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George R. Wilson Australian Wildlife Services, Australia

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Integrating kangaroos and livestock though sustainable wildlife enterprise trials

George R Wilson

Australian Wildlife Services , Canberra , ACT , 2600 , Australia , E-mail ; george , wilson@ awt .com .au

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Kangaroos are abundant in the temperate Australian rangelands where cattle and sheep are raised, competing with them in dry times and being labelled by livestock producers as pests. They are not contained and roam from property to property seeking out best pastures in response to local rainfall. Despite the existence of a commercial kangaroo industry, under current arrangements it is rare for landholders to benefit from the kangaroos on their lands or play a role in their management . To address this , Sustainable Wildlife Enterprises (SWE) trials are underway to find ways to integrate kangaroos into livestock production systems.

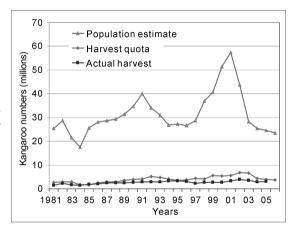
Kangaroo harvesting is the shooting of kangaroos for their meat and skins. The process is regulated under nationally coordinated wildlife trade management plans that have consistently been endorsed by professional ecologists and wildlife managers and their associations. Kangaroos are shot in the field at night using a high-powered spotlight and a high-powered rifle by certified and licensed shooters . A Code of Practice requires head shots and instantaneous death . Most carcasses are processed to human consumption standard and kangaroo meat is currently exported and sold in Australia to the food service industry, retail outlets and also to the pet food industry. Kangaroo harvesters are generally independent small businesses paid per kilogram for the kangaroo carcasses they supply to processors. Quotas are based on scientific studies and rigorous monitoring of population numbers and breeding patterns and are only set for species which are abundant and not threatened by endangerment.

The Figure shows population estimates for 25 years from 1981 to 2006 for commercially harvested species.

Populations can grow rapidly in years favourable for breeding and survival, for example 1996 to 2001, and droughts can depress populations equally rapidly. Figure also shows that harvests are a small proportion of the population and unrelated to fluctuations.

Greater use of wildlife has been made elsewhere in recent years. Notwithstanding that a relatively small kangaroo industry exists, Australia has been slow to follow these examples, and in particular to involve landholders. An impediment to change is uncertainty about resource ownership. Local migration is a key part of the kangaroos adaption strategy to Australia's erratic rainfall.

But this means they move from property to property and claiming ownership or managing them is difficult. Management responsibility is further complicated by state protective legislation and the status of kangaroos as a national icon but resolving these issues is not



insurmountable, as has been shown for equally iconic species, springbok in South Africa, red deer in Scotland, and bison in United States . Regional collaboration in management addresses ownership and local movement issues . The establishment of cooperatives is one solution being trialled that brings together independent livestock producers and kangaroo harvesters and assists in marketing products. Integration of kangaroos also requires landholders to stop regarding kangaroos as pests that compete with livestock and provide no benefit. Such a change in attitude would follow an increase in the value of kangaroos, which could be achieved by improved product control and marketing . Many of the initiatives would emulate the product quality and enhanced description practices being used in the beef industry. Other marketing to increase demand would be based on kangaroos environmentally friendly adaptations such as efficient use of pastures, minimal management inputs and intrinsic capability to reproduce and prosper in Australian habitats and highly variable climate. . Another significant environmental attribute of using kangaroos that will gain prominence when greenhouse gas emissions from livestock are exposed to their cost is the kangaroos low production of methane, leading to low emission meat".

After three years, the trials show that the economic benefits of fewer cattle and sheep and more kangaroos are not immediate, and the incentives for landholders to change are weak. However, with market development, attention to quality and emphasis on a range of other environmental benefits, demand for kangaroo meat could increase and entice rangeland landholders into kangaroo production. Continuing research support is needed to advise and monitor the establishment of cooperatives, marketing, economic, ecological and social issues.

References

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