why bother about the lives of a few hundred? We would ask in response, since when has perceived level of abundance provided a basis upon which to make judgements about animal welfare? As a point of comparison in our society's thinking, it is clearly not a basis the RSPCA uses for decision making in its great work on shelters and re-homing for cats and dogs.

Recently, the ACT Government proudly released figures which showed absolute numbers of kangaroos culled/harvested in states across Australia. The ACT Government should probably have done some proportional analyses on these numbers as they showed that more kangaroos per hectare are deliberately killed in the ACT than in any other State or Territory. On the ACT Government's own figures, the claim by animal rights groups that Canberra is the kangaroo killing capital of Australia is entirely justified.

Yes, there has been a good deal of emotion demonstrated by groups opposed to the cull of kangaroos at BNTS, but how does this translate into a reason for dismissal of their argument? Let's recognise the emotion for what it is, consider the weight of opinion, understand what the real world is already doing and ask science and policy makers to catch up. Good decisions depend on good information.

Relocation is possible and should be pursued.

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