

## **RSPCA Alan White Scholarship for Animal Welfare research**

Recipient: Lily van Eeden, The University of Sydney, 2016

### **The dingo in Australian society: public perceptions of dingoes and their management**

#### **Background**

Dingoes are an important part of Australian ecosystems as our only top order predator. However, they are mired in controversy because their ambiguous status as both an iconic native species and introduced pest. This is because they arrived in Australia around 5000 years ago and are now generally considered a naturalised species, but they are also considered a pest because of the threat they pose to livestock. There has never been a survey undertaken to determine how the dingo sits in the mindset of the Australian public.

Dingo populations are managed across most of mainland Australia, at a cost of \$48-60 million per year, in an effort to protect livestock from attack. This management entails mostly lethal control, with a focus on baiting with poisons such as sodium monofluoroacetate (1080) – a poison which the RSPCA considers inhumane<sup>1</sup>. We currently have little understanding of whether the general public are aware of or to what extent they approve of such management practices, but it is possible that public perceptions have been influenced by a lack of transparency which has been engendered by use of the term “wild dog management” to describe lethal dingo control.

#### **Aims**

For my PhD, I aim to understand the social and political settings that shape contemporary dingo management. The component of my PhD that is supported by the Alan White Scholarship investigates public perceptions of dingoes and their management, and has the following specific aims:

- To identify whether dingoes are considered a native, iconic species by the Australian public;
- To discover how public attitudes towards dingoes compare with those of other wildlife and “pest” species;
- To understand how the public view the dichotomy between dingoes and “wild dogs”; and
- To measure support for current and proposed alternative wildlife management methods.

#### **Methods and scope**

The above aims will be met by conducting two public surveys supported by the Alan White Scholarship. Both surveys will be distributed online to randomly selected participants across Australia by a market research company. While the focus of my research is on dingoes, the scope of the research will have broader relevance in building our understanding of public perceptions and attitudes to other wild animals and their management in Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://kb.rspca.org.au/What-is-the-RSPCAs-view-on-using-1080-for-pest-animal-control\\_141.html](http://kb.rspca.org.au/What-is-the-RSPCAs-view-on-using-1080-for-pest-animal-control_141.html) Accessed 16/08/2016

The first survey is a questionnaire that comprises multiple choice and Likert scale ranking questions which seek to identify participants' levels of knowledge about wildlife management, and then correlates this with their approval or disapproval of a range of lethal and non-lethal management methods. The survey compares between key species (e.g. dingoes, kangaroos, wild horses) to understand how and why perceptions of the management of these species may differ. The questionnaire will be distributed as two different versions, the only difference being that in one survey dingoes will be referred to as "dingoes" and in the other they will be referred to as "wild dogs". This is intended to identify how such terminology affects public perceptions and whether the public distinguish between dingoes and wild dogs as being a valued native species or an introduced pest.

The second survey seeks to identify Australian public preferences for wild animals. The survey comprises paired images of wild animals in Australia (including both native and non-native species) and for each pair participants are asked to rank the strength of their preference between the two species, in the context of wild animals living in Australia. This will identify how Australians view dingoes (as native or non-native, iconic or a pest) but will also provide broader information on (1) how Australians perceive and relate to native wildlife, which may indicate conservation priorities, and (2) whether Australians favour native over non-native species.

### **Timeframe**

These surveys are pending ethics approval and will be distributed before the end of 2017. It is my intention that at least two peer-reviewed journal articles will be published as a result of this research, which will be provided in their final published form to the RSPCA over the next two years.