



Wild Dogs and Dingoes in Victoria

Department of Primary Industries

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This Landcare Note summarises information about the biology and pest status of wild dogs and dingoes in Victoria.

Introduction

The dingo is a primitive type of dog evolved from the wolf, and has become widespread across southern Asia. Dingoes were introduced to northern Australia by Asian seafarers 3,500-4,000 years ago. The dingo was a semi-domesticated animal that either escaped or was deliberately released. It then colonised the rest of Australia, and now dingoes are established over much of mainland Australia, except Tasmania.

Some people regard the dingo as native because it was introduced prior to European settlement and thought then to have assimilated into the Australian mainland ecosystem. Others believe that it is another human introduced exotic predator like the domestic dog, fox, and cat. The dingo has been implicated in the extinction of the Tasmanian tiger and Tasmanian devil from the mainland and may still have deleterious effects on native fauna.

Present situation

Breeding between domestic dogs and dingoes has taken place, since 1788. Interbreeding is most likely in areas that are in close proximity to human settlement. Dingoes in the sparsely populated arid and semi-arid areas of Australia are believed to be pure dingo.

In Victoria, where breeding between domestic dogs and dingoes has been more extensive, some physical changes have occurred to the dingoes. There is now a much greater range of variability to be found in characteristics such as skull shape, body conformation and coat colour. This has caused problems in classification and the term wild dog is now often used to collectively describe the present canid population. It is possible that there are wild dogs in Victoria that are dingo in origin, however only detailed DNA analysis is likely to confirm the heredity of present populations. The dingo and wild dog will be referred to as a wild dog/dingo her, as the status of free living animals is uncertain.

In Victoria, wild dogs/dingoes are now concentrated in the heavily timbered areas of the Eastern Highlands, from the NSW border south to Healesville and Gembrook. They are also present in the Big Desert region in the northwest of Victoria.

Biology

Wild dogs/dingoes are medium-sized canids; in Victoria, adult males normally weigh 12-22 kg (mean weight approximately 16.5 kg) and adult females normally weigh 10- 20 kg (mean weight approximately 14 kg). Their most common coat colour is yellow (from dark to light) but black and tan, black, brindle and sometimes white (not albino) also occur. White is usually present on the head, chest and feet.

Wild dogs/dingoes are opportunistic predators and their diet is composed mainly of mammals. Kangaroos, wallabies, wombats and smaller animals such as rabbits and echidnas form part of their staple diet. Birds, reptiles, insects and fruit may also be included in their diet.

Breeding

The usual breeding season of dingoes is autumn to winter. Females are sexually mature at 2 years and come into oestrus only once a year. Mating usually takes place between April and June. Litters are usually whelped between June and August, after a 63 day gestation period. However, in Victoria some litters may be dropped as early as April, or as late as September. Litter size varies from one to nine and the mean litter size is approximately five.

Females from one litter may stay in the group and assist in raising the next years litter. This may lead to the establishment of family groups. Dominant females can cause suppression of breeding in sub dominant young females.

Pest status

The wild dog/dingo is a serious predator of sheep, cattle and other livestock in areas of Queensland; New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. Wild dogs/dingoes are regarded as serious pests.

In the Eastern Highlands of Victoria, wild dogs/dingoes, either alone or in-groups, sporadically attack sheep flocks and may kill or maim many sheep in a single attack.

Stock losses

Annual stock losses attributed to wild dog attack that are reported to the Department of Primary Industries average about 1,900 sheep, however these are only the reported stock losses. Discussions with affected communities indicate that not all losses are reported and the actual numbers of stock lost to wild dog/dingo attacks may be



much greater. Accurate data on the numbers of stock killed and the economic impact of wild dogs/dingo attacks on stock are difficult to obtain. The control or the lack of control is a very emotive issue to land managers in wild dog/dingo areas.

There is a strong community belief that the wild dogs/dingos originate from public land under government control and therefore they are a government problem not a community problem. The government, as major land manager has the same duty as other land managers.

There is a community expectation that public land managers will be a 'Good Neighbour' and take all reasonable steps to reduce harmful effects of established pest animals on the assets of adjoining private land managers. Similarly responsible private land managers will act to protect stock with the application of appropriate land and stock management techniques.

Diseases: Hydatids, rabies

Wild dogs/dingoes are also a final host for the hydatid tapeworm and they have an infection rate of between 70% and 90% for this parasite. The intermediate hosts are macropods, which become infected and develop hydatid cysts after eating grass contaminated with eggs passed in wild dog/dingo faeces. Hydatid tapeworms can also infect domestic dogs, with sheep usually acting as the intermediate host. Humans can also become infected by domestic dogs and develop hydatid cysts which may be fatal. Contamination from hydatid cysts can be minimised by not feeding offal products and ensuring only cooked meat is provided to domestic dogs.

Wild dogs/dingoes are potential carriers of the exotic disease rabies. If a rabies epizootic were to occur in the highlands, the control of an outbreak may involve destruction of wild dogs/dingoes and/or a large-scale inoculation program.

Legal status

The principal legislation relating to the management of wild dogs in Victoria is the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994*, which is administered by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE).

Under this Act wild dogs are declared "Established Pest Animals" and are defined as feral dogs, dogs-run-wild, and dingoes and their hybrids (except for recognised canine breeds such as the Australian Cattle Dog (Queensland Heeler) and the Australian Kelpie), and are declared as an Established Pest Animal.

All landholders, except the Commonwealth, are responsible for declared pest animals on their property.

Wild dog/dingo control

The most effective control involves using a combination of methods that are integrated, and carried out over a large geographic area that involves all land managers.

The combination of exclusion fencing (electric), improved animal husbandry, strategic poison baiting, and trapping can reduce negative wild dog/dingo impacts.

Joint control programs that have been carried out in Gippsland, the North East and the Mallee have proved to be very successful. Private land managers have shown that by using a combination of effective exclusion fencing and good animal husbandry, they can reduce wild dog/dingo problems on a local scale.

Acknowledgements

Revised by Fiona Orchard and Tim Bloomfield, DPI, July 2000. Updated by Michael Rosier, DPI, December 2007.

Further reading

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Further information

- Contact your local landcare or friends group for further assistance and advice.
- Call the DPI/DSE Customer Service Centre on 136 186.
- Contact your local DPI Pest Management Officer for advice on local programs.
- Visit the DPI website at: <http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au> and the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre at: <http://www.invasiveanimals.com>

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