

BUSTING DINGO

MYTHS



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The Australian dingo is a unique social predator that has lived on the continent of Australia for many thousands of years, and evolved alongside native prey species to establish efficient and well-balanced ecosystems.

Our dingo is the only remaining large predator in Australia, and is responsible for keeping our wildlife healthy by keeping prey and pest species populations in check. Unfortunately, similar to the Tasmanian tiger (Thylacene) in our shameful past, our dingo is being vilified and pushed towards extinction by powerful rural and hunting lobbies that cling to an abundance of ignorance, cruelty and greed.

Paying the ultimate price of insufficient action by the government to protect our wildlife, the Tasmanian Tiger is now gone forever. Our dingo is currently the only native animal to be classified in many states as “vermin”, and is being regularly baited with the aerially dropped super-toxin 1080. Despite the dingoes “endangered” status in Victoria there is still a \$100 bounty on “wild dog” scalps. If we do not pressure the government to take immediate action to truly protect our dingo, it will join the Tasmanian Tiger as an extinct animal and our future generations will only be able to marvel at dingoes in old photographs.

As part of their campaign to exterminate our dingo, rural and hunting lobbies spread myths designed to mislead the public. The following are some of the most common myths perpetuated, along with descriptions of what more factually constitutes reality:

Myth #1

“Dingoes decimate native wildlife and ruin ecosystems.”

Reality: Scientific studies of ecosystem conditions on either side of the dingo fence contradict this claim. On the side where dingoes are absent, kangaroos, wallabies, foxes and cats

are overpopulating and destroying vegetation and endangering small marsupials. On the “useless” side where dingoes are present, kangaroo and wallaby populations remain healthy and balanced, allowing vegetation to regenerate; Foxes and cats are also suppressed as a result of predation by dingoes, allowing small marsupials to thrive. Dingoes have naturally preyed upon native marsupials for thousands of years.

Our dingo is beyond doubt Australia’s keystone predator: The species which preys on the weak and sick of the most abundant prey species, keeping herbivore species from overpopulating and outcompeting one another. Dingoes have been doing this job successfully for thousands of years. It is therefore absurd to suggest that dingoes would suddenly pose a threat to wildlife.

The dingo naturally suppresses foxes and feral cats where it is left unmolested. In a recent study where 7 foxes and 8 cats were released into a known dingo habitat, all 7 foxes and 5 of 8 cats were destroyed by the dingoes in 17 days.



Myth #2

“Dingoes are devastating our sheep industry.”

Reality: The reported losses of sheep to wild dogs in a given year in Victoria and New South Wales are at only around 3,600 and 1,200. Given that Victoria and New South Wales house upwards of 20,000,000 and 35,000,000 sheep, these losses could barely even be represented by a crumb on a pie chart or a percentage of just 0.02%. Vastly more sheep are lost in just a month during live export trips. Livestock losses to wild dogs cost nowhere near as much as the continual baiting of our dingoes with the super-toxin 1080 and its successors. There really is no “wild dog problem” in Australia that could not be solved by compensating farmers for losses and/or making them practice more sensible husbandry using proven protective measures such as donkeys, llamas, camels, flock guardian dogs and exclusion fencing.

Dingoes do not prey on domestic farm animals for food, they are unable to metabolise fat, and prefer a diet of lean possum, rabbit and wallaby. The panic behaviour of sheep triggers chasing and prey behaviour in Dingoes.

Myth #3

“Dingoes are not native, and have been proven to be just introduced feral domestic dogs from Asia, therefore they are pests that need to be exterminated.”

Reality: There is no evidence to support the assumption that the dingo travelled by boat with man for its earliest arrival in Australia.

Latest published studies on geological records and rock art depicting dingoes, recently discovered in Arnhem Land NT, and carbon dated at 28 - 30,000 years, plus recent molecular studies on DNA (Wilton et al) have shown that our dingo may have been present on the Australian continent for up to 28,000 years, which predates the separation of New Guinea and Tasmania. This is a very long time in the context of evolution and has been sufficient for the dingo to evolve and adapt to the Australian environment. By any official definition, the dingo is “native”, and deserves specific listing in legislation

How the ancestor of dingoes, shown to be a pale-footed Asian wolf by skull morphology studies, arrived in Australia is unknown, and can only be speculated about and this does not change the fact that dingoes are essential components of Australian ecosystems that must be protected if we wish to preserve our wildlife. Because dingoes still retain most characteristics present in their wild Asian ancestors, it is also highly unlikely that they have been subjected to any form of domestication that would warrant labelling them as “feral dogs”. Dingoes truly are Australia’s own form of wolf.

Myth #4

“Dingoes are vicious killers that attack humans unprovoked.”

Reality: You can count the number of confirmed fatal attacks of dingoes on humans in our entire recorded history on just half a hand. Compare this to about 40,000 domestic dog attacks per annum. Dingoes, like wolves in other parts of the world, have an inherent fear and distrust of humans. They generally avoid confrontations with people and flee at the slightest hint of trouble. The only incidents of “attacks” on humans by dingoes are recorded in areas where they are habituated to humans by irresponsible people, such as on Fraser Island. In those incidents the dingoes have lost much of their fear of humans as a result of feeding, and behaved more boldly when feeling threatened. There are also incidents of habituated juvenile dingoes attempting to play with people, which are often misinterpreted as attacks.

Myth #5

“The real danger to the dingo is the domestic dog, with which it is hybridised to extinction.”

Reality: Domestic dogs do not have the biological adaptations necessary for survival without human assistance, unlike the dingo. Hence most are culled by natural selection before the rare opportunity to mate with a dingo even presents itself. On the rare occasion where mating may succeed, the resulting pups are unlikely to survive due to the harshness of life in the

wild. Even only about half of pure dingo cubs survive to their first year of age.

Hence, all successful wild living canine populations are either of pure or almost pure pre-settler dingoes, performing the identical crucial ecological role. Hybridization is a process that has occurred for wild wolf species across the world since the dawn of the domestic dog, without presenting itself as a real threat. A recent study has shown that the black pelt colour in North American gray wolves was acquired at some point in history through hybridization with domestic dogs. Rather than harming the species, hybridization has actually presented it with a new opportunity for adaptation.

The label “wild dogs” now semantically utilised, exploits hybridisation as a loophole to justify killing entire populations of dingoes. If the dingo is ever to see real protection, the popular paradigm on hybridization needs to change. There is equal danger in lumping foxes with dogs under the heading “wild canids” for the purposes of culling by toxins. This assumes that domestic pet dogs should go free, when this category can represent the greatest threat to livestock.

Myth #6

“Controlled exclusion zones” will protect grazing properties”

Reality: Foxes prefer broken and marginal country to dense bush cover and will quickly colonise areas where dogs are persecuted – at the current rate of 32 foxes for each dog removed (see Victorian Bounty figures, which clearly show alarming annual increases in the ratios of foxes to dogs/dingoes). Taking dingoes out creates fox havens.

Dingoes are strict observers and enforcers of territory and fracturing stable families by indiscriminate control methods leads quickly to “rogue” juveniles, with no parental restraint, creating problems for graziers. If you are not experiencing substantiated direct dingo losses, yet observing the odd dog on the landscape, the wisest management strategy is to leave nature to itself. Sight of a dog does not necessarily imply a threat to grazer livelihood. Dogs control all other introduced feral species, including pigs, which can devour up to 50 lambs in one sitting.

Do you have a question? Email us:

dingo@dingofoundation.org.au

Spread the word in the media and contact the Federal and State minister for the environment, demanding that ALL dingoes be protected, with no needless genetic discrimination!

Hon. Tony Burke – Federal Minister for Environment, Level 1, 1-5 Commercial Road, Kingsgrove NSW 2208 Phone (02) 9553 3800 Email: TonyBurke.MP@APH.gov.au

Hon. Ryan Smith – Victorian Minister for Environment 44 New Street, RINGWOOD VIC 3134 Phone (03) 9637 8890 Email: ryan.smith@parliament.vic.gov.au

Join the Australian Dingo Foundation in the fight for our dingo. Visit our website: www.dingofoundation.org.au