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# **ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE KANGAROO INDUSTRY IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA: AN INTRODUCTION TO CURRENT RESEARCH**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Kangaroos are culturally significant to Aboriginal people but Aboriginal people are generally not involved in kangaroo management or in the commercial kangaroo industry. Our research has provided the first opportunity for Aboriginal people in South Australia to present their perspectives on the commercial harvest of kangaroos. We found a diverse range of views on this topic from Aboriginal research participants, but a commonality is the desire to be involved in decision-making processes for kangaroo management. The successful involvement of Aboriginal people in kangaroo management requires improved communication and greater understanding of cultural considerations and the diversity of Aboriginal perspectives.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper introduces current research which is addressing a lack of understanding about social issues that influence the sustainable development of the commercial kangaroo industry. This research involves the examination of the kangaroo industry in terms of social and institutional factors that influence commercial harvest with the aim of improving understanding of the factors that act as constraints to industry development and limit the industry's ability to contribute to the economic viability of rural and remote communities. An outcome of this research will be recommendations for institutional and policy changes that deliver social and economic benefits to industry stakeholders and to rural communities.

An integral component of this research is the consideration of indigenous perspectives about the commercial harvest of kangaroos. These perspectives have not been previously researched nor considered in the management of the commercial harvest of kangaroos. Further, there are very few Aboriginal people involved in this industry and there are no mechanisms for the inclusion of indigenous people in decision-making processes for management. This is the case despite various agencies advocating indigenous involvement in the commercial harvest of kangaroos as a pathway for economic development (ATSIC and DPIE 1997).

The indigenous component of the research project is designed to produce recommendations for ethical and appropriate consideration of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and values associated with kangaroo harvesting, and improved capacity for equitable and appropriate Aboriginal involvement in the kangaroo industry through better understanding of indigenous aspirations and cultural considerations. This paper first provides some background to the commercial kangaroo industry and then summarises research findings about Aboriginal perspectives and issues regarding the commercial harvest of kangaroos.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE COMMERCIAL HARVEST OF KANGAROOS**

The commercial kangaroo industry emerged as a pest control mechanism for rural communities in response to increased abundance of the larger species of kangaroos (e.g. red kangaroos, eastern and western grey kangaroos, and euros). In the past, the prolific explosion in populations of the larger

species of kangaroos was often explained as the result of reducing dingo populations but, while dingo predation does impact on kangaroo density, current knowledge tells us that kangaroos were a beneficiary of landscape alteration caused by pastoralism. Landscape changes, such as the conversion of wooded areas to pasture and the provision of watering points for stock, and dingo control measures, such as the construction of the dingo fence and baiting activities, resulted in kangaroo overabundance and the labelling of the kangaroo as an agricultural pest (Pople and Grigg 1999).

Sustainable harvest of kangaroos is justified by the argument that large numbers of kangaroos cause problems for rangeland production and conservation values. Without a commercial kangaroo industry, pastoralists would still act to control kangaroo numbers, but there would be no monitoring mechanisms for the cull and the culled kangaroos would be wasted rather than utilised as a valuable resource. Also, some commentators suggest that in the absence of commercial harvest, pastoralists could opt for the cheapest and most effective means for reducing local kangaroo populations (such as poisoning water sources or non-professional shooting) which would not necessarily be the most humane or sustainable options (Pople and Grigg 1999).

Under current legislation, kangaroos are managed by the Crown and their harvest is controlled by state National Parks and Wildlife authorities through a quota system and the issue of tags to licensed shooters, landholders or meat processors. As state governments are primarily responsible for developing and implementing kangaroo management plans, the management of kangaroos varies to some extent from state to state. Despite some variance in approaches to management, in all states current kangaroo management plans emphasise conservation values and aim to maintain species across their ranges while reducing deleterious impacts on pastoral activities through sustainable harvest (Ramsay 1994).

## **ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES ABOUT THE COMMERCIAL HARVEST OF KANGAROOS**

This research has explored the perspectives and aspirations of Aboriginal people in two cultural regions of South Australia, the Western Desert cultural region and the northern Flinders Ranges. Research methods were primarily qualitative involving consultations with authoritative Aboriginal people about their perspectives, aspirations and how they see their rights and interests in relation to the commercial harvest of kangaroos. This enquiry found that cultural protocols and other issues influence the engagement of Aboriginal people with the commercial kangaroo industry. However, there is not one perspective or view point that is common for all Aboriginal research participants. Rather, there is a range of indigenous views regarding the commercial kangaroo industry.

For some Aboriginal people, strict cultural protocols preclude any involvement in the commercial harvest, while for people from other regions, where the cultural laws concerning kangaroos are quite different, there is interest in developing businesses based on kangaroo harvest. Despite the diversity of views about commercial kangaroo harvest, Aboriginal people across South Australia highly value kangaroos and desire to be included in decision-making processes for kangaroo management.

### **Cultural considerations**

Many Aboriginal people consider that eating kangaroo is important for their physical and cultural health. Kangaroo meat is known to be a lean and healthy product, but for some Aboriginal people the health benefits of kangaroo are also inextricably linked to the spiritual and cultural. The cultural protocols involved in the harvest, preparation, distribution and consumption of kangaroo vary according to the customary practices of particular language groups. While customary protocols differ across South Australia, the cooking of the entire carcass is a widespread preference. In some cultural regions of South Australia the customary protocols regarding kangaroo are strict and the consequences

of not following customary protocols very serious. Thus, for some South Australian Aboriginal people, it is culturally inappropriate to purchase kangaroo meat that has been processed according to non-indigenous laws and practices.

As the cultural protocols of kangaroo harvest are not catered for by the commercial industry, it is important for Aboriginal people to be able to hunt kangaroos. In consultations with Aboriginal people during this research, issues of access to kangaroos were raised. We found that Aboriginal hunters may face difficulties accessing kangaroos due to regulatory requirements of gun ownership, economic considerations such as the cost of a vehicle, and difficult relationships with landholders may mean they do not feel secure and confident when hunting on pastoral leases. Problems such as these are impacting on the ability of Aboriginal people to access kangaroo meat.

During the course of this research project a proposal for the establishment of a unique indigenous business venture based on the harvest of kangaroos for the Aboriginal market in the Port Augusta region emerged. Unlike existing methods employed in the commercial harvest of kangaroos, this enterprise has been developed to take account of Aboriginal cultural values and protocols. While this business proposal fits poorly into the current institutions that govern commercial kangaroo harvest, the South Australian government has responded favourably to the proposal. Business planning and establishment is continuing with the prospect of starting to sell kangaroos to Port Augusta people early in the 2004/5 financial year. Further developments regarding this business venture will be reported on in due course.

### **Indigenous involvement in kangaroo management**

The advice that the Aboriginal people consulted provided about addressing Aboriginal perspectives and interests in commercial kangaroo harvest is quite simple. Generally, people want the opportunity to discuss their views and issues about kangaroo management and have meaningful input into decision-making processes. The successful promotion of Aboriginal involvement in kangaroo management is dependent on effective communication and trusting relationships. While this research has found that these are not often present, capacity building approaches that aim to develop mutual understanding between Aboriginal people and other stakeholders in the kangaroo industry could redress the situation. The employment of Aboriginal people in kangaroo management programs and education programs for stakeholders are ways in which capacity for understanding may be improved.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has provided a brief description of current research exploring social aspects of the commercial kangaroo industry with particular emphasis on the issues and perspectives that the industry presents for Aboriginal people. An important finding is that there is no one perspective on commercial kangaroo harvest common to all Aboriginal research participants. While cultural considerations influence the perspectives of Aboriginal people about the kangaroo industry, cultural protocols surrounding kangaroos vary between language groups. There is potential for the appropriate engagement of Aboriginal people in kangaroo management through greater understanding and respect for the diversity of indigenous culture and protocols regarding native wildlife.

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