

Wild dog

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THE DINGO DEBATE:
ORIGINS, BEHAVIOUR
AND CONSERVATION
edited by Bradley Smith

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Australia's wild dog, the dingo, probably generates the most diverse human responses of any of our fauna – from a determination to exterminate to passionate conservation advocacy. This book is a bold attempt to cover this diversity and asserts that the dingo is a unique wild animal worthy of conservation for its intrinsic value, as well as for its critical role in ecological function and stability. It is a complex story involving the evolutionary history of wolves and dogs, the latest genetic techniques for elucidating relationships between species and populations, Aboriginal culture, and the attitudes about wildlife held by European settlers and modern Australians.

One issue that editor and primary author, Bradley Smith, labours, and eventually stumbles, over concerns the position of the dingo within the family Canidae. Is the dingo a dog or an offshoot of an Asian wolf? For all practical purposes, these taxonomic semantics matter little – the book builds a strong case that the dingo is a distinctive form of wild canid that deserves full conservation attention because of that distinctiveness and, importantly, because of the ecological role that it plays as Australia's largest predator. That point aside, Smith and his five expert co-authors tackle this complexity with assurance in this comprehensive, well-argued, nicely illustrated book.

Dingoes are perhaps the last remaining truly wild dogs, despite having been partially domesticated somewhere in east Asia before being brought to Australia about 4,000 years ago. On arrival in the far north, dingoes resumed a wild lifestyle and spread across the entire continent, occupying virtually every environment, from deserts to rainforest

and alpine regions. They could not, however, colonise Tasmania – they arrived too late to cross the land bridge before it was flooded by rising sea levels some 12,000 years ago. Dingoes are adaptable, intelligent, and resilient, as indicated by the deliberate crossing of dingoes with domestic dogs to produce dogs tough enough to work in the cattle industry in northern Australia.

When not persecuted by land managers, wild dingoes retain many of the behaviours of ancestral dogs: for example, having only one short breeding period each year, maintaining a group territory, living as a cooperative family unit, and possessing a complex vocal repertoire. In this it could be argued they are unique; most other dog species and breeds, apart from wolves, have been domesticated. This confers great scientific interest and conservation value on the dingo.

How to handle the dingo is one of the most perplexing issues in Australian wildlife management. Some questions that arise are: given that it was introduced to Australia by humans about 4,000 years ago, should it be considered native fauna? For the last 200 years, there has been widespread hybridisation with domestic dogs and it is difficult, often impossible, to distinguish pure dingoes from hybrids, so how can we judge the conservation value of a particular individual or population? Given the widespread hybridisation, do we have a hope of conserving the dingo, assuming that we decide that we want to? The dingo is a pest to the pastoral industry, particularly sheep farming, and costly programs, including a 5,600-kilometre exclusion fence, aim to eradicate or control populations. So should it be protected at all?

Until recently, the last question has dominated dingo management and the focus has been squarely on eradication, usually by poisoning. Outside the most densely settled regions, these attempts at eradication have failed; dingoes (or hybrids) remain widespread through most of the continent. In recent years, however, opinion in scientific and public spheres has swung dramatically towards recognition of the critical role played by apex predators in ecosystem stabil-

ity and function. There are numerous examples from around the world of the sorts of detrimental ecological cascades that follow the removal of apex predators from ecological systems. These include the proliferation of prey species, often large herbivores, such as deer or kangaroos, resulting in over-grazing of vegetation communities, with consequent erosion and conservation losses, and adverse impacts on agriculture. In Australia, where the dingo is the only large predator, its removal can result in increased populations of the two smaller, introduced predators: the red fox and the feral cat. Higher populations of these killers spell doom for small mammals such as bandicoots, potoroos, and indigenous rodents. This somewhat unintuitive outcome has now been well demonstrated in extensive field management trials, our fauna is better off with dingoes, or dingo-dog hybrids (they are a fact of life now), in the ecosystem.

Smith and his co-authors tease out the nuances of these issues, and more, in this impressive book, which includes chapters on dingo biology and behaviour, origin and ancestry, dingo-human conflict, dingoes' role in Aboriginal culture, their ecological role, intelligence, personality, and potential as companion animals, management in captivity, and suggestions about how Australians and dingoes might co-exist. The aim must be to reduce dingo attacks on livestock rather than to indiscriminately kill dingoes. Further, areas that retain dingo populations with low levels of domestic dog genes, such as Fraser Island, need to be prioritised for dingo conservation. Elsewhere, a pragmatic approach that emphasises the ecological role of apex predators, rather than the desire to conserve pure dingoes, is appropriate.

Until recently, our attitude to the dingo has been, on the whole, rooted in ignorance and outdated views about wildlife. This book is an important step towards improving those attitudes and deserves a wide readership. ■

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