Kangaroo harvesters and the euthanasia of orphaned young-at-foot: applying the theory of planned behaviour to an animal welfare issue

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Abstract

When female kangaroos are shot during commercial harvesting, it is a requirement that dependent young-at-foot are euthanased. However, there are anecdotal reports that harvesters either cannot euthanase young-at-foot (eg they do not see them or they flee) or will not (eg they do not think it is necessary). In this study we used the theory of planned behaviour to understand the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of kangaroo harvesters with regards to the euthanasia of young-at-foot. We firstly conducted a survey of a small number of kangaroo harvesters (n = 21) to gather information to develop the main questionnaire. Recruitment of participants was conducted using a number of approaches including a mail out of over 600 pen-and-paper questionnaires to harvesters in NSW, QLD and SA, Australia. We received completed questionnaires from 65 harvesters. Behaviour was directly observed in only 14 harvesters. The results indicated that those kangaroo harvesters with a more favourable attitude towards euthanasing young-at-foot and who feel more social pressure to do so are more likely to intend to euthanase young-at-foot. However, intention to euthanase orphaned young-at-foot only rarely translated into actual behaviour. The participating harvesters believe that euthanasing young-at-foot reduces joey suffering; that government kangaroo management agencies and farmers and graziers approve of them doing it (but animal protection groups do not); and that the greatest limiting factor preventing them from euthanising young at-foot is that they escape. This research revealed deficiencies in knowledge and training of kangaroo harvesters with regard to humane harvesting practices. We conclude that the use of social psychology methodology and frameworks, such as the theory of planned behaviour, can provide a detailed insight into human attitudes and behaviours that affect animal welfare. This approach can reveal the most important specific factors to consider when training and educating personnel who have direct responsibility for the humane treatment of animals.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes, commercial harvesting, kangaroo, social psychology, theory of planned behaviour

Introduction

In Australia, kangaroos are commercially harvested to produce meat for pet food and for human consumption — both domestically and abroad — as well as skins for leather products. Adult kangaroos, mostly males, are shot by professional shooters who hold the necessary permits and licences. When females are shot they will usually have at least one dependent young at some stage of development (ie pouch young or young-at-foot) and it is a requirement of a national Code of Practice (Commonwealth of Australia 2008) (from herein referred to as the Code) that these young are humanely euthanased by the harvester. According to the Code, euthanasia of pouch young and young-at-foot is done to “prevent the inhumane death of young that cannot survive on their own” (Commonwealth of Australia 2008; p 9). The Code prescribes that small, furless pouch young are killed using either blunt trauma to the head or stunning followed by decapitation. Older, furred pouch young must be killed with a single, forceful blow to the head whilst young-at-foot must be killed using a single shot to the brain or the heart. Despite being a requirement of the Code the euthanasia of dependent young during harvesting is currently not monitored and has not been studied in any detail. Opponents of kangaroo harvesting argue that it is common practice for young-at-foot to be left to fend for themselves once their mothers have been shot (Ben-Ami 2009) and indeed kangaroo harvesters report that euthanasia of young-at-foot is much more difficult to perform compared with killing young that are still contained within the pouch (RSPCA Australia 2002). In this study we used a social psychology framework to understand the factors that influence the euthanasia of orphaned young-at-foot.

For many years animal protection groups have expressed significant concern for young-at-foot that are not euthanased, believing that they will suffer and die from starvation, exposure or predation (Wilson 1999; RSPCA