

BOOK REVIEW OF
LIVING WITH THE DINGO
by Adam O'Neill

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Reviewed by Alex Colley

Adam O'Neill, a professional eradicator of feral animals and a talented observer, is well qualified to write this book, the theme of which is that "dingoes play a critically important role in maintaining ecological balance in Australia."

Professor John Pettigrew first brought to the attention of the Colong Foundation the ecological significance of the dingo (see Colong Bulletin Nov. 1992). As Director of the Vision Touch and Hearing Centre of the University of Queensland he studied the vision of birds, which is very relevant to human vision. At the same time a grant from the Australian Research Council enabled a study of bilby, feral cat, fox and dingo numbers. The site of the study, Davenport Downs in central Queensland was not a stock breeding station but a fattening property. Dingoes were not therefore a problem. However dingoes disappeared from one area, adjacent to a bore watering point, probably due to the fact that they were shot for the bounty. The area was overrun with cats which preyed on the bilbys. It was also noted that the highest densities of cats were found on properties adjacent to Davenport Downs where dingoes had been eliminated by baiting. From a scientific aspect this afforded experimental evidence, that where the dingoes were eliminated foxes and cats proliferated and smaller species, such as bilbys, were destroyed.

O'Neill writes that "For the last 200 years the dingo has been, and probably still is, the most persecuted animal in the history of Australia. By 1863 there was scarcely a dingo left south of the Murrumbidgee. In the 1930s the price of a dingo's head was 2 pounds. An 8000 km. fence has been erected to contain them."

O'Neill provides abundant evidence that, when the dingo is eliminated, foxes and cats proliferate. This was the case in the Riverina and also in many arid areas. Baiting, aerial or ground based, is the main means of eliminating dingoes. When the dingoes go there is an upsurge in smaller native mammals. Baiting however does not eliminate foxes and cats. Foxes avoid baits and cats prefer the fresh prey that they kill. With the demise of the dingoes the foxes and cats soon breed in large numbers or infiltrate from adjoining areas and destroy the native mammals. The dingoes, like other Australian animals, adapted to the climatically uncertain Australian environment, increase slowly and may never return to the baited territory. With their disappearance kangaroos breed up, and this is perhaps the main reason why they are now a pest in many areas.

O'Neill has presented a well supported case for the preservation of the dingo. The main difficulty is that fact that they have interbred with feral or domestic dogs. This has meant the fragmentation of the dingo packs led by a dominant dingo dog. After baiting dingoes may return to the baited area from adjoining areas, but not as a pack. It is these disoriented remnants which mate with domestic and feral dogs. It is a mixture of dogs and dingo half breeds which cause stock losses. Can selective preservation of pure bred, or near pure bred dingoes be achieved? Is there an alternative to baiting? There are alternatives, though they would prove expensive. One is to use areas subject to dog depredation for fattening of stock rather than breeding. Another is to exclude dogs by erection of electric fences. . Another is to put dog proof fences round dingo habitats and eliminate the dogs within it (on the lines of the Earth Sanctuaries reserves). Perhaps the most practical measure is to shoot the offending animals, as O'Neill has done within the Scotia Sanctuary. There are many difficulties to be overcome if the dingo is to be preserved, but as he concludes:

Only when we put away the poison baits and concentrate on rehabilitating our environment as a whole, will our endangered species have any hope of survival. The dingo has 4,000 years of experience in managing Australian land systems and controlling the animals that existed within them. I believe that the dingo is our only chance for reconciliation.

[Note: The Colong Foundation for Wilderness agrees with Mr O'Neil that dingoes should not be baited within its core habitat on public lands, but, to effectively control hybridisation with feral dogs, the Foundation does not rule out baiting around the perimeter of national parks and state forests. Such

baiting can prevent entry of dogs into these core areas; kill off rouge feral dog populations; and prevent attacks on stock. Baiting should also be considered as part of a dingo recovery program to displace feral dogs from core dingo habitat on public lands.]