

# Roogate



Author and Sydney University associate professor **David Brooks** tries to understand the almost inexplicable basis for the ACT government's annual reign of terror on communities of Eastern Grey Kangaroos in Canberra and nearby public land.



This is happening in a national context where commercial meat and hide 'harvesting' of millions of kangaroos and large-scale massacres by some landholders (particularly in Queensland at the moment), threaten to reduce the kangaroo to koala status – another iconic Australian, now listed as endangered – also once considered to be limitless and killed in the millions for the fur trade or due to human desire for its habitats.

**SHOT UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS**, buried in mass graves in the forest. But this isn't Srebrenica in 1995, this isn't Poland in 1942. The shooters aren't rogue militants or members of the SS. They are sub-contractors paid by the government of the Australian Capital Territory, and the victims are not humans but a different species of animal. Many of them female, with, at foot or in the pouch, joeys who will be clubbed to death, decapitated, or otherwise summarily dispatched, if they are looked for at all.

This is part of a campaign of annual mass killing of kangaroos that has been going on in the ACT since 2009, almost 11,000 buried on reserves according to a recent account.<sup>1</sup> This figure doesn't include almost 14,000 killed by the Department of Defence on licence from the same government (dubbed that government's 'dirty secret'<sup>2</sup>) or the far larger number killed yearly by rural landholders under individual licences from the ACT government (11,455 in 2015 alone<sup>3</sup>).



Belconnen 2008.

Why this killing is happening is hard to determine. It is almost certainly not for the reason – that kangaroo 'overgrazing' is 'threatening biodiversity' and destroying one of the last areas of temperate grassland in Australia – put forward by the ACT government.

The principal reason stares us in the face – or would, if so many hadn't turned their back on it, as is usually the case when there is (I apologise for the animal metaphor) an elephant in the room. The rapid expansion of the National Capital in recent decades and the extensions of supporting infrastructure have had a devastating impact upon kangaroo habitat. *Humans* are the greatest threat to biodiversity; nothing destroys an area of natural temperate grassland like a new suburb. Kangaroos are quite simply being forced to pay the price for human priorities.

And for them, as scapegoats, the situation is in fact an awful, compounding abyss. If they migrate to avoid the new suburbs their numbers intensify in and increase the pressure on adjoining grasslands; if they move into the suburbs in search of grass when their adjoining grazing areas are exhausted, their encounters – and conflicts – with humans increase.

The expanding suburbs multiply the number of roads across kangaroo territory, making movement more dangerous, increasing the number of encounters with cars; kangaroos are shot because their numbers are deemed by some to be too great for their diminishing grazing areas, and the traumatic impact of these shootings (the slaughter of friends, family, destruction of social networks), plus the cars, the deprivation of native habitat, affect their character, lead to what some call 'aggressive' behaviours (read post-traumatic stress, PTSD) that erode the sympathy of the *human* community and make kangaroos even more vulnerable to human aggression.

Although unofficial and peri-official communications occasionally admit some of this,<sup>4</sup> the *official* position of the ACT government is, as I have stated, quite different. The kangaroos are eating down the biomass (just call it grass, since a kind of verbal obfuscation has marked the government's attempts to justify this campaign).

With the kangaroo population now drastically reduced in some of its KMUs ('Kangaroo Management Units': read parks, wildlife reserves, reclaimed and rezoned grazing properties, the airport, the Department of Defence's weapons training range), leaving a biomass (grass, weeds) that is rapidly growing, the ACT government has recently brought in cattle (cattle!, whose hooves, unlike the feet of the kangaroo, which have evolved to such conditions, do so much damage) and employ controlled burns to reduce the grass.



New management of sensitive ACT reserve grasslands: cattle grazing, burning. Photographed 2016.

The ACT government claims that, when the *kangaroos* reduce the biomass (as contrasted, let's say, to rapid urban expansion), it has a detrimental effect on some species of flora and fauna – the Grassland Earless Dragon, the Striped Legless Lizard, the Golden Sun Moth, the Perunga Grasshopper, the Button Wrinklewort – whose populations and species-viability are endangered.

But the ACT's Senior Ecologist, who would appear to have had a significant role in the genesis of this program of mass killing, and whose PhD thesis looked at the possibility of 'overgrazing' by Eastern Grey Kangaroos (a conflict of interest there?), has actually admitted in public that the ACT government's reference to endangered species is largely a PR exercise.<sup>5</sup> And of course it is, since the same government has already taken measures (eg fenced 'kangaroo exclusion zones') to ensure the species-safety of these endangered creatures (yet is prepared to expose them to the feet of cattle, and will do less to control the foxes and feral cats who prey upon some of them).

Leaving aside the facts that the means of determining optimum biomass are far from clear, and that the ACT government hasn't yet produced any real evidence that the killing of the kangaroos has had any positive effect upon the population of the aforementioned small reptiles and other endangered species, there is also, and one would think most importantly, the matter of how the number of kangaroos to be killed each year is arrived at in the first place.

The ACT's Senior Ecologist (again) is on public record as having admitted to a 2013 hearing of the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal (ACAT) that he couldn't remember how he had arrived at some of these figures.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed a special report, commissioned by the ACT government and undertaken by an invasive-mammal specialist from New Zealand and a Victorian expert in pest species<sup>7</sup> (more conflict of interest here?) recommended in 2014 that the ACT government not only be more rigorous and transparent concerning their kangaroo-counting methods, but that it not use the term 'carrying capacity' when it came to the ideal number of kangaroos per hectare in the KMUs, since it had no real way of knowing what this capacity was.

The report recommended that the ACT government use instead the term 'target density', which if nothing else is a great deal more honest (its sad pun aside). But the ACT government is no more convincing now than it was before in terms of its kangaroo-counting methods – in fact appears to employ methods which its own consultants recommended it *not* employ – and still uses the term 'carrying capacity' rather than 'target density'.<sup>8</sup> 'Carrying capacity', after all, sounds a lot more like they know what they are doing.

According to the ACT government's account, they are struggling to contain an over-population of over-grazing kangaroos. According to other accounts<sup>9</sup> – those that point out that kangaroos breed slowly and have a high juvenile mortality (around 73%), that maximum wild population growth rates average approximately 10% in optimum conditions, with annual declines of up to 60% during

## FOOTNOTES

1 *The Canberra Times* 6.vii.15

2 'Anger at Defence cull of 14,000 Kangaroos', *The Canberra Times*, 2.ix.13. See <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/anger-at-defence-cull-of-14000-kangaroos-20130901-2sz23.html>

3 2015 licences were in fact issued for a cull quota of 20,722 (figures from ACT Conservator of Flora and Fauna, 23 February 2016). The 2010 Kangaroo Management Plan gives an 'indicative' figure of 42,695 kangaroos culled under individual licence from 1997–2009

(inclusive), an average of 3,284 for those years. The 2015 figure is just under three and a half times this.

4 'Is it fair', wrote the minister until recently responsible Shane Rattenbury, 'that individual animals must pay the ultimate price for the effects of ever-encroaching human settlement?' 'No it's not fair. But it's the right thing to do.' (letter to *The Canberra Times*, 21 May 2015)

5 See <http://www.animalsaustralia.org/features/kangaroo-killing-canberra.php>. The Senior Ecologist admitted this to the 2013 ACAT hearing (As well as in Attachment A of the dossier detailed in note 9).

6 See <http://www.theage.com.au/it-pro/act-government-ecologist-defends-kangaroo-cull-figures-at-hearing-20140605-zrz34.html>

7 See <http://www.arcohab.org/#!/point1/c1185>

8 See [http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/open\\_government/inform/act\\_government\\_media\\_releases/tamsd/2015/conservation-cull-to-take-place-in-act-grasslands-and-woodlands](http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/tamsd/2015/conservation-cull-to-take-place-in-act-grasslands-and-woodlands) and <https://www.facebook.com/shanerattenburymla/posts/10152877517518181:0>

9 Eg Ray Mjadwesch, on p19 of a dossier with evidence ('complaint and request for investigation') prepared by members of Regional

drought, and that cull rates even as 'low' as 15–20% therefore exceed population growth rates.

The ACT government's current cull-rates which are hard to determine, (change from one KMU to another) but appear to average 30–40% and have been as high as 80%, are driving the mobs in question toward extinction.

**“ Cull rates appear to average 30–40 across 'management units' and have been as high as 80% on some reserves. [Destroying mob structure and effect on orphaned young are not mentioned by the ACT managers.]**

Or would, if we were dealing – as it would seem the ACT very much wants us to think we are dealing – with a stable kangaroo population in the first place. But it would seem we are not. There is, for example, the most interesting story of the Googong Eight Hundred.

At the 2009 ACAT hearing the aforementioned and, it would appear, somewhat conflicted Senior Ecologist argued that Eastern Grey Kangaroos (EGKs) were 'relatively sedentary and loyal to a particular area'. In the 2013 hearing of ACAT, however, he admitted that he had got this wrong. His earlier 'expert' account of Eastern Grey Kangaroos as 'relatively sedentary and loyal to a particular area' had been incorrect. He had not allowed for 'inward migration'.

### THE GOOGONG 800

In explanation he told the story of a 'roo cull on the Googong Reserve undertaken by the ACT government in 2004, a cull about which, ironically, he seems to have been quite uneasy at the time, according to email traffic obtained under Freedom of Information. Before the cull there had been 800 kangaroos on the reserve. Five hundred were culled, to reduce that population to an environmentally sustainable figure of 300. This should have been an end to it. Soon after the cull had been completed, however, the population had returned to 800. The cull, in other words, had been quite useless.

All very well. It is good to admit one's errors. But the 2009 cull – and the numbers involved – had been approved on the basis of the Senior Ecologist's advice that EGKs were 'relatively sedentary and loyal to a particular area'. His 2013 admission – in effect that Eastern Grey Kangaroos killed in open system reserves may immediately be replaced by kangaroos from close by<sup>10</sup> – becomes in this light an admission that, unless the area involved is thoroughly fenced, *all* culling is useless until such time as the population of kangaroos in the surrounding area is itself dramatically reduced or gone.

Does this mean, as it would appear to, that most of the ACT culling has been a more-or-less useless endeavour? And why on earth, five years after the Googong fiasco, was the Senior Ecologist still speaking of sedentary populations?

Was he so slow to realise? Was he repressing information? Was this, to bring the kindest words to it, just a terrible blunder?

The only alternative explanation – but how could this be? – is that KMUs in the ACT, under a smoke screen of environmental protection, biodiversity, etc., are being used as killing-zones to reduce, or eliminate over time, the wider kangaroo population of the area.

It's not, after all, as if there aren't very viable alternatives to the killing (and, Canberrans take note, potentially far less expensive ones). Although the concept is not without its own ethical problems (surely our fellow animals should be allowed to conduct their lives as fully as we wish to conduct our own), there is, for example, the possibility of population reduction through contraception, rather than slaughter.

**“ In 2013 the ACT government spent \$182 per head to kill kangaroos. (Multiply this cost by several thousand a year.)**

There is also (or would be, if we were dealing with a sedentary population) the very real possibility of relocation, a private trial of which suggested that it might be done for between \$10 and \$50 per head, a fraction of the price that the ACT government is currently paying to have them killed (in 2013, \$182 per head).<sup>11</sup> Why this alternative, brought up continuously, has not been employed has been something of a mystery.<sup>12</sup> In the light of inward migration, however, the reason seems clear: one would simply be engaging in an endless and futile game of musical chairs.

To do them justice, and how can one demand justice without extending it, the ACT government does appear to have been trialling a contraception option. At least, they have been talking about it, unenthusiastically, for some time. One wonders if this too isn't a PR exercise. (Or if the real problem with it is that it would compromise the Experiment – of which more shortly.)

### THE EIGHT PAPERS

To do them further justice – but I have my tongue in my cheek here, for this is in fact a travesty, an intellectual insult to the people of Canberra – they have put up on their

website<sup>13</sup> summaries of eight scientific papers which they claim validate their cull. Opposition to the cull has several times in the media in the last eighteen months been dismissed by reference to this body of expert evidence.

Citing these papers thus, however, is tantamount to admitting that one hasn't read them (not that the ACT government makes that easy<sup>14</sup>). These papers are a study in themselves. While I don't dispute the competence of the researchers involved, the claims made for these papers by the ACT government are misleading in the extreme.

**“ an intellectual insult to the people of Canberra and region**

Given the use to which that government tries to put them, they become far more a case of conflict of interest, research cadre formation, and scientific/bureaucratic encryption than of independent, objective, state-of-the-science evaluation.

To give just a taste, three of these papers were written by a first-class honours student then PhD candidate previously employed and still, it seems, part funded by the ACT government.<sup>15</sup>

Of these three papers, directly contrary to the government's claims, two, at the time the ACT government first vaunted them (and still, at the time of the 2015 cull) had not only not yet been published (one, it seemed, had not yet even been peer reviewed), but had actually been co-authored by the aforementioned ACT Senior Ecologist.

The third, short-titled '*Eaten out of House and Home*' and summarised as a kind of Infomercial on The Conversation site on 12 December 2014, is not nearly as watertight and conclusive as its proponent authors make it out to be.

Another, on the Grassland Earless Dragon (*T. pinguicollis*), seems actually to contradict the ACT government's position ('It is clear *T. pinguicollis* is in decline, but the causes of that decline are not readily identified'<sup>16</sup>). Still others support the ACT position largely or only by referring, in a curiously circular manner, to the ACT government's own Kangaroo Management Plan (KMP) for figures that the government in its turn claims that *the papers* provide.

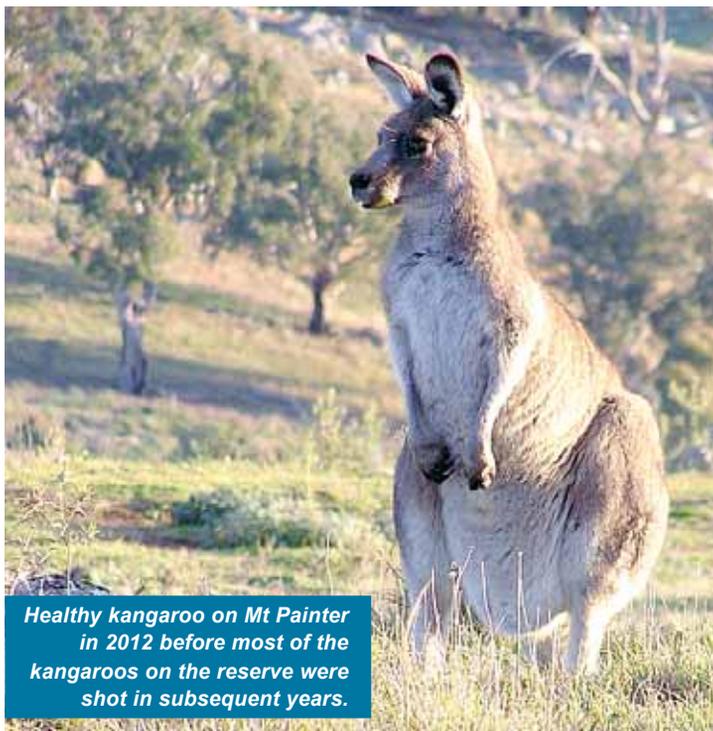
All of these papers, too, are co-authored, as is often the way with scientific papers, but lest this be taken as

### Why David Brooks wrote this essay

I have been hearing about the Canberra kangaroo cull for several years with mounting horror and have deplored it at various points in other things I've written. Last year I was one of fifty national and international signatories to an Open Letter to the people of Canberra, calling for an end to the cull.

At 6am on the morning of the letter's publication, dragged from my bed, I was 'interviewed' by an ABC Rural journalist, although rounded upon might be a better term. Amongst other things he claimed that the Eight Papers (see below) justified the cull finally and thoroughly, and cut me off before I could adequately respond.

I realised that the abuse and misrepresentation of these papers had not only to be carefully exposed, but that someone had to set it as clearly as they could within the wider story of this horrid fiasco. The Canberra kangaroos need every bit of help they can get.



Healthy kangaroo on Mt Painter in 2012 before most of the kangaroos on the reserve were shot in subsequent years.



June 2012.

Friends of Wildlife in Palerang and ACT for presentation to the ACT Commissioner for the Environment in 2013. <https://warmwildlife.wordpress.com/55-2/regional-friends-of-wildlife-submission-2013/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. (dossier). The truth, as is often the case, would seem to lie somewhere between. Research has demonstrated that EGKs are relatively 'sedentary', but over a territory of approximately ten square

kilometres. Within any such territory, however, there will be many mobs, each with its own slightly differing territory. Any one 10k<sup>2</sup> area will overlap with numerous others, so that boundaries cannot be fixed, and the migration toward better (ie recently vacated) grazing land (and so supply to the cullers) need not be impeded. Unfenced, a zone of consistent killing can therefore become a species drain for a much wider area.

<sup>11</sup> See [http://www.awrc.org.au/uploads/5/8/6/6/5866843/garlick\\_austen\\_translocation2.pdf](http://www.awrc.org.au/uploads/5/8/6/6/5866843/garlick_austen_translocation2.pdf) – item 5.6, and <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/annual-roo-cull-costs-182-a-head-20131115-2xmw9.html>

<sup>12</sup> Particularly mysterious is the fact that, when the Australian Navy attempted to relocate, rather than kill, the kangaroos slated for death

evidence of a wide experience-pool, it should be noted that, amongst these co-authors, the same names keep coming up again and again, locating the pool of expertise quite firmly in CSIRO (largely pest animal research), the University of Canberra's Institute of Applied Ecology, and the ANU's Fenner School of Environment and Society – all, it would appear, partly funded, in some manner (scholarships, research partnerships, etc.), by the ACT government.<sup>17</sup>

In effect – and I mean no insult to the scientists themselves, who can't be held responsible for the manner in which their work has been instrumentalised – these papers, used thus, are not much more than an interesting breed of infomercial.

Clearly there is, in the explanations most commonly put forward by the ACT government, little or no real justification for this systematic slaughter, and clearly there are viable and significantly less expensive alternatives. So why on earth is this killing still going on?

Although we can't entirely discount the possibility that there is just someone of some power in the ACT administration who hates kangaroos with a passion, I think this is actually a very large and very complicated question, a full and proper consideration of which is far from impossible yet would take so long in the reasoning and involve such detail in the writing up that, in the current discursive environment (the Age of Twitter), it would have little if any impact.

And meanwhile, of course, annually, in the months of May, June, July, the kangaroos have been shot. A dilemma for anyone trying to understand and explain this bizarre and deeply troubling situation, and one that the ACT government has been taking full and cynical advantage of. But I also think it's not too hard to set out, in agonising brevity, at least some areas such a consideration might look at.

### AN EXPERIMENT?

First and simplest is what I've come to call the Experiment, although 'project' might be a better term: 'experiment' implies testing whether an hypothesis is true or correct; 'project' might be seen to involve – as the use of the Eight Papers suggests – promoting that hypothesis whether it is correct or not.

The brouhaha that has so far marked both the protest against the culling and the government's responses to that protest have served as a smoke-screen to what some see as the real 'scientific' reason for the cull, namely (the Eight Papers again), a many-fronted and coordinated attempt, by a group of applied ecologists and conservationists/land

managers in the ACT, to prove a theory discussed in (but not the exclusive province of) the PhD dissertation of the aforementioned Senior Ecologist.<sup>18</sup> This theory suggests that the decline of temperate grassland in Eastern Australia – to the point, supposedly, where the largest surviving pockets are in the ACT – can be related to over-grazing by Eastern Grey Kangaroos.

(To be careful here, I do not say that the ACT government has lied about this, so much as *spun* it. It is presented that the kangaroos *are* the reason for the decline in temperate grassland, and that they have to be killed as a consequence, not that they may be a contributing cause, and that the killing is an experiment. This, presumably, would be too much for the public to wear.)

Leaving aside (but can we?) the fact that even this Senior Ecologist has argued de facto (including at the time of the Googong 800) that culling is *not* the solution, indeed that it's virtually useless in any area not surrounded by prison-like fences, the theory this experiment seeks to test can only be demonstrated by a carefully-controlled count (there are serious doubts that they have managed this) and reduction of Eastern Grey numbers within a large but very clearly defined and (supposedly) controllable area. For this, *bureaucratically*, the ACT would seem to be ideal: an administrative island, as it were (albeit without the actual fences that might make more sense of all this), with only the one very

sympathetic authority to deal with, upon which researchers and administrators can closely cooperate.

**“ If the theory is wrong, many thousands of kangaroos will have died, often horribly, for nothing**

Even if one were to accept that there is something to this theory – ie of damage to extant temperate grassland – a huge number of kangaroos have been dying in its cause. And if, as many suggest, the theory is wrong, or at least very poorly conceived, then those kangaroos will have died, often horribly, for nothing. Indeed even if the theory is proven correct, there will still be a large party, of which I will be one, who will still think they died for nothing.

The Experiment, that is to say, may be a reason to try to control a kangaroo population within a determined area, but – setting aside the nonetheless significant suspicion that this is ultimately an *aesthetic* motivation (an important question for conservation: what period or state do we wish

to 'manage' our ecosystems back to? pre-1788? [in this case it's certainly not that!]) and why do we make the choices that we do? – it is no reason for mass killing (forget 'mass' there: it is no reason for killing, period).

### KILLING AS A DEFAULT MODE

Which leaves us with this bizarre but apparently unquestioned phenomenon of killing as a default mode. Why on earth is killing – such a violent action – seen as the preferred option? Is it just that it is *easiest*? The least expensive? Or is there, along with everything else involved here, a need in us to expend a violent energy?

The etymology of the word 'cull' has nothing to do with that of 'culture', though in Australia you could be forgiven for thinking otherwise. Here it can seem all too often that the idea of killing is almost synonymous with that of conservation and/or 'ecological' land management. This is perhaps not all that surprising when one considers how inappropriate farming and pastoral practices have rapidly destroyed so much of the friable soil surface, and thus created such intense competition for what fodder the land can still produce.

When you are determined to raise cattle and sheep in a land where their hooves will inevitably drastically reduce the productive capacity of the soil they walk upon, then of course the kangaroos will be seen as competitors that must be eliminated.

It doesn't take much thought to see how such a mindset, bred of misapplication, might become entrenched and, extending beyond *agriculture* to culture itself, lead to the culling of flying foxes, cockatoos, galahs, koalas, sharks, crocodiles, and whatever else irritates the human animal or embarrasses it by stirring its bad conscience.

And yet, although there seems to be an historic numb-mindedness when it comes to them, it is not – as we have seen – as if there aren't ready alternatives, or as if, in some areas, the mood isn't changing.

Indeed there appears to be a growing split in the 'conservation' movement itself in this regard, and such a growing heft of thought behind it that one might even speak of an impending paradigm shift in our ideas of conservation and ecology, entailing serious interrogation of our existing ideas of ecosystem, biodiversity, and the various binaries upon which we base our current practices, to say nothing of our determinations that some lives are worth many times more than others (native/exotic, beneficent/pest, feral/tame, wild/domesticated, endangered/'of-least-concern', livestock/pet, etc). But, again, this is too vast an issue to take further here. I raise it only to set the scene.

### WHAT'S WRONG WITH COMPASSION?

According to hearsay – I freely admit that this is all it is – the beleaguered Senior Ecologist once warned a meeting of people discussing the kangaroo cull of the imminent arrival of 'compassionate conservation', as if this were a heresy

Many have wondered what the authority is for the ACT formula of shooting kangaroos down to one per hectare, now trending to half a kangaroo per hectare (from a natural, stable population of three to four per hectare). See the following quote from the Senior Ecologist's thesis referenced in footnote 18:

A park “ ‘damage mitigation’ formula, which holds kangaroo density to about 1 ha-1, is predicted to increase herbage mass [grass height] considerably and to reduce the frequency of crashes in herbage mass, but these effects would be achieved at the cost of having to shoot large numbers of kangaroos”

– Bulletin editor



**COLLATERAL DAMAGE of kangaroo cull, the survivors: This joey (left) is 7kg and permanently out of mother's pouch but still dependent on her for nutrition and guidance. (Right) A 3.5kg joey that would be in and out of mum's pouch. Orphaned, both are at risk of hypothermia, predation and renal failure from stress. Joeys are not considered fully independent until at least 14kg. Joeys that look like the smaller one but weigh less are pulled out of mother's pouch and bashed to death.**

on their land, the ACT government denied them a permit! Why might this have been? Because it might have compromised their own argument that relocation was not an option?

13 See [http://www.tams.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/715487/ACT-conservation-research-the-effect-of-kangaroo-grazing-and-biodiversity-Summary-of-recent-papers.pdf](http://www.tams.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/715487/ACT-conservation-research-the-effect-of-kangaroo-grazing-and-biodiversity-Summary-of-recent-papers.pdf)

14 The website neither presents the papers in their entirety nor provides

links to them. It's up to the reader to locate them – not an easy task for some of the papers, and quite impossible for those not yet published! Most readers – to continue the circularity of this curious operation – will have to take the ACT government's word for what they contain.

15 The paper's author wrote: "The vast majority of my work has been with the ACT Conservation Research Unit" The Conversation: <https://theconversation.com/profiles/brett-howland-135653>.

16 Wendy Dimond *et al*, 'Back to the Brink: Population Decline of the Endangered Grassland Earless Dragon', *Herpetological Conservation and Biology* 7.2 (2012): 141.

17 I will leave my readers to speculate upon the independence or otherwise of the peer assessors of these papers.

18 D Fletcher 2006, Population Dynamics of Eastern Grey Kangaroos in Temperate Grasslands Institute of Applied Ecology, University of

much to be feared. And yet compassionate conservation is nothing more than an attempt to find and advocate for ways of protecting wildlife and the ecosystem that do not involve killing.

What's to be feared about that?

Well, there is, in *this* instance, the Experiment, and to change methodology mid-stream might seriously compromise it. But that is just local. Behind the broader culture's resistance to a default-change from conservation killing to compassionate conservation there is, probably first and foremost, the issue of cost, or should we better say economic/political commitment.

Leaving aside that 'cheap' and 'expensive' are relative terms and only express our priorities (nothing is too expensive if we want it enough), killing is cheap (although, as records show, perhaps not as cheap in the ACT as one might be led to think). The alternatives, with less and less credibility, are made out to be too expensive, and require substantial investment of thought, a whole new mindset. Sooner invest vast amounts in overseas military campaigns, submarines or border protection.

For animals there is little political will. Killing, one's ethical qualms aside, is also easy and 'effective': all it requires is a gun; nothing is so final as a shot to the head.

And there is also, of course – again I use the metaphor embarrassedly – another elephant in the room. We are, as are almost all other human cultures, a culture that insists upon mass slaughter of non-human animals to provide for our dietary choices. We've become inured to this aspect of ourselves. This repression surely contributes to our lassitude when it comes to kill/cull-culture.

### A BUREAUCRATIC JUGGERNAUT?

But of course there is more involved here than cultural bias. We must also consider that, in the ACT, a bureaucratic process has begun and, juggernaut-like, is very hard to stop.

On the one hand there is the logic of culling itself: presuming that there is some reasonably accurate means of determining it – and the ACT government seems to have tied itself in knots trying to do so – there will be a figure, a proportion, which, supposedly, can be culled without threatening the sustainability of a population – indeed it may even be that one of the purposes of the Experiment is to determine or confirm this figure. One must cull below this figure, to ensure sustainability, but of course, *having* culled below this figure, one must inevitably, as the population reproduces (and leaving local migration aside), have to cull again.

And on the other hand there is the matter of administrative structure and forward estimates. To put this most simply, but not unrealistically, we have a bureau set up to administer the killing, with people employed to do so, and a budget-line their unit is in danger of losing if it does not administer the culling, so the killing has to occur.

It may be even simpler than that. Perhaps, that is, one or two senior administrators and politicians – for there is an ACT government minister ultimately responsible here – have dug in their heels and are refusing to admit, perhaps even to see, that they have been wrong, for fear that their jobs and reputations might be at stake. As of course they should be, for these people now have a great deal of blood on their hands.<sup>19</sup>



Death by ego? Who knows? Ludicrous and bizarre as such a possibility might seem, the daily news surely teaches us never to discount it.

However one looks at it, the cynicism with which this campaign is being conducted is alarming, even to the most cynical. Why has no investigative journalist done a thorough exposé, bringing this situation to the wider Australian public and demanding justice for these creatures? (I was told, by a friend who helps produce one of our best-known national investigative documentary programs, that it would help if I had a whistle-blower. I don't suppose Chris Klootwijk, the seventy-year-old man arrested in mid-2015 in the ACT on charges of hindering public officials for blowing a whistle to try to scare kangaroos away from the shooters, would count.)

But of course 'they are only animals', and for animals there is no international war crimes tribunal, no court in the Hague in which to try human animals for crimes against non-human animals. And not even (not *especially*) a Native Title tribunal, to assert their rights to their own habitats.

Is there *any* chance that the bureaucrats who persist with this campaign in the face of all the evidence against it will ever be seen as criminals, ever be brought to justice – even (as is, sadly, about all we can hope for) the symbolic justice of a small fine and slap on the wrist for animal cruelty? We'll see. But don't hold your breath.

### SHADOW OF A BIGGER PICTURE

Is there a bigger picture? Where such secrecy and mixed messages surround so strange, vicious and largely *inexplicable* and *indefensible* a phenomenon, you might almost think there has to be. Could it be, for example, that, somewhere within it, and perhaps unbeknownst even to some of its participants, there is reflected a desire to establish the kangaroo as a new harvestable species, and the attempt to set in place a mythology – of overpopulation, over-grazing, damage to biodiversity, etc. – that will enable the Australian public the more readily to accept this industrialisation of this iconic species?

The meat industry is one of the largest in the country. It has substantial lobbying power, as is testified by the recent passage of biosecurity laws, labelling of animal rights advocates as terrorists, and media reports vilifying, with apparent impunity, those who do not eat the flesh of animals. And as far as the wider meat industry is concerned

the development of the *kangaroo* industry is in every respect a win/win situation.

The meat industry, after all, has its own bigger picture. In a time of mounting environmental /market pressure, it finds itself in transition, keen to identify more sustainable and less environmentally destructive sources of product, and kangaroos are clearly in its sights, although in all likelihood it is shorter-term gains that are at issue here.

As the Kangaroo Industries Association of Australia (KIAA) argues it,<sup>20</sup> a widespread, systematic and continuous (read industrial) culling of kangaroos not only reduces what the current meat industry presents as a pest and a liability to the maximum production of sheep- and cattle-meat, but would also produce in itself commodities – hides, and meat for both human and pet consumption – for which there are hoped-for larger and larger international markets.

Kangaroo products at present go to more than fifty countries and are worth over a quarter of a billion dollars annually. With recent free trade agreements with China, Japan and the United States, and a Trans-Pacific Partnership in the offing, there is a clear hope that this market will expand dramatically. These agreements have been coming for some time. It would be foolish to think that the meat industry more generally, and the kangaroo industry in particular, have not been preparing for them.

But there are some thorns in the industry's side, as evidenced by the California Legislature's having only recently renewed a long-standing ban on the importation and sale of kangaroo products, and by the great lengths to which the KIAA (with substantial government assistance<sup>21</sup>) has gone to try to have that ban rescinded. California is only a small market, but its stance is pivotal. Its resistance creates resistance elsewhere.

**“ Any experiment supporting the 'pest' and overpopulation claims of the kangaroo meat and skin industry is gold to them**

The California ban is based on renewed advice that the kangaroo populations involved are not at pest level but in fact under threat. Every study suggesting otherwise is therefore gold to the KIAA – platinum if it can at the same time demonstrate that, for environmental reasons, the kangaroo population in fact *must* be culled, and that the kangaroo industry would be doing the country not just an economic but an environmental favour.

If it turns out that the ACT experiment, after years of trying, is not actually able to provide this supporting data, then heaven forbid that that information get out.

But enough. It's May, 2016. There is every reason to think that, despite their protestations that they are actively seeking alternatives, the ACT government is already preparing to take the low road again, and that, unless this baseless, barbaric, ineffective and unimaginative process is not brought abruptly to a halt, night after night for the next three months in the reserves around Canberra, the kangaroos will be dying, for reasons not even their killers can explain.

**David Brooks** is an Honorary Associate Professor at the University of Sydney, where he taught Australian Literature from 1991–2013. Poet, author and essayist, he is co-editor of the journal *Southerly* and the 2015–16 Australia Council Fellow in Literature. He was born and raised in Canberra.



**Healthy-looking Pinnacle reserve in Belconnen 2013 just before they shot hundreds of kangaroos in the wider landscape there. Canberrans should see for themselves if they can spot any "overabundant" kangaroos in any reserve. Visitors certainly would like to see some!**

Canberra [www.canberra.edu.au/researchrepository/file/8376efb7-f1b7-1b76-74d8-14604c15865a/1/introductory\\_pages.pdf](http://www.canberra.edu.au/researchrepository/file/8376efb7-f1b7-1b76-74d8-14604c15865a/1/introductory_pages.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> A new minister has been appointed as this essay was prepared for press. Will anything change?

<sup>20</sup> See [http://www.kangaroo-industry.asn.au/media/ki\\_med\\_kit\\_gen.html](http://www.kangaroo-industry.asn.au/media/ki_med_kit_gen.html)

<sup>21</sup> \$143,000 to help fight the California ban; \$800,000 more recently from the Department of Agriculture.

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