

National Dingo Preservation and Recovery Program (NDPRP Inc.)
Submission on the Greater Alpine National Parks Draft Management Plan
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The NDPRP

The NDPRP was incorporated in 2008, when a group of environmental experts and conservationists from Victoria, NSW and Queensland agreed upon the need to establish an overarching not-for-profit national organisation to advocate for the protection of the dingo. The NDPRP adopted a two category approach to defining the dingo for conservation purposes: 'ancestral' dingoes and 'modern' dingoes. The 'ancestral' dingo type refers to dingoes resembling the 'original' dingo type that reached Australia some 4000 to 5000 years ago and was first described by European settlers in 1789. The 'modern' dingo type refers to dingoes that have undergone some degree of hybridisation over the past two centuries or so since European settlement of Australia. The NDPRP maintains that both dingo types exhibit similar territorial, breeding and social behaviours in the wild and both types perform similar ecological roles.

The Ecological Benefits of Dingoes and Dingo Hybrids

Over recent decades, there has been a growing interest, internationally, in the positive role of apex predators in maintaining the health of ecosystems and biodiversity. In Australia, too, there is an increasing body of research findings to show that healthy dingo populations, as the terrestrial apex predator, provide ecological benefits for the maintenance of biodiversity, including improving the survival prospects of threatened small marsupial species. In 2011, research supervised by Professor Chris Johnson of the School of Marine & Tropical Biology, Cook University and Dr Arian Wallach stated:

Our research has demonstrated that dingoes have a profound influence on ecosystem structure. Dingoes suppress mesopredators (foxes and cats) and herbivores (rabbits, kangaroos, emus, goats and donkeys), which enables small mammals (such as hopping mice, dunnarts and kowaris) to increase in abundance. Where predator control is relaxed vegetation cover and diversity also increase. The ecological influence of dingoes is so important in fact, that many native species can only persist where dingoes are present.

Because dingoes (like other wolves) are socially complex, they are particularly sensitive to lethal control. Dingoes are deeply social and intelligent beings...To recover Australia's wilderness, predator-control practices must be eliminated entirely, and dingoes afforded full protection. (Reviving Ecological Functioning with Dingo Restoration, http://www.hermonslade.org.au/projects/HSF_08_11/hsf_08_11.html)

In this context, it is important to note that the greater part of the in-the-field and other research that has been conducted in Australia into the ecological role of the dingo has not controlled for dingo purity. The ecological benefits that have been observed relate to populations that are likely to have undergone some degree of hybridisation over the two-hundred years since European arrival. This realisation appears to have been acknowledged by the Victorian Department for the Environment and Primary Industries which, in its invasive pest animal control material states:

'We regard wild dogs/dingoes as Top Order Carnivores that all healthy ecosystems need, and we will make all attempts to ensure these animals are not targeted [by fox control programs].' (Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries – Powerpoint Presentation, Southern Ark Project)

Commentary on the Draft Plan

In light of the growing awareness of the ecological benefits of healthy dingo populations, the NDPRP wishes to highlight a number of inaccuracies and inconsistencies within the Draft Plan in relation to Dingoes and Dingo hybrids within Victorian National Parks which, if not corrected, will potentially misinform the general public and public authorities charged with protecting the biodiversity values within Victoria's Alpine National Parks.

i/The implication that Dingoes/ Wild dogs present a biodiversity threat

It is therefore of concern that the Draft Plan, in listing severe pest animal threats to biodiversity within Victorian National Parks, refers to:

'predation of native fauna by introduced pest animals including foxes, cats and wild dogs (issue box 9)' (Draft Plan, p. 23)

The above statement implies that the issue box 9, found on page 58 of the Draft Plan will contain evidence or further information on the wild dog threat to biodiversity. However, this is not the case. Indeed, this box points to the biodiversity benefits of dingoes as top order predator, such as in the suppression of fox activity, and points to dingoes and their hybrids being virtually indistinguishable.

Indeed, foxes and feral cats have been shown to be major threats to biodiversity. However, the implication that 'wild dogs', a taxonomically imprecise term that includes dingoes, dingo hybrids and feral dogs (domestic dogs run wild), present a biodiversity threat within Victorian Alpine parks is seriously misleading. As noted, the majority of recent research into the role of dingoes and their hybrids in Australian ecosystems shows that these animals provide a net environmental benefit in terms of biodiversity maintenance. Most importantly, this research shows that this benefit is the result of the role of dingoes (and their hybrids) in *suppressing the predation activity of foxes and feral cats* upon small and mid-sized marsupial species. As it stands, this section of the Plan is highly misleading in categorising dingoes (and their hybrids) in the same way as foxes and feral cats.

This misclassification of dingoes/dingo hybrids continues on page 25 of the Draft Plan, where table 4.1 is presented which provides an overview of the level of priority given to 'threats to natural values within the parks'. Table 4.1 lists the alleged threats, the type of natural ecosystems involved and the ecological values that need to be protected, along with a threat level designation, either HP (High Priority) or P (Priority). The threat listed at the top of the Table is 'Predation (foxes, cats, and dogs)'. This threat item is identified as 'HP' across 3 of the 4 natural ecosystems listed and across all 5 of the natural values listed: Arboreal mammals, ground dwelling mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians and fish. Again, while the destructive impact of foxes and feral cats upon biodiversity is not contested, the suggestion that dingoes/dingo hybrids play the same destructive role as foxes and cats within Victorian Alpine ecosystems is scientifically unfounded and unjustified.

li/ Confusion between protecting land productivity and biodiversity

As it stands, the Draft Plan confuses the objectives of protection of land productivity on private land adjacent to Victorian Alpine National Parks and biodiversity protection. That the perceived threat from 'wild dogs' is to farm stock becomes evident in the list of strategies and measures put forward on pages 26 and 27. Although the stated *Goals* of the Plan in relation to threat management relate to protecting 'biodiversity, and maintaining healthy ecological processes, such as fires and ensuring appropriate fire regimes, area-wide pest animal management is framed in the following terms:

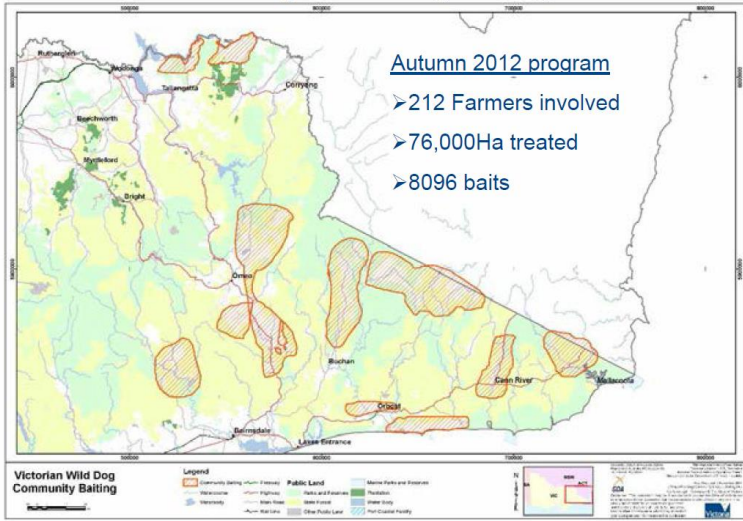
'Reduction of fox abundance to levels that allow increasing distribution and abundance of susceptible fauna...

Containment of populations of wild dogs to protect neighbouring properties.' (Action Plan , p. 27)

Although this item does appear to separate the biodiversity threat arising from foxes from the threat to land productivity from 'wild dogs', it is incongruous that the issue of land productivity is dealt with under a section that is meant to address actions to deal with threats to natural values within Victorian Alpine National Parks.

The Action Plan needs to make it clear that dingoes (and dingo hybrids) are not managed in Victoria as a threat to biodiversity, but as a threat to land productivity. This is why dingo/'wild-dog' control in Victoria is limited to a 3 kilometer zone at the interface of public and private land. The rationale represents a compromise between the need to protect dingo populations and the protection of livestock.

Community Baiting Programs



The map above, from a Department of Environment and Primary Industries shows ‘wild dog’ community baiting programs in 2012, which were limited to areas close to the public-private land interface in eastern Victoria (Southern Ark, DEPI). Again, the rationale is farm stock protection, not biodiversity protection as implied at various points within the Draft Plan. Much greater clarification is needed within the Plan in distinguishing these goals in relation to dingo/wild dog control.

The NDPRP encourages the Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries to correct the inaccuracies in the Draft Plan identified above. As it stands, the Draft is conceptually and programmatically confusing with respect to dingo/‘wild-dog’ management.