



dingo dilemma

Is the dingo a native animal worthy of protection, or an introduced predator that should be eradicated? There are many different opinions, as Briar Jensen discovers, but as the debate continues among the scientific community the dingo is rapidly heading towards extinction.



'Most portrayals of dingoes concentrate on their threatening or pest status; because they are predators, they naturally make us uncomfortable and fearful,' says Professor Chris Johnson from James Cook University. 'What's missing is an appreciation of the ecological roles played by dingoes, as the top mammalian predator in Australian ecosystems.'

Image isn't the only problem. 'The dingo is facing genetic extinction,' says Dr Ernest Healy, secretary of the Dingo CARE [Conserve, Appreciate, Research, Educate] Network (DCN). 'Hybridisation with domestic dogs is corrupting the dingo gene pool and wild dog eradication programs continue to kill off pure dingoes.' With few pure populations left in the wild, some suggest the dingo will be extinct in as little as ten years.

It was originally thought dingoes came to Australia with the Aborigines, but recent DNA tests suggest they arrived between 3,500 to 5,000 years ago. Of South-East Asian origin, the dingo evolved from a subspecies of the Grey Wolf and probably arrived via Asian seafarers. Adopted by Aborigines as a companion animal, it was used for hunting, as well as warmth on cold nights.

Predominantly ginger coloured, dingoes are naturally lean-looking predators that live in small family groups. Unlike domestic dogs, they only breed once a year and the dominant female destroys all pups bar her own, ensuring the population remains stable. They are largely carnivores, eating a variety of prey, including wallabies and kangaroos. Although often portrayed as aggressive in the media, they are timid and naturally fearful of humans.

According to Professor Johnson the dingo took over from the Thylacine – the Tasmania Tiger – as our largest predator and interacted stably with other native species. 'It has not been implicated in any extinctions of native mammals other than the Thylacine, and the [Tasmanian] devil [on the mainland],' he says. 'And evidence linking the dingo to these is weak.'

When settlers started farming, the dingo was seen as menace to livestock and eliminated from large areas of Australia, particularly the south-east. Simultaneously, introduced foxes and cats wrought havoc on native wildlife. In his book *Australia's Mammal Extinctions: A 50,000 Year History*, Professor Johnson says foxes and cats are responsible for most of our recent mammal losses.

He believes they will continue to cause extinctions and suggests dingoes could be a solution. 'Where there are no dingoes, introduced predators are rife, and up to 65 per cent of ground-dwelling mammal species have disappeared.' Dingoes compete with foxes and cats for food and deliberately prey on both. 'Australia needs more dingoes to protect our biodiversity,' he says.

Dr Alan Wilton of the University of New South Wales has spent ten years studying dingo genetics and says Australian wildlife has adapted to the presence of dingoes. 'We don't know how their replacement by [wild] dogs will affect other species.' He believes pure dingoes should also be saved for their cultural and scientific value: 'Dingoes are an Aboriginal totem and a native animal.'

But not everyone agrees. 'I see the dingo as a dog from Thailand, a feral predator in Australia,' says Steve Van Dyck, Senior Curator of Vertebrates at the Queensland Museum. 'Hybridisation doesn't particularly disturb me. The purity of the dingo is a red herring in the conservation argument, particularly in respect of Fraser Island.' He is concerned remains of rare native species are being found in dingo scats on the island. But Dr Healy says if dingoes were a threat to native animals on Fraser the damage would have been done long before Europeans arrived.

Human interaction and illegal feeding have made Fraser Island dingoes less wary of people. They killed a nine-year-old boy in 2001 and recently attacked a four-year-old girl. 'There is no "evil intent" on the part

This page right photography:
Nick Baker

Opposite page and this page left
photography: Gill Ryhorchuck

**'Australia
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Above photography: Nick Baker

Opposite page

Left: Sampson the dingo with playmate Daisy the Labrador
Photography: Sharon Rivett

Opposite page right
photography: Gill Ryhorchuck

of a dingo,' says Dr Nicholas Baker from the University of Queensland, who researched the ecology of the island's dingoes. He says most confrontations occur during the breeding and whelping seasons. 'The dingoes are amped up on hormones at this time and defending their areas.' He says tourists must realise the dingo is a wild carnivore. 'Don't leave your kids alone and don't feed the animals.'

Dr Healy believes the number of tourists on the island should be reduced. 'As a World Heritage-listed area, Fraser Island's purpose is primarily for the preservation of its wildlife, including the high conservation-value dingo population.'

There's no disputing wild dogs cause problems for farmers by tormenting sheep, and to a lesser degree, calves. According to Jo Hall of AgForce, wild dog predation caused approximately \$18.3 million worth of livestock losses in Queensland in 2004, and a further \$9 million loss through the spread of disease. However, there is no distinction in the statistics between feral dogs, hybrids and dingoes.

Attacks on livestock are horrific as wild dogs aim for the kidneys, but rarely eat their victims, leaving them to suffer shocking injuries. Brian Tomalin from the New South Wales Farmers Association says attacks are increasing and many farmers have had to convert from sheep to cattle. While understanding dingoes have a place in the environment, he feels more aerial baiting is necessary to curb the increase.

However, some people believe baiting increases wild dog populations by disrupting dingo groups, making them more likely to mate with feral dogs that breed more regularly. It's also suggested a decline in dingoes could mean more kangaroos and rabbits competing for pasture.

A further complicating factor is the disagreement between the states over whether the dingo is a pest, pet or native animal, with each state having different regulations. They cannot be kept at all in Queensland, but can be kept under a Pest Animal Permit in Victoria. They can be kept under a Wildlife Permit in the Northern Territory, but in New South Wales anyone can keep them as pets. This is partly due to a change in scientific name from *Canis familiaris dingo*, a subspecies of the domestic dog, to *Canis lupus dingo*, a race of wolf and ancestor to the domestic dog. Interestingly, the change has seen some states accept the dingo as native wildlife and others interpret it as a wild domestic dog and therefore a pest.

Conservation groups want to see the dingo removed from pest classification and recognised as an endangered native species. 'The dingo has been here so long he deserves to be regarded as native,' says Barry Oakman, president of the Australian Dingo Conservation Association. 'He's part of the evolutionary process.'



They also want dingoes removed from the companion animal act, believing they belong in the wild, not the backyard, where crossbreeding would further dilute the gene pool. Gill Ryhorchuk, vice president of the DCN, says while dingoes love soft cushions they are also wild, hunting animals and can be unpredictable. A cute dingo pup turns into a dangerous wolf, as Oakman puts it.

But for dedicated owners like Sharon Rivett, who has raised two dingoes with the help of a Labrador and German Shepard, the enormous effort involved in keeping these intelligent animals is extremely rewarding. 'They are naturally cunning and crafty – in a nice way, though. Everything becomes a game to

them, especially when they are young,' says Sharon. 'Dingoes are very time consuming, but people who are willing to put in the time, patience and love will get a very special pet as a reward.'

Captive breeding programs run by conservationists as insurance against the dingo's extinction include DNA testing of animals for purity, in the hope they can eventually be returned to the wild.

Most people agree the dingo deserves a place in Australian ecosystems, but conservation is a complex issue. Ongoing research will provide a better understanding of this unique animal and hopefully some solutions, before the dingo runs out of time.

Links

The Dingo Sanctuary
in Bargo, NSW, which is open to the public, is run by the Australian Native Dog Conservation Society
www.dingosanctuary.com.au

Dingo CARE Network
<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~dingo/welcome.htm>