



Killing for Kicks



Juliet Gellatley, zoologist and founder & director of Viva!, examines why Australia continues its assault on kangaroos and how other countries can help stop the slaughter

It's easy to be emotional about the killing of Australia's national symbol because death, injury, bereavement, pain and suffering are the very stuff of emotion – and they are the products of this slaughter. However, Viva!'s campaign to end the sale of most kangaroo meat in Britain, which saw all 1,500 big supermarkets empty their shelves of the stuff, was a product of logic, scientific research, persistence and determination.

A culture of blame has become entrenched in Australia which results in video footage of farmers engaging in 'pest' control, whooping and shouting with glee as they plough through a mob of terrified kangaroos at high speed in a fourtrack, shooting indiscriminately with shotguns, injuring more than they kill.

It is blame which encourages a smiling, 12-year-old boy to swing a baby joey around his head by the legs and repeatedly smash her head against a rock then laugh and punch the air like a champion for the camera.

Of course, we're told that these images have nothing to do with the 'humane', 'well regulated' and 'rigidly controlled' commercial killing industry, even though it shares the same roots and has been fertilised by this savagery. Which is why, in a 60 Minutes programme on which I appeared, a professional killer was able to admit that he feels nothing when he takes a helpless baby from his or her mother's pouch and beats it to death. It's what enabled an industry vet in a radio debate with me unemotionally maintain that to repeatedly club a joey with an iron pipe is humane.

To support the kangaroo industry you have to subscribe to this culture of blame – and how can this be possible in a developed country like Australia? But then you look across the world and see what happens to whales and wolves, rhinos and tigers, elephants and seals and some 70 per cent of all the wild creatures who are struggling to survive or are facing extinction. Whether you mean to or not, your focus inevitably moves on to Auschwitz and Rwanda, Bosnia and Iraq and you can see the common threads that bind all these together.

It is power, economics, self interest and the suspension of truth which increasingly drives society – all societies – and Australia is no different. To exploit or destroy humans or animals en masse you first have to demonise them and present them as a threat or create an artificial need, as in the case of livestock farming. It then requires only a small, additional step to begin the slaughter but once it starts it develops a momentum and a life of its own. It is this which results in a 12-year-old seeking approval by cruelly killing a creature. He isn't yet aware of it but it is his lifestyle not the kangaroo's which poses the real threat to Australia and the rest of the planet.

Monitoring the massacre and listening to the excuses which drive it is like watching a Greek tragedy unfold in slow motion. As a nation, the course Australia has chosen is based on short-term financial and political expedients which will eventually lead to disaster. The same is true for most other countries but because of Australia's unique and fragile environment, it will be one of the first to hit the buffers. Eventually, it will not be just the kangaroos who pay the price. If kangaroos were a genuine threat, the industry would have had no need to manufacture excuses in order to justify the slaughter.

The original excuse for kangaroo killing was 'damage mitigation' – polite words for pest control. However, it wasn't helped by the industry's own scientists. First, CSIRO showed that wheat crop damage was a myth and that kangaroos aren't keen on any farm crops and can't thrive on them (1). A study of the kangaroo killing zones quickly revealed that kangaroos are largely commercially shot in areas where which produce almost no crops and account for only 10 per cent of Australia's meat production. Despite this, the excuses shifted to grazing – kangaroos have to be killed so that sheep can prosper.

A study by Steve McLeod (UNSW) knocked the legs from beneath this one by showing there is no competitive effect for grazing between sheep and kangaroos even during drought (2). 'Competition' only occurs in the most exceptionally poor conditions. He even showed that sheep can negatively impact on kangaroos, not the other way round. So the focus shifted again – to stock (artificial) watering points (AWP) and the argument that this unnatural water supply had caused kangaroo numbers to explode, causing serious overgrazing.

No sooner was the claim established than a study in Sturt National Park (Strategic Management of AWP for Biodiversity, Conservation and Nature Based Tourism) destroyed it. It reveals that kangaroo distribution is not related to 'water-focused grazing patterns' but is mainly determined by the best grazing and resting spots. Researcher Rebecca Montague-Drake (UNSW, Sydney) showed that because kangaroos prefer to drink at specific times of day, they may be seen in high densities around watering holes, but the animals quickly disperse to the best grazing or resting places. She states "...current lack of vegetation around AWP can be more correctly attributed to sheep grazing pressure, even 20 years after sheep have been removed, than to kangaroo grazing pressure." (3)



Research on red kangaroos by Amanda Bilton and David Croft (UNSW) was even more disturbing when it revealed that far from numbers booming, few joeys survive (4). The average number of young weaned in a lifetime is only 3.7 (41% less than their potential). Half the females weaned less offspring than expected and a quarter left no offspring at all. Only about seven per cent reach adulthood each year and, even worse, red kangaroos are being slaughtered three times faster than they can breed. Without showing concern, other scientists stated at a conference in July 2001 that the average age of red males, who can live for more than 20 years, has collapsed from 15 to just two years old, caused by the industry's practice of targeting the largest animals.

This might not be of concern to the killing industry but it is to macropod expert, Doug Reilly. "In any wild animal if, in a short period of time, you disrupt the normal reproduction processes that have evolved over tens of thousands of years, you are in danger of putting the species at risk." Seals, bison, wolves and other animals have faced extinction after similar destructive 'culling' programs.

Extinction? It's certainly a possibility, remembering that Australia has an appalling record for wildlife – the worst in the world. Eighteen species of mammals gone and another 45 threatened; six species of kangaroo exterminated in Australasia as a whole and four more on the mainland and 17 now classified as endangered or vulnerable. Not bad going in a couple of hundred years!

And it may not be over yet, according to vet and kangaroo expert, Dr Ian Gunn (Animal Gene Storage Resource Centre of Australia): "...the current situation will ultimately reduce the mature weights and sizes of future generations and could lead to a decrease in the ability of the population to survive.(5) ...the continued slaughter of kangaroos has the potential to cause the extinction of a number of remaining species. (6)"

If there was any doubt left that kangaroos are pests and compete with sheep, it was finally laid to rest by Gordon Grigg, the man who first encouraged the slaughter with his bible, *The Commercial Harvesting of Kangaroos in Australia*. It had previously been claimed that one kangaroo equalled one sheep in its grazing demands, forgetting to add that at about 100 million, the actual number of sheep far outstrips even the most ambitious estimate for kangaroos.

Grigg finally did some research and discovered that one sheep equalled almost five kangaroos - so estimates of their grazing pressure had been 500 per cent out and the excuse for killing kangaroos was therefore also 500 per cent out. Unsurprisingly he concluded: "The hope of getting a significant improvement in wool production by pest control of kangaroos is probably doomed to failure." (7)



If you were naive you might think that this demolished the last excuse of the industry and killing would be ended. Governments are much more duplicitous than this, particularly when a few votes are at risk in remote rural areas. They simply removed the need to prove damage mitigation at all – in other words, anyone can now kill kangaroos simply because they're there.

Those of us who oppose the slaughter warned that once an industry is started it has its own imperatives and would kill increasing numbers of kangaroos, even if populations crashed. Even the Queensland government can claim full marks for its farsightedness on this score despite its questionable reasoning. It said in 1984:

"It is important to recognize that while the kangaroo industry was originally a response to the pest problem caused by these animals it has now come to exist in its own right as the user of a renewable natural resource and thus serves its own interests".

The safeguard against these interests dominating and resulting in over exploitation, we were assured by the industry, was a failsafe scientific model which would show when numbers were under pressure. It fell at the first hurdle.

No sooner were the words out than drought struck and kangaroo numbers crashed – red kangaroos by more than 50 per cent. The Kangaroo Industry Association of NSW sent an impassioned plea to Government (NPWS) asking it to curb the numbers still being killed as pests. It included these words:

“I’m sure I need not remind you that extensive computer modeling has suggested that the one strategy most likely significantly to depress kangaroo populations to extremely low levels in the long term, is heavy culling immediately before the breaking of a long-term drought... We believe that any such cull is not necessary ... unless of course it is the intention to place the population under an unsustainably high level of culling pressure.”

Culling was not curbed but the NSW Government extended commercial killing into new areas previously seen as unproductive simply to keep the number of carcasses flowing. It was condemned even by some who had previously been gung ho about the industry. We can only assume that the intention was to place kangaroos under unsustainably high pressure. So much for scientific models, which are now doing for kangaroos what they have done for fish - encouraging extinction by pretending to have scientific rigour.

Having been stripped of all other excuses, the final and most crass claim is increasingly being pushed – kangaroos are destroying the country’s environment! A primary school kid could demolish this one. Unique animals with long, soft feet flit over the delicate scrub – an environment with which they have evolved over millions of years and are an essential part of. Their toe nails make small holes in the ground – holes into which salt bush seeds are washed to germinate and be protected. They are animals which nibble at vegetation rather than tug at it, pulling out the roots and are finally attuned to the native vegetation.

There are two alien animals, of course, which do none of these things and which are inexorably turning the outback into desert – 160 million sheep and cattle. The desperation of those who are building careers out of the exploitation of Australia’s wildlife – people like Michael Archer (Australian Museum) – is laughable. Eat kangaroos instead of sheep and cows they say – they’ve even received a \$120,000 grant from government to help them say it. About 1,700,000 tonnes of farmed meat is produced each year. To provide this amount of meat from kangaroos, their total population would have to be 566 times bigger than it is and every one of them would have to be killed every year.



Without State and Federal government support, the kangaroo industry would be a shadow of what it is and far more vulnerable to attacks by groups such as Viva! Not only does it receive grants to increase its kill quota, the Government is prepared to fight its battles for it. As the Australian meat industry stated in the food press:

"When Viva! successfully lobbied Tesco in the UK to remove kangaroo meat from sale, the deputy Prime Minister contacted the chairman of Tesco to plainly state that kangaroo meat production meets every required standard. But despite the intervention Tesco still pulled the meat from sale." (8)

The important point is that David can still take on Goliath and win! But there have to be more victories because if a rich country such as Australia can ravage its wildlife for export, it shows a massive green light to every impoverished country in the world. So this is not just about saving kangaroos - but all wildlife. Ironically, it is also about saving Australia!

Australia lies firmly in the belt of semi-arid land that girdles the globe making up one-third of its surface area. These are amongst the most fragile of all rangelands and grazing pressure, land misuse and clear felling of tree cover is inexorably turning them to desert – nowhere more so than Australia. The environmental disaster caused by the hard hooves and destructive eating habits of cattle and sheep is already well advanced. Scapegoating the kangaroo is simply a way of pretending to people that action is being taken. Sadly, it is entirely the wrong action.

The fate of Australia is being determined by butchers and bakers and candlestick makers who have traded sustainability and long-term ecological survival for a fist full of foreign dollars today. When the question is finally asked – “Who was responsible for this catastrophe?” the culprits will have disappeared and no one will even remember their names.

The KIAA issued a statement on its website when Viva! targeted Adidas for its use of kangaroo skin in football boots. It said:

"A United Kingdom based radical animal liberation organisation (sic) has launched a campaign targeting Adidas... This (soccer boot) market is vital to the kangaroo industry. Without it underpinning kangaroo skin prices the entire industry would be at risk.... Adidas have received to date over 10,000 emails complaining about their use of kangaroo leather...and are obviously concerned about damage to their image.... The Kangaroo Industry is under attack and needs your help." (9)

You bet your sweet life it is and everyone in Australia should fervently hope that we win.

Viva!'s UK Campaign to End the Sale of Kangaroo Products

According to the Kangaroo Industries Association, 80 per cent of kangaroo meat sold for human consumption is exported overseas. This illustrates the need for international campaigns. Viva! ran a successful three-year campaign from 1997 to 2000 to stop the sale of kangaroo meat from supermarkets in the UK. A chain called **Sainsbury's** seemed the most determined to keep selling the meat and supplied it nationwide. It vigorously defended the trade but suddenly withdrew one week before Viva! was due to run another Day of Action outside its stores to highlight the suffering caused by the kangaroo killing.

The Days of Action involved more than 100 local Viva! groups holding photocalls, demonstrations and talking to the public at any one time at stores all over the

nation. **Tesco** withdrew from the trade after an extensive campaign by Viva!. **Somerfield** has refrained from introducing kangaroo meat in over 500 stores due to Viva!'s campaign and large contract caterers acknowledged Viva! as the reason they stopped selling the meat. The British public support for Viva!'s campaign was huge, with many people refusing to shop at stores that sold kangaroo meat.

This quote from the Australian newspaper, **Northern Territory News**, shows the **success of Viva!'s campaign**:

'South Australia-based Australian Meats, one of five major exporters of kangaroo, said that **the ban on the sale of meat in Britain had destroyed its \$1 million a year export business**. The company handed back their export licence and Dennis Grantham, the manager said:

"We have stopped production altogether to Britain... we were exporting close to 400 tonnes of kangaroo meat a year. The decision has also affected our exports to other countries including the US."

After the success of this campaign, Viva! turned its attention to football. The connection? Companies such as Adidas kill kangaroos for their skin – for football boots and the kangaroo industry is desperate to nurture this trade.

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