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Against Kangaroo Harvesting

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If an ecological form of management of wild, free-ranging populations of kangaroos on a commercial basis were genuinely feasible, then perhaps the harvesting of kangaroos would be morally justifiable. By genuine ecological management, I mean a regime in which shooters would assume the predator-niche originally filled by dingos and Aboriginal hunters in Australia, taking out only the numbers of kangaroos necessary to tune the population dynamics of the eco-system as a whole. (For moral reservations with regard even to this ideal scenario however, see Mathews 2012.) But the economic imperative to maximize profit that inevitably kicks in with the advent of commercialization makes this ideal scenario non-feasible. As soon as species become identified primarily in economic terms, they become subject to the logic of the market – a logic which is in its very essence antithetical to the logic of ecology. (Shiva 1989)

Opening kangaroo management to the logic of the market will have consequences for both sustainability and animal ethics.

The sustainability argument

In the policy recommendations of the fictitious report on Sustainable Agriculture and Environment, compellingly set forth by Rob Irvine, the role of landholders/pastoralists in the harvesting of kangaroos on rangelands is not identified. Such harvesting would presumably take place mostly on freehold or leasehold land under the control of private pastoralists. The report fails to consider the economic pressures that commercialization would place on landholders who have been obliged, under the proposed policy, to de-stock their properties of sheep and cattle. Commercialization of kangaroos would create an economic incentive for landholders to increase the size of kangaroo populations and/or confine wild populations to their own properties (via fencing or other methods). Either way, properties would be likely to become over-grazed and hence ecologically degraded. The fact that pastoralists are already prepared to degrade rangelands by over-grazing them, in response to commercial pressures to maximize economic returns on landholdings, implies that they would be equally likely to 'over-stock' their properties with kangaroo as a result of exactly the same commercial pressures. Kangaroos may have a lighter ecological footprint than sheep or cattle, but in sufficient numbers their impact is just as harmful (which is why they are routinely culled for environmental reasons). The profit-based structure of the global economy, together with a lack of legal protection for freehold and leasehold lands, means that pastoralists will have incentives to push their lands to the ecological limit regardless of whether those lands are stocked with sheep, cattle or kangaroo. Environmental regulation will

be no more effective in the case of kangaroo stocking than it currently is in the case of cattle and sheep stocking. In light of this, the sustainability argument for harvesting kangaroos loses its force.

The animal ethics argument

Commercialization, I have just suggested, is likely to induce pastoralists eventually to confine or fence in kangaroo populations rather than merely harvesting wild kangaroos as they pass through private properties. Confinement – and subsequent maintenance of a private herd – gives the kind of economic certainty and predictability that is important for commercial operators. When kangaroos are perceived as the primary product of the pastoral industry, landholders will expect to be able to control the resource. But to control the resource by maintaining kangaroos on private property is effectively to *farm* them. And farming is a form of domestication.

Any proposal that is likely to lead to domestication of kangaroos is ethically problematic. In the process of domestication, animals become indentured to humankind, their own ends and interests entirely subordinated to those of humans. Humans decide where they live, how long they live, under what conditions, when they will reproduce and who their reproductive partners will be. Family structures - key to the social and emotional welfare of kangaroo mobs in the wild - are totally over-ridden by human interests. (Dawson 1995) In this sense domestication raises the spectre of all manner of potential suffering and abuse. Clearly there are no limits to the abjection to which humanity is prepared to subject animals in the process of domestication - factory farming is testament to this. Once domesticated, kangaroos would have no more right to protection from such abuse than other domestic species, such as pigs, currently do.

It is not on the prospect of suffering per se however that I wish to focus here. Suffering is a primary issue for animal ethics generally. But there is another ethical issue which pertains exclusively to wildlife – the ethical significance of the *wildness* of wildlife. In the process of domestication, animals are de-natured and re-programmed to suit human purposes, and in that sense effectively transformed into quasi-artefacts. (Callicott 1980) What, we must ask, gives humanity the right to deprive wild beings of their natural sovereignty in this way? Wild animals do not owe their existence to us. They have ends that are completely independent of ours. They have their own unique patterns and rhythms of existence. They do not belong to us; they are not our property. They belong to themselves. They are, in the terms of Kant's moral philosophy (so beautifully adapted to environmental ethics by Paul Taylor (1986)), ends in themselves, not means to ends of ours. We did not invent them, design them, create them. The biosphere was shaped for them and by them as much as it was shaped for us and by us. In this sense the biosphere belongs to them as much as it belongs to us. Kangaroos are not "our" kangaroos; they are beings with a telos of their own, a unique and important place in a grand system of shared biological destinies.

The fact that many species have been domesticated for farming in the past does not mean that such past instances of domestication were not wrong when they

occurred.[1] That they were wrong when they occurred does not necessarily mean that farming is wrong today. To farm sheep humanely today may be morally unobjectionable because modern sheep are adapted to dependence on humans and hence tolerant of (humane) farm conditions. They are no longer sovereign beings in the manner of their wild ancestors. Generally they owe their existence to us and depend upon us for their welfare; this creates a kind of pact between our species and theirs. (Callicott 1980) We are obliged to care for them but we also have certain rights over their destiny. Such a pact, allowing us rights over their destiny, does not exist with wild species. To take a wild species today and deprive it of its sovereignty by subjecting it to the process of domestication is to commit a serious moral wrong against its members.

The force of the case for the commercial harvesting of kangaroos depends upon an idealization of the projected management regime. It does not foresee the inevitable consequences of creating powerful vested interests in the exploitation of kangaroos. To open up one of the last great remaining wildlife constituencies on the planet today to a voracious and bottomless global market that consistently, everywhere, over-rides every attempt at environmental regulation is to compound our own species' manifold sins against our earth-kin. As I write these concluding lines, five young kangaroos hop past my window, heading for destinations of their own devising, masters and mistresses of their own destiny.[2] To the extent that we have any right or obligation to "manage" wildlife populations in this country, we should be looking for methods of "compassionate conservation", not resorting to the gun, let alone to the ruthless and ungovernable logic of the market.[3]

References

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[1] While it may be true that some species initiated the process of domestication themselves, seeking to insert themselves into the human niche for the adaptive advantages it offered (Budiansky 1995), this is clearly not the case with species such as kangaroos (or emus), which avoid contact with humanity.

[2] For stunning confirmation of just how applicable Kant's category of "ends-in-themselves" is to animals, see the recent Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness: <fcmconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf>

[3] A path-breaking workshop on the notion of compassionate conservation was held in November 2012, co-sponsored by the University of Oxford's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit and the Born Free Foundation. See <www.compassionateconservation>