

RED KANGAROO, THE HOUR IS LATE, BUT ...

“Big Reds are like the bull elephants of Africa. They are what tourists want to see. You feel embarrassed because there is none left to show them ... the big kangaroos have been shot out ... nobody is looking after the Big Reds.”

— TOURISM BUSH SAFARI OPERATORS EARLY 2000s AS TOLD TO
LES HUTCHINSON IN ‘KANGAROOS: FROM ICON TO ASSET’

“Bloody pests,” mutters Johnson. He is accompanied by an American journalist and they are driving in a Land Cruiser rattling with meat hooks.

“Soon enough the hunt begins. Johnson spots a kangaroo, bent forward swinging its head side to side snipping the dry grass. He closes in at 150 yards and switches on a spotlight mounted on the windshield.

“It is a red kangaroo, an 80-pound buck with a ponderous tail. Light freezes the creature ... His head pops up, he sits tall and dazed, uncertain of the meaning of this sudden attention. He lifts his paws and tucks them under his chin as if in prayer. A ‘fools’ prayers, because it is already too late.”

— FROM *BOING, BOING BOING ... BANG* A REPORT TO AMERICA FROM
OUTBACK BROKEN HILL, BY LAURA BLUMENFELD, WASHINGTON POST, 1994



Photo: © Gary Bell / Oceanwideimages.com

THE HUNTED FUGITIVE ELSEWHERE KNOWN AS SKIPPY

“If you are unfortunate enough to go ‘bush walking’ for 20 kilometres in any direction in the sheep-degraded landscapes around Broken Hill, you’ll see the terrified, scattered, sole survivors of the nightly slaughter. Young kangaroos left alone, wandering in full daylight, with no family for company and affection, no mob mates or mentors, no older experienced kangaroos to stand watch against dog pack attacks or lead them to better areas during drought time.

“When a kangaroo family heads to a waterhole to drink each night, as it needs to, the shooters will be waiting there in ambush with their spotlight, high-power rifles and vicious dogs. Is that any way you’d like to live?”

Now retired science teacher Les Hutchinson wrote these observations in October 2002 when he was working in the iconic mining town in north-west NSW.

Hutchinson, like many others, saw disappointed tourists leave Australia, never having had the wildlife experience of viewing mobs of free-living big kangaroos in the outback. As he told a national wildlife conservation organisation, “these beautiful animals need wide open spaces and need to move in family groups and neighbourly mobs, and even to mass in large mobs during migrations and bad seasons”.

But, he wrote: “The kangaroos’ entire territory, one that they arguably should be left with, the semi-desert, has been taken over by sheep graziers, making the kangaroos trespassers on their own land, where not even one of them is welcome ... and every blade of grass or leaf of foliage is begrudged them (and) a campaign of blame and vilification is waged against them.”

He saw unmotivated school students in Broken Hill boast that they don’t need to study – that they could always get a job as a roo shooter. At nights he observed as many as 120 kangaroo-killing

one-ton trucks return to Broken Hill kangaroo processing plants. The meat would fetch a meagre \$1.50 a kilo.

Working in Broken Hill and looking around, he was convinced wildlife ecotourism could be a durable and sustainable economic bulwark, but, he wrote, “our ecotourism status is currently that of a nationwide boneyard of skeletons of our largest kangaroos”.

In 2002, veterinarian and kangaroo defender John Auty and zoologist David Croft came to Broken Hill for a community roundtable, leading a discussion on the benefits of ecotourism for the region. An article penned by Les Hutchinson appeared in the town paper the *Barrier Daily Truth*. (The venerable *Daily Truth* has recorded a century of worker–boss relations in this tough mining town. Broken Hill also has the dubious distinction of being the model for journalist Kenneth Cooke’s 1970s Australian rural-gothic horror story *Wake in Fright* – a drunken weekend crowned by a savage kangaroo hunt.)

John Auty wrote and spoke often in those days from his first-hand experience as a government veterinarian, in charge of animal welfare for the Commonwealth, who had worked for years in semi-arid, stock-raising country.

LIFE AND PROSPERITY BACK TO THE DEAD HEART

Auty formed the view that there was no future for the post-colonial pastoral industries in the semi-desert, echoing conclusions from earlier Australian biological scientists. He also pointed out the wealth of taxpayer subsidies that keep pastoralists going in marginal lands: infrastructure, control of unwanted native and feral animals, including the substantial cost of baiting and dingo fencing, disease management, drought relief, tax relief, fuel subsidies ...

He noted that the West Kimberley sheep industry, for which pastoralists had been poisoning wallabies with arsenic in the 1960s–70s, was no more. Further south, the WA government was poisoning water sources to rid the pastoralists of a million feral goats.

Auty's vision for the centre of Australia, what he called Reanimating the Dead Heart, was this: two million hectares of the semi-arid and arid lands of Australia eventually returned to the public domain as one great continuous national park, probably managed by local Aboriginal groups. Destocking and managed tourism going hand in hand. There would then be no need for solutions to the 'kangaroo problem.' This could either happen by present attrition, with "desertification", the loss of many more species of flora and fauna or in a planned way.

The *Barrier Truth* article added Croft's ideas for inland tourism, featuring the Red kangaroo – a future akin to whale watching on the eastern coast. Perhaps it was not too late.

"These animals are worth far more to Australians alive than dead," said Croft. He had studied the great national parks of the arid lands of southern Africa as a model and learned that tourism brought in a lot more income to the regions than struggling stock operations. The unique kangaroo mobs would rival the appeal of springbok or wildebeest herds. The unique behavioural traits of the kangaroo from boxing to pouch young had already made the kangaroo, Skippy, a world-wide top tourist 'must see'.

"Rather than harvesting these kangaroos for minimal returns," said Croft, "those with the imagination to go beyond the 19th century view of wildlife exploitation will profit by encouraging wildlife tourism on their properties in the form of farm holidays." He had no doubt it could be done. He had spent 20 years at the University of NSW Fowler's Gap Arid Zone Research Station. Work there showed that conservative sheep stocking to retain chenopod shrubs (valuable drought fodder) meant the Red kangaroo and sheep – who do not eat the same plants normally – can co-exist even in dry times.¹

In the event, post-colonial views of Australian native grazers prevailed in Broken Hill as elsewhere. Kangaroos were 'pests' to

be removed from sheep enterprises. The economically attractive ecotourism proposals languished and expired.

I saw the national value frame from that same year (2002) reflected in archived correspondence between a citizen who wrote about the benefits of inland ecotourism and concerns about the fate of the Red kangaroo and the Australian Tourism Commission. The commission is a statutory body established to promote Australia as a tourism destination. It did not think Red kangaroos were worth talking about as a tourist attraction. It was on board with the graziers and the official land management view of the large macropods.

The “facts” the Tourism Commission passed on about the status quo of kangaroo “harvesting” included: that kangaroos have “thrived” in Australia since settlement. The commission’s words here are in quotation marks because words matter in persuading citizens how to think about things. The commission told the enquiring citizen that aerial surveys before 2002 estimated large kangaroo populations at 25 million or maybe it was upward of 40 million? Anyway, kangaroos are the most numerous land mammals on earth, said the commission’s note.

In this view, the unique animal that holds up one side of the national emblem “do immense damage to pastoral properties” – ruining crops and fences and competing with livestock for food and water; “harvesting” turns a long-time pest into an economic resource; harvesting is strictly regulated to prevent cruelty and flexible quotas respond to seasonal conditions.

The fact sheet referred the citizen to the Director, federal National Parks and Wildlife Service; the public relations director of Environment Australia, and the then communications manager of CSIRO Wildlife and Ecology.

THEY ALL AGREE

The official stamp of approval animates this story of wildlife treatment in Australia and how Australia treats Skippy. Media reports have used the words of politicians, government officials and applied ecologists for decades to justify what is happening, and to counter any animal welfare or population sustainability concerns. ‘Must-have’ economic and export arguments are cited without need of defence.

A typical example is a 1997 *Australian Financial Review* story about a consumer campaign at the time, led by the International Fund for Animal Welfare. (Consumer campaigns to stop kangaroo meat and skins sold overseas continue to the present day. More on that later). The *Fin Review*’s story quoted the then premier of NSW Bob Carr. He accuses independent NSW Member of the Legislative Assembly, Richard Jones, who was lending his weight to the wildlife cause, of “sabotaging the State’s efforts to open a new export market in Europe”²

I spent some time on this journey with the documentary record, looking for those with professional expertise whose eyes and ears were not closed to the tragedy befalling Australia’s wildlife and the increasingly bad outlook for the Red kangaroo in particular. It appeared mainstream warnings have been suppressed, not understood or forgotten.

Thus, no one would have called the 1960s chief of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research, Harry Frith, a bleeding heart for kangaroos. On the contrary, in a report from 1968, his stated views of kangaroos as a “resource” and as a “game meat” source fit with the hard-nosed, rationalist thinking of the time, and since, about Australia’s national symbol and its place in the national export economy.

But Frith was a thorough biologist and did appreciate Australia’s unique biodiversity. Elsewhere in these pages I record his comments

about the destruction for colonial dairy farms of the unique east coast rainforest ecosystems and the abundant wildlife that once lived there.

His 1968 scientific commentary and critique of the over-shooting of the Red kangaroo, published in a newsletter by the Australian Conservation Foundation, describes an unabated pattern of killing on behalf of western sheep graziers and a growing game meat and skins 'harvest', while disregarding the Red's basic biology that determines the breeding stock holding up the population's future.³

Dry seasons and drought (becoming more frequent with climate change) play a big role in reproductive capability. Red females outside of captive conditions may not be sexually mature until five years of age in bad years, with an average in good seasons of two-and-a-half years. Many pouch young do not survive even a mild drought. Frith's research showed 83 percent of joeys failing to leave the pouch under those conditions. Red kangaroos have the added ability to cease breeding in poor season until rain falls (also observed in Greys).

Frith reported statistics from the mid-1960s such as the following: in central Australia, on one station, 14,000 Red kangaroos were shot each year; in central NSW, on one property with 6,000 sheep, 7,000 kangaroos were shot each year – and in WA, 13,000 Wallaroos/Euros were poisoned in a year. He concluded that the large numbers of kangaroos on their home territories would have been competing with the stock at the time.

But he also concluded that there was no control over the commercial 'harvesting' rate that ensued and the numbers of kangaroos declined precipitously within a year or so of such numbers being killed. Aerial counts over hundreds of square miles recorded population drops of 70 percent and more.

Already 50 years ago, Frith noted other evidence that the hunt was unsustainable to the population. Smaller average size and immature animals were recorded at the chillers. The magnificent

big Reds were being systematically shot out – bigger skins, more meat at pennies a pound.

In 2001 it was again noted, at a NSW government-convened conference, that the average age of a shot Red kangaroo was only two years of age, below sexual maturity for females, when in normal life these resilient macropods could make it to 20 or more years. I was also learning about the ‘mystery’ disease epidemics hammering the survivors in the decades since the 1960s.

THE RED KANGAROOS WILL BE GONE AND THE GREYS SOON AFTER

On 27 May 1998, Pat O’Brien, then president of a wildlife conservation group in central Queensland and kangaroo campaigner for the Australian Wildlife Protection Council, wrote to the Director of the Australian Conservation Foundation.

He wrote of the pressure from well-funded industry groups and bureaucrats to exploit Australia’s wildlife for profit. He noted Queensland nature was already reeling from mega-dams, vegetation removal, mines, chemical plants, “dead coral by the bucketful”. Now the state was being offered proposals for extending export trade of Australia’s wildlife, alive or dead.

“In Central Queensland there have been proposals to farm and harvest native water rats for skins, bandicoots for meat and fur, capture of native birds for export as talking cage birds, game hunting in National Parks and other horrible proposals ... we believe a strong illegal market already exists in Queensland, supplying the Victorian native pet market ...

“The worst issue is the large kangaroos. I sit on the Queensland Macropod Management Advisory Committee and regularly communicate with conservation representatives on the NSW Macropod Committee. Both committees are structured to facilitate the industry which is totally out of control ... In recent meetings that I have had

with shooter groups, they are saying that unless there are dramatic management changes, our red roos will be gone in 10 years and the greys soon after.”⁴

When I spoke with Mick McIntyre, director of *Kangaroo*, a recent documentary about Australia’s ‘love/hate’ relationship with its national emblem, I asked him what footage his drones had picked up of Red kangaroos in western NSW. Across the vast semi-arid outback of western NSW, he said they filmed very few kangaroos, and the only large ones were seen in a national park.

At the end of 2019, the Queensland government – which has handed out numerous kangaroo destruction permits to graziers in recent years, and used taxpayer money to help graziers build miles of deadly fencing traps for a renewed wool industry – halted the 2020 commercial kangaroo hunt. Numbers of Grey kangaroos and Wallaroos/Euros had fallen below critical population markers. Reds were not mentioned.

The national broadcaster, the ABC, as well as rural newspapers, thereupon solicited the opinions of rural commercial operators who thought it was a waste to stop the hunt and let this free ‘product’ starve to death. Starvation was not documented. Decades after the alarm was raised for the fate of the Big Reds, there were no voices in these reports for the welfare of the other species of large kangaroos, or for non-lethal directions to share the land and Australia’s unique wildlife heritage.⁵