The welfare ethics of the commercial killing of free-ranging kangaroos: an evaluation of the benefits and costs of the industry

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Abstract

The commercial killing of kangaroos provides multiple benefits to society, but also causes both deliberate and unintended harms to kangaroos. The ethics of the kangaroo industry is assessed in terms of whether the assumed benefits justify the welfare costs. An analysis of the stated benefits indicates that killing for damage mitigation is beneficial mainly during drought and not at current levels; that there is a commercial value, although considerably lower than previously estimated, and that demonstrable environmental benefits from commercial killing of kangaroos are lacking; and that the commercial kill may ameliorate the suffering of kangaroos during drought. Welfare practices are very difficult to assess and regulate due to the size and remote nature of the industry. A combination of empirical data on welfare outcomes and inferences drawn from behavioural and reproductive knowledge of the commercially killed species are utilised to assess harm. The welfare costs include deliberate and indirect harm to dependent young (a by-product of the commercial kill), and a number of unintended harms to adult kangaroos, including increased mortality during drought, inhumane killing of a portion of adult kangaroos, and a disruption of social stability and the evolutionary potential of individuals. Furthermore, a substantial gap exists between the intended welfare standards of the code of practice governing the kangaroo industry and the welfare outcomes for both dependent young and adult kangaroos. We found that, on balance, the benefits are lower than expected and the welfare costs are likely to be considerably higher than acceptable. More research, particularly at the point of kill, is necessary to verify and assess the extent of harms. A number of improvements are suggested to the code of practice to improve welfare outcomes.

Keywords: animal welfare, commercial, ethics, harvest, industry, kangaroo

Introduction

Considerable interest has arisen regarding the impact of humans on wild animal welfare (Littin & Mellor 2005; Bekoff 2010; Fraser 2010) including wildlife considered pests (Littin 2010; Mathews 2010) or resources (Gill 2000; Boom & Ben-Ami 2011). High profile examples, such as white-tailed deer (Odocoileus virginianus) in the US (Messmer et al. 1997) and Canadian harp seals (Phoca groenlandica) (Daoust et al. 2002) illustrate that community opposition to the killing of wildlife, whether it is perceived as pest or resource, can be strong. Ethical frameworks for assessing human impacts on animal welfare must expand to incorporate a broader range of possible harms to free-living animals (Francione 2000; Weldon 2008). Even if there is a legitimate purpose to cause harm to animals, the suffering imposed by such activity may not be justified by the means utilised, particularly if there are less harmful procedures available at a comparable cost (Sankoff & Steven 2009). Over the past 30 years in Australia, an annual average of approximately three million free-ranging kangaroos are commercially killed and processed annually by the kangaroo industry (not including young which are collateral deaths). They are killed in prescribed numbers ostensibly to manage their impacts on agricultural production, and for meat for human consumption and pet meat, and for hides and other products (Lunney 2010; Boom et al. 2012). In 1998, the latest Australian congressional review of the use of wildlife, including the commercial killing of kangaroos, determined that although the commercial industry effectively “institutionalised the suffering of kangaroos”, the commercial killing is necessary due to the impact of kangaroos on farming income (Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee 1998). However, accumulating data do not show...