



Photo by Stella Reid

‘Clean, green and sustainable’ kangaroo meat? Examining the myth

“Australia is presently slaughtering kangaroos at the same time the Minister of the Environment is condemning Japan for killing whales. Despite the fact that kangaroos are a protected species under the 1975 Wildlife Act, the Minister is supporting the slaughter saying that the kill is ‘humane’ and ‘properly administered’...The Japanese say the exact same thing about their whale slaughter-that it is humane and properly managed.”

Captain Paul Watson, Sea Shepherd Conservation Society¹

Introduction

An entrenched view among many in the Australian community is that the kangaroo meat industry provides those not yet willing to replace animal flesh in our diets with a ‘green’ and ethically acceptable protein alternative. This paper examines the ‘clean, green and sustainable’ claim for kangaroo meat, arguing that it is merely a comforting myth sold to the public by an industry making millions from the slaughter of our most iconic native animal-no less severe in its implications as the myths about ‘clean coal’ and ‘scientific whaling’.

¹ Paul Watson, “Whales and Kangaroos Down Under: A Tale of Two Hypocrisies” commentary emailed from the Southern Ocean, March 16 2008

A “clean and green” product would need to comply with at least three minimal standards: that it be ecologically sustainable, ethically acceptable and without detrimental effects on human health. Let’s apply these standards to kangaroo meat.

A sustainable source of protein?

Kangaroo meat is considered preferable to beef, and other intensively farmed products, on the basis that soft-footed kangaroo populations do not compact the soil to the degree that cows and sheep do, move in numbers through established corridors across a wide range thus avoiding over-browsing on indigenous flora, and have digestive systems that do not release high levels of methane into the atmosphere.

However, let’s embed the biological and evolutionary characteristics of kangaroos within the current environmental landscape, taking into account incremental loss of habitat such that kangaroo mobs are frequently fenced in by farms and urban fringe developments which significantly decrease their range and block their movement corridors. This can create implosive population growth, overgrazing and ultimately death by starvation or gunfire from irate farmers bent on damage mitigation. Drought and disease also take their toll, resulting in dramatic population crashes. As a recent report by wildlife ecologist Dr. Dror Ben-Ami makes clear to introduce a commercial kill into this formula is to threaten the viability of the species altogether:

“In Queensland, the commercial kangaroo industry has access to 94% of the state leaving only six percent of the state as protected habitat for kangaroos. Red Kangaroos are quasi-extinct across 70% of Queensland, and at densities of less than 1.6 kangaroos per km² across 40% of the state. Despite these critically low levels the Queensland Government has set a harvesting quota of 15% to 20% of the remaining Red Kangaroos in 2008.”²

Similar trends are evident in other States where commercial kangaroo killing takes place. Driven by market pressures “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”³.

A Queensland Department of Primary Industries study ⁴ “puts the maximum potential supply of kangaroo meat at just 57,000 tonnes per year... In comparison cattle supply over 1,700,000 tonnes of beef each year (ABS 1999). To get

²Dr. Dror Ben-Ami(2009) “A Shot in the Dark: A Report on Kangaroo Harvesting”, NSW, Australia, P.31

³ Dr. Ian Gunn, Animal Gene Storage Resource centre of Australia, cited in Wilson M. & Dr. David B. Croft (eds) *Kangaroos: Myths and Realities*, Australian Wildlife Protection Council Inc. 2005 P.52

⁴ Hardman (1996) cited by Goeff Russell “The Economic and Ecological Infeasibility of Large Volume Kangaroo Farming” in Wilson M. & Dr. David B. Croft (eds) *Kangaroos: Myths and Realities*, Envirobooks NSW 2005, pp.124-6.

1,7000.000 tonnes of kangaroo meat for human consumption, we would need ...to be killing the entire kangaroo population hundreds of times over each year.”⁵

Thus, kangaroo harvesting, far from alleviating environmental degradation while producing a sustainable meat source, employs commercially expedient methods that undermine fundamental ecological principles:

“Harvesting removes the largest and therefore fittest kangaroos (whether male or female) from the population – the ones most likely to survive extreme climatic conditions and other detrimental unpredictable events.”⁶

Nor is building up kangaroo populations through farming a viable option; not only were sheep and cows once wild and the environmental degradation we now attribute to them the result of our farming practices, kangaroos suffer capture myopathy:

“Kangaroos can’t be farmed (They get severely stressed, which causes toxins to be released into their meat, so they are not good for eating).”⁷

The environmentally aware have traditionally condemned the domestication, commercialization and killing of wild species yet many are blinkered with regard to our most iconic native animal. A useful warning is provided by the fate of the Brushtail Rock Wallaby, hunted for fur in the 1900’s, now extinct in the wild and found only in captive breeding programs⁸. With over 30% of our native mammals gone and many more on the precipice, it is foolish to think that the Kangaroo can somehow survive the combined factors inexorably leading to its destruction.

Clearly the realities of kangaroo meat do not reflect the folksy “bush food” branding. Kangaroo slaughter is practiced by a commercial industry annually worth \$400 million, \$270 million from export income alone:

“With more than 3 million kangaroos killed every year Australia is home to the largest annual terrestrial cull on earth.”⁹

Ethically acceptable?

The commercial kangaroo industry disregards the nature of the animal it kills. Its “take’ of individuals fulfils allowable quotas but ignores the complex social and family relationships of the kangaroo mob upon which the group’s survival depends.¹⁰

⁵ Geoff Russell (2005) p.26

⁶ Ben-Ami (2009) P.35

⁷ Will Storr “The Kangaroo Files”, *The Age Good Weekend*, May 23, 2009

⁸ ABC 7.30 Report, April 1 2008

⁹ Jill Margo “Misconceptions Abound”, *The Weekend Australian Financial Review*, 1 April- 5 April 2010

¹⁰ As shown in the award-winning documentary “Kangaroo: Faces in the Mob” filmed by Dr. Jan Aldenhoven and Ben Carruthers over a 2-year period of non-intrusive observation,

The animal welfare issues are considerable and cannot be monitored due to the remoteness of outback locations. Dr. Ben-Ami states “that by conservative estimates 440,000 joeys die every year”. There is also evidence, he says, “that 40 per cent of the adults are not killed by a clean shot to the head, but by a more painful and illegal shot to the jaw or neck”¹¹ and consequently take off with their injuries or “are left in the field because their carcasses will not be accepted by the meat processors.”¹²

The level of suffering escalates when we consider the fate of joeys:

*“Every year some 440,000 dependent young kangaroos are either clubbed to death or left to starve after their mothers have been killed”*¹³

Kangaroo “joeys”, up to three perishing for every harvested female kangaroo, are the industry’s “by-products” whose numbers are not even counted in the kill quotas. Their treatment, enshrined in the industry’s voluntary Code of Practice¹⁴, has earned us an international reputation for brutality.

A YouTube clip¹⁵ documenting a night of outback kangaroo shooting provides a graphic challenge to claims about a “humane” and “well-administered” kangaroo harvesting industry. Nor does a recent article the UK’s *The Daily Mail* hold back on telling it like it is:

“These little victims are bludgeoned to death and left for trash when their mothers are shot in the outback”¹⁶



(www.viva.org.uk)
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Low in fat but is it healthy?

*“They are killed in the dirt in summer in high temperatures. How can you produce a clean meat under those conditions?”*¹⁷

Russia was our biggest export market for kangaroo products but in 2009 banned the import of kangaroo meat following recurring instances of bacterial

¹¹ Will Storr “The Kangaroo Files”, *The Age Good Weekend*, May 23, 2009

¹² Dror Ben-Ami (2009) P.7

¹³ Dror Ben-Ami (2009) P. 6

¹⁴ National Code of Practice for the Humane Shooting of Kangaroos and Wallabies: 2007

¹⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcMkNYOBvW8

¹⁶ Sean Poulter, *The Daily Mail*, 22 June 2010 (www.dailymail.co.uk)

¹⁷ Dr. Desmond Sibraa, former chief food inspector for the NSW Health Department quoted in Will Storr “The Kangaroo Files”, *The Age Good Weekend*, May 23, 2009

contamination. One has to ask, if kangaroo meat is deemed a health risk for Russian citizens, why our government is hell-bent on marketing it to us and the rest of the world.

“Toxoplasmosis and salmonellosis are two bacterial infections that affect kangaroos and which also have significant public health implications. The infections can spread to human through the handling, processing or consumption of infected kangaroo meat –and as many as one in two kangaroo carcasses may harbour the salmonella bacterium”¹⁸

The industry is not shy in coming forth with an answer:

“Australians could soon find themselves eating our national emblem, the kangaroo, as meat businesses look for assistance to stay afloat after their main export market in Russia collapsed...Increasing domestic consumption of kangaroo meat is considered the industry's best short-term measure”¹⁹

Conclusion

What future do we envisage for the kangaroo, the unique iconic species that defines the land of “droughts and flooding rains” and has survived in the harsh Australian landscape for millennia? Are we prepared to stand by as our kangaroos disappear into plastic-encased packaging, as cuts of meat on the supermarket shelf while we continue to swallow the greenwashing²⁰ of the “clean & sustainable” myth? Surely the only sustainable commercial use of kangaroos worthy of support is the development of environmentally-sensitive tourism coupled with restoration of wildlife habitat and safe movement corridors. Only thus can we preserve the Kangaroo’s rightful place in this wild and challenging continent we all inhabit.

Rheya Linden
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¹⁸ Shultz et al (1996) cited in Ben-Ami (2009) P.13

¹⁹ “Russia bans kangaroo meat imports” *Foodmagazine* 3 August 2009 (www.foodmag.com.au)

²⁰ See Kelly Lyell, *Green Times* magazine June 29 2010

(<http://www.greentimes.com.au/wildlife/australiaskangaroo-cull-green-or-greenwash.html>)