The Beast Within:

An exploration of Australian constructions of wildlife

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF FIGURES

TABLES

Abstract

The work presented here is a primarily qualitative examination of the meanings, values and perceptions ascribed to Australian wildlife and the influence and impact this has on its management. I argue that there is good reason to believe Australian wildlife management is fundamentally different from models based on game management as practiced in Europe and North America. Instead, Australian management models are grounded almost exclusively in the management of those species defined as pests.

The approach taken here was to use a grounded theory methodology during the data collection and analysis and a social constructionist analysis for higher order abstractions. The approach was adopted because of an identified need to re-evaluate some of the precepts of Australian wildlife management.

Although Australian fauna is generally intrinsically valued, such value appears not to have arrested its critical decline. With some exceptions, Australia's wildlife has not typically been valued as a resource although many of the "pest" species killed in this country are utilised as food elsewhere. A partial explanation of what makes a species edible or worth conserving or needing to be culled appears to lie within the constructions different social groups hold for wildlife. I reasoned that if evidence was found that different groups of people constructed wildlife differently then this diversity of perception would clearly emerge during wildlife conflicts.

There were three principle sources of data used in this thesis. The first was participant observations of a number of wildlife conflicts, the second was the textual analysis of newspaper texts that pertained to wildlife and the third were interviews with different stakeholders involved in a wildlife conflict.

The data suggested different groups will construct wildlife differently, with the "good" wildlife needing to be conserved while the "bad" had to be "managed." However, there was no apparent consensus on which species were good and which were bad.

Conflicts over wildlife often occur where a species is valued by one group and deplored by another. These conflicts can be simple, involving a single complainant and an individual of a species, or they can be community-wide, involving nuisance behaviours of sub-populations of a species, or they can be complex and reflect a range of deeper social tensions. In the studies presented here, these tensions included "values clashes"

between urban and rural groups, between groups who sought to nurture and protect wildlife and those who sought to manage risks associated with human-wildlife interactions. I argue that the way wildlife is constructed by the different groups, in addition to the values those groups ascribe to wildlife, often lies at the heart of a wildlife conflict - and that those constructions often reflect deeper differences than those relating to the treatment of wildlife itself.

Observations of 11 conflicts informed development of a wildlife conflict typology describing the process by which these conflicts escalated into wider, and often intractable, disputes. Analysis of newspaper texts and interview transcripts allowed development of a second model which identified complexity, moral imperatives, ownership and the differing constructions as being key factors influencing the development and resolution of wildlife based conflicts. Both models were successfully tested against a serious wildlife dispute over the management of dingoes on Fraser Island.

Based on these findings I conclude that in order to manage wildlife in a way which meets the expectations of Australians, wildlife professionals must recognise that there are a diversity of valid constructions and values ascribed to wildlife. Understanding these differing constructions will become a powerful tool for the resolution of wildlife conflicts that occur when the presence and behaviours of wildlife cause deterioration in relations between different social groups expressing an interest in that wildlife.

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Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Preface

While working on this thesis I was a regular guest on a Brisbane AM radio station discussing with callers matters related to wildlife. At the time there were a number of conflicts both in the region and throughout Australia involving the presence of flying-fox colonies in urban areas so I felt it timely to promote a flying-fox information evening in a Brisbane park on dusk, around the time of the nightly fly out. I knew the station's target market was primarily retired and semi-retired listeners and, judging from the many calls I fielded and the broadcast content, it was clear it catered to a very conservative audience. For the information night I also invited a Brisbane-based wildlife manager to address the group. Prior to his talk I told him that he shouldn't assume everyone in his audience was comfortable with the concept of evolution. He replied, "Glad you told me that, mate. I'll give it to them in spades." He was true to his word and did not miss an opportunity to lecture his audience on the ecological importance of the species, saying in as many different ways as possible that flying-foxes had "co-evolved" with species of Australian trees. I had no problems with what he said but in terms of attempting to build greater tolerance in the community for flying-foxes, I suspect he failed to reach the hearts and minds of our audience. By linking evolution to the ecological importance of flying-foxes he had challenged his audience to surrender their faith and take a "scientific" view of nature. All I wanted from the meeting was to promote a better understanding of the role of flying-foxes in the landscape, not a religious conversion of sorts. Afterwards I questioned him on his approach and he said "They weren't ever going to get it until they left that creationist nonsense behind."

This example clarified for me, more than anything else, the different ways people viewed wildlife. I was also alerted to the fact that for some there was a *right* and *wrong* way to appreciate wildlife and embedded in these beliefs was the implication that some of the perspectives carried moral overtones. This meant that moderating wildlife conflicts was not so much about telling people why animals did what they did, and how to live with or manage those behaviours, but about fully understanding the causes and contexts of those conflicts. To this end, it is human attitudes and behaviours underscoring wildlife management that will be investigated here rather than any endeavour to expand the field of wildlife ecology. This thesis will explore the differing constructions Australians hold of wildlife and the role these constructions play in the evolution and resolution of human-wildlife conflicts.