

Photo: Bradley Smith

DINGO KINSHIP

'People save what they love,' observed conservation biologist Michael Soule. Conversely, they will often mistreat what is disliked or deemed a problem. Although there is now greater societal acceptance that all animals, whether native, introduced or domestic, warrant ethical consideration, exceptions are often made for animals labelled 'pest'

Photo: Jonny Lockwood

Perceptions of dingoes range from kin to pest. Social and ecological justice researcher **Deborah Bird Rose** explores the ethical dimensions of our relationship with this top predator.

One of the greatest story-tellers I encountered in my years of research with Aboriginal people was Old Tim Yilngayarli. His home country was out in the hot golden savannah region of the Northern Territory, and he was a Dingo Lawman. Dingo Dreamings travelled across his country doing their creative work, and there were sacred sites where they had stopped and done things. Old Tim had the responsibility for sites, songs and stories, and for dingoes themselves.

My research involved listening to lots of stories, so I was lucky to live with people like Old Tim. Many of the stories he and others told were quite specifically about humans in relation to other animals: What kind of creature is the human? Where do we come from? How are we meant to fit into country? These are among the great questions of philosophy, but as Aboriginal people tell the stories, they don't sound like philosophy. They sound fascinating, or raunchy, or like botany or zoology lessons; they're funny, or sad, or all of the above.

Old Tim told long fabulous stories about how dogs and humans have a common origin and a shared destiny. The birth of the human, he explained, is through dogs, because in the beginning there was only the one creature, the ancestor of us all. He wanted to be clear that this story is true for all humans and *all* dogs: 'Dreaming [creators] worked that way for everyone, White lady, Aboriginal men, all the same. They walk, they stand up, they're finished being dogs now, they're proper humans, women and men. Mother and Father Dingo made Aboriginal people. White children come out of a white dog.' ▶

After that founding moment, the one kind of creature became two – dingoes (and other dogs) on one side of the equation, and humans on the other. We all have the same ancestors, and therefore we are all kin, but now we look and act differently. To look into the face of dogs is to see close relations. It is to see mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. Without them we could not be who we are, and their faces turn toward us in the knowledge that we are here together, all of us, living and interacting in our related ways.

Old Tim had the wonderful gift of understanding dog language, and so I asked him what dogs said to him. His answers were all about how badly people are treating dogs. In general, it was white people he thought were mistreating dogs, not Aboriginals. In any event, he said that dogs say: 'We don't come bash up people.' They say: 'What for people want to bash up us?' And Tim added this commentary: 'We come out of that dog. No good hit them, no good shoot them. Dog's a big boss, you've gotta leave him, no more killing.' In his stories the ancestral Dingoes give voice to their sense of lost connection and care: 'I made them man and woman. Now you've dropped me, put me in the rubbish dump.'

The dogs were not wrong. Our dingo kinfolk are not faring well at this time. Their suffering calls us to consider in greater depth the place Old Tim referred to as the rubbish dump. Of course, the rubbish dump is the end-point for all that is unwanted, all that is no longer useful. And because we live in a throw-away culture, the rubbish dump is growing ever more rapidly. But Old Tim wasn't just talking about household or industrial waste. In his vivid way, he was talking about something far more sinister.

The consequences of labels

The category of the unwanted includes the creatures that are labelled 'pest', and we now have major industries dedicated to killing them. The central image of a pest is an insect. From a human point of view, living a life not threatened by insects is a perfectly reasonable expectation. We don't want scorpions in our swags or boots, we know that mosquitoes can transmit horrible diseases, and we do our best to keep flies out of our eyes and ants out of our food. However, this insect-oriented category has been expanded to include many creatures, and the emotional energy that goes into it is immense. It even includes native and keystone species, notably flying-foxes and dingoes.

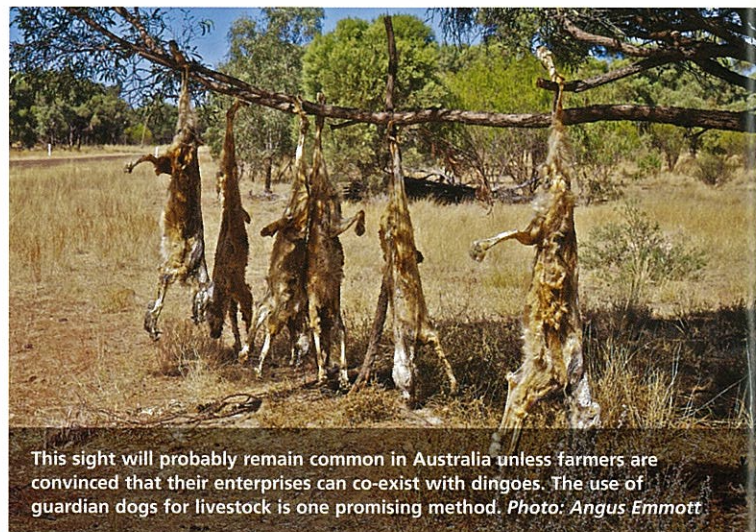
When Old Tim talked about creatures being thrown on the rubbish dump, he was addressing a huge and ethically disastrous issue. A pest, it seems, is something that can be killed with satisfaction. My question is not exactly about the motivations of those who kill, be it for conservation, or protection of crops and flocks, or trophy hunting. Rather, the first question concerns what happens ethically when a creature is classed as a pest. Many thoughtful persons have noted that once an animal is declared 'pest', or 'vermin', or even 'invasive', something happens within the sensibilities of many humans. Cane toads are an outstanding example. As David Trigger notes, there is public discourse about ways of killing cane toads, such as bashing with golf clubs or cricket bats, that would be completely unacceptable if they were a native mammal or domestic pet. The language of invasive vs. native species also does interesting work here. As Thom van Dooren discovered in his research on foxes and the penguin colony at Manly in Sydney, those animals deemed not to belong slip into a category of those whose 'lives are not *legitimate* lives within the context of contemporary ecologies, and as such ... their deaths are not only *condoned* (as they often are in legislation), but also in an important sense *demand*ed for the sake of any genuine conservation'.

Killing for conservation is particularly challenging because it combines both care and killing.

Thus the category pest sets a creature apart, and that apartness is determined by a human vision. To quote educational materials provided on the feral.org.au website: 'The word "pest" is used to describe an animal that causes serious damage to a valued resource. Such a pest may be destructive, a nuisance, noisy or simply not wanted.' Legislation meant to prevent cruelty to animals can be put aside, as the Queensland government has recently done in order to allow flying-foxes to be shot.

Scanning the web, one sees that some humans get great satisfaction from destroying 'pests': some go out on safari and 'bag' their donkey, others pose with the bodies of dead dingoes. My travels back and forth across Australia have taken me past many trophy sites: trees strung up with dead dingoes or cats; dingoes hung from signposts, gateposts and fences. At its worst, pest eradication takes on the fervour of a cult. In that mode, it seems to entail a self-satisfied vision of humanity that celebrates the human capacity to destroy anything that gets in their way. Underlying this vision is an old and ugly idea that humans are entitled to an unencumbered place in the sun. That is, our place on earth, our place in the sun, is treated as if it were an infinitely expandable, non-negotiable right, and anything that gets in the way of us doing any darn thing we want is treated as if it were an aggressive enemy.

Words like 'vilification' and 'violence' carry overtones that may sound far-fetched or remote, so it is important to remember that pest killing is well established within the mainstream. Let us bear in mind that it is part of a wider, bureaucratised, government-funded, university-based, industry-supported, socially legitimated effort to enhance *both* primary production *and* native ecosystems (for example, the CRC for Invasive Animals).



This sight will probably remain common in Australia unless farmers are convinced that their enterprises can co-exist with dingoes. The use of guardian dogs for livestock is one promising method. Photo: Angus Emmott

Care and killing

Killing for conservation is particularly challenging because it combines both care and killing. Environmental philosopher Freya Mathews has written a beautiful essay on the anguish she experienced when she left the university and took up residence on a large conservation property where she had to undertake rabbit 'control'. What appalled her, in particular, was that there were no good alternatives to killing, and that decisions about what and how to kill were regularly made on the basis of what was cheapest and most convenient (for humans, of course). Her point was not that the killing must stop. Like most conservationists, Mathews is clear about the positive effects of control. The consequence is that a great deal of conservation action designed to protect certain species involves violence toward other species, resulting in what van Dooren calls violent-care. Mathews's plea, like van Dooren's, is that we *not* take all this killing for granted; that we do continue to work for alternatives;

that we *not* desensitise ourselves to practices that are, and should remain, ethically problematic; and that we continue to reflect upon our interactions with others in this time of rapid social and ecological change.

All this wholesale death raises significant questions, one of which concerns the act of killing. This brings us back to dingo kinship and the life of predators. Old Tim did not eat dingoes because he was closely related to them, but other Aboriginal people in the region did. They knew when the pups were just at the point of being able to live apart from their parents, and they would raid a few dens. They killed some pups for food, and kept a few as pets. This was part of the lives of hunters prior to the time when they were subjected to strong forms of settler Australian control.

Old Tim and other Aboriginal people in the region objected deeply to the wholesale slaughter of dingoes, which they saw as yet another way of tossing creatures onto the rubbish dump. It was part of a war that for decades had been killing without care, breaking up families, destroying long-term, formerly stable relationships, and was aimed at the long-term marginalisation or disappearance of dingoes. It was a familiar story. Old Tim was born around the turn of the century, and he knew this story as it related to both dingo and Aboriginal families. So when Old Tim spoke, as he sometimes did, about Mother and Father Dingo, he was talking about ancestors and kinship, and was well aware of the shared experience of being a member of a despised group.

Top predators

Another dimension of this kinship is the affinities between two top order predators – dingoes and humans. We know that dingoes live within well ordered family groups, adjust themselves to their territory, and engage in predation that has positive ecosystem effects that cascade through both animals and plants (see *Dingoes for Wildlife* article). We humans are capable of living like dingoes: we, too, have the capacity to limit our numbers and to keep our family units in balance with territory and with other species. We have the capacity to self-manage, but are not handling it at all well. In fact, from an ecosystem point of view, it seems that humans are the great pests: we are the ones, surely, who cause 'serious damage to a valued resource' (earth), and are 'destructive, a nuisance, noisy'; quite possibly we are 'simply not wanted.' The idea that humans can take up all the place in the sun works against our capacity to self-manage, as does our seemingly unrelenting commitment to growth (of society, economy, consumption, and much more). It seems incredibly difficult to develop a discourse that brings human management together with wildlife management so as to articulate strategies for how we would limit our population, control *our* impacts, give way to the needs of *others*.

Thinking 'human' together with 'conservation' poses good questions. Why would one declare war on the top predator whose functional participation in webs of life keeps ecosystems healthy? These are the living systems on which we, too, depend. Protection, rather than destruction, seems so clearly smart: because Australian ecosystems need dingoes; because we don't know all there is to know, and therefore do not know and cannot know what we would be destroying if we were to destroy them entirely. But side by side with the reasonableness, there are other issues: we can and should protect them because they are kin, because they are beautiful, because life is richer with them than it could ever be without them, because we humans have the capacity to love other animals and in these days of violence, dingoes and other vilified creatures need our love.

We need to be able to love other animals, protect them, live with them, and experience their awesome presence. How we manage to share this earth, this beautiful place in the sun, defines who we really are. The love we offer to others, perhaps especially to animals under threat of extermination, is the measure of us as humans.

What do these dingoes represent? It depends who you ask. Some say native, others say feral or pest, or introduced but ecologically valuable. For some Aboriginal people, dingoes are kin. Some people advocate strict protection, others eradication. Photo: Bradley Smith



That measure can never be fully specified. Human life and the lives of others are always entangled, and always shifting. It is certainly possible, however, to imagine a world in which we kill for food, but not for dominance or pleasure. Where we respect the lives of other animals by refusing to denigrate or vilify them. Where we respect their deaths by minimising suffering and treating their dead bodies with dignity. Where dingo kinship brings recognition of the responsibilities of being a top predator, and we aim in every possible way toward becoming a responsible, empathetic, self-managing and self-limiting species. ■

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DEBORAH BIRD ROSE came to Australia in 1980 to live with Aboriginal people to learn about their relationships with country and other species. Instead of returning to the USA, she stayed to work with people on land claims and other matters. Her commitment to social and ecological justice is now focussed on multispecies communities. Her most recent book is *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* (University of Virginia Press). A prize winning author, she is a Professor at Macquarie University and an Adjunct Professor at the University of NSW.