Handing down THE FAMILY FARM

The disappearing dingo

LINDBERGH camp

3080 Metcalfe Street
Melbourne 3000
Ph: (03) 9209 2680
Fax: (03) 9209 2781
realestate.vic@landmark.com.au

Toowoomba
388-396 Taylor Street
Toowoomba
Queensland 4350
Ph: (07) 4637 3023
Fax: (07) 4637 3055
realestate.qld@landmark.com.au

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realestate.wa@landmark.com.au

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Fax: (03) 9209 2781
realestate.vic@landmark.com.au

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Corner Port Wakefield and
Cross Keys Road, Green
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Fax: (08) 8359 9055
realestate.sa@landmark.com.au

Toowoomba
388-396 Taylor Street
Toowoomba
Queensland 4350
Ph: (07) 4637 3023
Fax: (07) 4637 3055
realestate.qld@landmark.com.au
The dingo howls like a wolf from which it is believed to have descended.
THE DISAPPEARING DINGO

With its survival now on the brink, the much maligned pure Australian dingo could go the way of the Tasmanian tiger. Despite enduring a couple of hundred years of persecution – shooting, trapping and poisoning – some researchers are saying Australia’s top predator could be extinct in 20 years.

Australia has an unchallenged record for mammalian destruction. Of all the mammal extinctions across the planet over the last two hundred years, close to half have been of Australian species.

Endangered species are commonly perceived to be often small and usually non threatening. Hairy nosed wombats, numbats and polka dotted quolls are just some of our animal species undergoing breeding programs to bring them back from the brink.

But rarely, if ever, is the Australian native dog or ‘dingo’ envisaged by the general public to be a vanishing species. Now, however, a contingent of experts, from academics to conservationists, is worried that the iconic Australian dingo could be on the verge of extinction.

Part of the problem say many of the researchers, is that the money which is spent on eradication research could be better directed to determining exact dingo numbers, populations and the level of hybridisation, leading to a much more informed and intelligent approach to our native dog.

Thought to have arrived in Australia some 4,000 years ago, Canis lupus dingo is typically a yellow ginger colour although this can vary. It howls like a wolf from which it is believed to have descended and is mostly found in packs, anywhere between 3 and 12 in number. Successful breeding is by and large restricted to the dominant pair, though subordinate pack members will assist in rearing the puppies. Dingoes reproduce once annually.

When hunting small prey they will usually hunt alone, but when hunting large prey like kangaroos, their preferred food, they will hunt in groups.

First listed as pest and vermin in 1905, it is now protected in the Territories and classed as ‘endangered’ in Victoria.

Even the Oxford dictionary has assisted in the disparagement of the animal with its definition of dingo as a ‘cheat, traitor, coward’ stemming from the Aboriginal meaning of the word.

In spite of decades of bad press, especially concerning stock losses, the dingo now has a growing band of supporters, ranging from shooters to conservation researchers, all of whom are convinced that we should be trying in earnest to save our only top predator.

Conservationists are generally split into two groups; those who view crossbreeding as detrimental to the dingo’s unique nature and those who believe genetics and appearance are irrelevant, as long as the animals maintain their ecological niche.

Adam O’Neill, whose background is as a professional shooter, doesn’t distinguish between the pure bred dingo and hybrids. They all have a part to play in balancing the ecosystem he says. He believes we should see them in terms of their functionality rather than their genetic purity.

“I’ve learnt over the years that the dingo regulates the populations of foxes and rabbits, which are a far greater threat to the environment than dingoes.”

In the early 90s Adam worked eradicating feral animals (foxes, cats, rabbits) from areas which were designated as native flora and fauna sanctuaries. But he soon discovered that when dingoes were present, that the foxes and cats disappeared. By scent marking their territory, the dingoes frightened off the feral animals.

“It’s incredible the power and influence dingoes have over smaller predators. In areas where the mallee fowl (endangered because the foxes take the eggs and the nestlings) is present, once the dingoes scent mark the area, the foxes and cats disappear and the mallee fowl is basically under the dingo’s protection.

While he sympathises with farmers who have encountered predation, Adam believes that if the dingoes are left alone, as the top predator, they will stabilise the ecosystem.
There are many farmers that understand that if we kill the dogs off, the wallabies and kangaroos then become dominant, competing with the stock for feed.

Adam is a great believer in leaving the maintenance of the ecosystem to the species designed for the job.

“In this country there is only one top predator and it’s when you have persecution of that social structure that you have problems.

“If the dingoes are stable and in good shape they will hunt wallabies and wallabies. Whilst like many animals they can be opportunistic, such as if there is a possum or a koala available, they will catch it. But primarily they will hunt kangaroos.”

After monitoring dingoes in the wild for over twenty years Adam has a good understanding of how the dingo culture works.

“If the young dogs lose their parents, the extended family is fractured. The social integrity of the group is destroyed; the young dogs are uneducated about hunting wallabies and wallabies and it leads to stock predation. The greatest problems are where war is initiated.

“If baiting is stopped the dogs will settle down. If farmers can weather the storm temporarily, ultimately they will benefit.”

Adam has been working with Arian Wallach, a PhD student at the University of Adelaide. They have been collecting data to support their observations about the role of dingoes in Australia’s ecosystem. He believes that good science has a critical role to play in separating fact from fiction.

Many dingo defenders compare the potential disappearance of our top predator with the extinction of the Tasmanian tiger, which is another creature suspected of being killed by humans, in their determination to eradicate a so called ‘pest’.

Anyone who has investigated dingoes over the years, remarks on their intelligence and the teaching process that goes on with adult dogs and their young.

This is confirmed by Lyn Watson from the Dingo Discovery and Research Sanctuary in Victoria, a renowned hound expert and judge

“The juveniles are educated by their parents in the art of hunting, beginning with possums gradually advancing to kangaroos. They are also sentient beings that grieve for loss of a partner or young.”

Lyn refers to the fact that farmers overseas have to deal with animals such as bears, mountain lions and pumas without resorting to annihilation. She also argues that most industries have to sustain some losses and those actual figures for losses from wild dogs are quite low.

“It’s vastly cheaper to compensate farmers for any shortfall than to conduct a war.”

Lyn is from the group of conservationists that doesn’t distinguish between the pure bred and the hybrid as far as biodiversity is concerned. She confesses that she has found dingoes to be so intelligent that it has ruined her appreciation for domestic dogs.

“Survivors are of the right morphology and biomass, with the right amount of energy, and the ability to exist on the smell of an oily rag.”

The current Australian policy is to cull hybrids while protecting purebreds, with some areas such as Fraser Island, being set aside as reserves. This has led to some violent encounters between dingoes and humans, largely thought to be the result of both intentional and unintentional feeding of dingoes by tourists.

“I estimate from ongoing reports since 2001 that the dingoes of Fraser Island number between only 50 and 100 animals surviving. They are on the brink. No authority will conduct a population survey on the dingo, not only on Fraser, but anywhere on the continent. We need to alter our conservation policies. The dingo is our only land dwelling predator.”

While much of the scientific research coming from universities and academia doesn’t differentiate between the pure and the hybrid, Dr Ricky Spencer from the native and pest animal unit at the University of Western Sydney, is one who disagrees that the hybrid of wild dogs has a place in the ecosystem.

However he is an advocate for the role of the dingo as top predator and refers to it as an iconic species. And to that extent much of his research is focused on developing a toxin which will eradicate the hybrids, but not harm the pure bred dingo, because they have different genes.

“What we’re doing is using modern technology to save the dingo in the laboratory. It’s cutting edge stuff and we are right at the beginning. Dingoes and dogs will metabolise this drug differently because of the genetic differences.”

To further the cause of scientific examination he urges farmers who have managed to destroy any dingoes to have their DNA investigated by the local field officers to determine whether it’s a feral domestic dog, a hybrid or a dingo.

The world of the dingo is very complex, and even though the public doesn’t know a great deal about the dingo, whenever there is a newspaper story on the dingo they will consider it as a hooligan and an iconic animal.

There does seem to be a consensus, at least amongst dingo researchers, that there is a place for our top predator in Australia’s biodiversity. Whether it retains its place either as a pure bred or a hybrid, remains to be seen.

Story Diane Cummins

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