

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELAND SOCIETY
BIENNIAL CONFERENCE**

Official publication of The Australian Rangeland Society

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Form of Reference

The reference for this article should be in this general form;
Author family name, initials (year). Title. *In*: Proceedings of the nth Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference. Pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Australia).

For example:

Anderson, L., van Klinken, R. D., and Shepherd, D. (2008). Aerially surveying Mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.) in the Pilbara. *In*: 'A Climate of Change in the Rangelands. Proceedings of the 15th Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference'. (Ed. D. Orr) 4 pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Australia).

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The Australian Rangeland Society

KANGAROO MANAGEMENT – A BRIEF HISTORY, CURRENT ISSUES AND THE FUTURE

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HISTORY

Commercial use and export of kangaroos can be traced back to the 19th century. Legislation also encouraged the destruction of kangaroos, and bounties were sometimes available.

The commercial use was restricted to kangaroo skins until the early 1960s when a meat industry emerged. Standards and practices were vastly different to those of today. The ban on the export of kangaroo products from Australia for approximately two years in the early 1970s affected the kangaroo industry at the time and resulted in changes to the way kangaroos were managed.

KANGAROO MANAGEMENT TODAY

Today, kangaroos are managed in accordance with management programs and annual commercial quotas that must be approved by the Commonwealth. The States licence and monitor those involved in the harvesting and processing of kangaroos. The States also monitor kangaroo populations directly through aerial surveys and indirectly through returns from the kangaroo industry.

Campaigns undertaken nationally and internationally by animal welfare and conservation groups against the commercial kangaroo industry have been very effective. The negative impact on certain markets by animal welfare and conservation groups has restricted the number of kangaroos harvested. In most years, it is not the commercial quota that restricts the number of kangaroos harvested, but demand for the product. If the industry can not use the kangaroos then they will not be taken.

For the past two decades kangaroo management in NSW has focused on the management of kangaroos with the commercial kangaroo industry as the primary tool. In effect kangaroo management has focused on the killing of kangaroos and not the wider issues such as tourism, watering points, the impact of kangaroo grazing in the rangelands and the relationship between kangaroos and other herbivores.

ROLE OF RESEARCH

Research has been an integral part of kangaroo management program development, e.g. aerial surveys, kangaroo population dynamics. Several current and proposed research projects will affect the development of new kangaroo management programs. However, the planning and implementation of kangaroo-related research should be given a greater emphasis.

Kangaroo management is characterised by complex issues and vigorous interest groups that are frequently diametrically opposed. Research may increasingly provide the basis for decisions in an environment where good information is being demanded by all interest groups. This of course is not unexpected, however, at some time in the research planning process a thorough assessment that considers the complex issues and variables should be conducted. For example, given the priority that animal welfare must be given, management options that increase animal welfare concerns should not be contemplated.

One key consideration in the assessment process must be that kangaroos are wild animals. Generally, it should not be assumed that wild kangaroos can be equated or assessed in the same manner as domestic grazing animals.

CURRENT ISSUES

Recent publications, including Croft (2000) and Pople & McLeod (2000), provide an analysis of what is known about the grazing impacts of kangaroos, and the relationship between kangaroos and other grazing animals. As long as the understanding of plant-herbivore and herbivore-herbivore interactions remain quite poor (Pople & McLeod, 2000), it is unlikely that the impacts of kangaroo grazing will be sufficiently understood.

It is highly likely that as the kangaroo management debate progresses the wider issues associated with it will gain increased prominence. Indeed, the NSW Kangaroo Management Advisory Committee (KMAC) is presently conducting a review of kangaroo management in NSW. Convened regularly for over ten years, the KMAC is the State Government's primary forum for the review and analysis of kangaroo management and associated issues. The membership of the KMAC includes landholders, animal welfare and conservation groups, the kangaroo industry and government agencies. Through membership on the KMAC these groups have direct input into kangaroo management in NSW.

THE FUTURE

Landholder organisations regularly petition for policies and a management program that will reduce kangaroo densities using the commercial kangaroo industry. There is some potential conflict because these same organisations also want a sustainable commercial kangaroo industry. Pople & McLeod (2000) discuss this conflict where a reduced density that meets the desires of landholders may be at odds with a sustainable industry.

Kangaroo management zones where the commercial quotas are regularly taken are areas most likely to satisfy the landholders desire for kangaroo population control using the commercial kangaroo industry. While Queensland has regularly taken the red kangaroo quota, they do not have a zonal system of management or a system of management that attempts to allocate the quota across properties in a zone. Therefore the quota was taken primarily from high harvest areas that may be related more closely to kangaroo industry convenience (i.e. proximity to towns and sealed roads) than the kangaroo populations.

Since 1996, parts of far western NSW have taken the majority of the quota each year. In 1999, nearly all the quota was taken in an area from Tibooburra in the north to Wentworth and Balranald in the south. This is approximately two-thirds of the Western Division. It is possible that the quotas will continue to be taken in these areas for a number of years to come.

DROUGHT AND THE FUTURE

At some time in the future a severe and widespread drought similar to early 1980s will reduce kangaroo populations across NSW. A run of years where the quota is significantly less than the amount the kangaroo industry desires is likely. It is a period that all interest groups should carefully consider when kangaroo management programs and practices are reviewed.

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