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NSW Legislative Council Hansard

WILDERNESS AMENDMENT BILL

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Bill introduced, read a first time and ordered to be printed.

Second Reading

The Hon. JON JENKINS [3.08 p.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The problems caused by feral animals and the lack of any real effort to deal with those problems are very well known within environmental circles. I will briefly describe the background to the bill and outline to honourable members the results of my research so that they may consider it between now and when debate on the bill resumes at a later date. Technically, it is somewhat difficult to define the term "feral animal". The dingo was introduced to Australia between 3,500 and 5,000 years ago, depending on which research paper is believed. The National Parks and Wildlife Service defines a feral animal as an animal that was not present when Europeans first arrived in this country in the 1800s. Throughout Australia's settlement, European settlers brought with them both animals and plants that are now having a devastating effect on our environment. They are very difficult to deal with, and I will be making some suggestions in that regard during this debate.

At the outset I will outline some of the history of the introduction of feral animals to Australia. One feral animal with which all honourable members would be familiar is the fox, which was introduced in approximately 1845 because English gentlemen wanted to continue their fox-hunting habits. Foxes are very adaptable, and within 50 years of their introduction to this country, had spread throughout almost the entire Australian continent. The only places where foxes are not found are the far northern, tropical regions of Australia—and there may be some biological reasons for that. Otherwise foxes have spread throughout the whole of Australia. An animal that was probably introduced with the arrival of the First Fleet is the cat. Cats were kept on ships to keep rats and mice under control, and they almost certainly escaped from ships onto land when European settlers came here.

Reverend the Hon. Dr Gordon Moyes: Matthew Flinders' Trim!

The Hon. JON JENKINS: It may well have been. Research that I conducted with the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service shows that some cats may well have come to this country via the Indonesian region. Apparently at an earlier time northern indigenous people traded with Indonesian people and cats may have arrived in Australia via that means. Genetic studies suggest that the appearance of some cats may have predated European settlement. Dogs arrived in this country on the First Fleet, as well as goats and pigs, which were kept for food. Unfortunately, many plants that we refer to as weeds were also brought into the country at that time. Lantana originated from South America and was introduced to Australia in approximately 1850. It has also spread throughout most of Australia. It grows to a height of 15 metres. Blackberry, another terrible pest, is of uncertain origin but probably originated in Africa. It grows to a height of approximately five metres in clumps of approximately eight metres long. It was probably introduced in the mid-1800s and also has spread throughout almost all mainland Australia. I will deal in more detail with weeds at a later stage.

Some of the problems caused by feral animals were dealt with by this very Parliament approximately two years ago. Two members who took part in that inquiry are present in the Chamber today. A report of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5 on feral animals was tabled in this House. It is a very substantive report, and I am sure, the two members of the committee to whom I have referred will confirm that the inquiry was most extensive. The committee travelled throughout New South Wales and consulted extensively with scientists, representatives of rural lands protection boards and experts on feral animals. It saddens me that two years later I can find no evidence of even one recommendation of the report having been implemented. Despite the considerable cost of preparing this report and conducting the inquiry—bearing in mind the cost of travel and so on—not one recommendation has been implemented.

Last year's National Parks and Wildlife Service report, which was also tabled in this House, devoted just half a page to information about feral animals—an indication that government instrumentalities are not treating the issue with the seriousness it deserves. This bill is designed to remedy that situation. The bill makes it a legislative requirement for the National Parks and Wildlife Service to deal with the problem of feral animals. I do not wish to unnecessarily take up the time of the House, but I will cite some statistics that I would like honourable members who are present in the Chamber to listen to so that they will be able to tell other members of their parties what I am about to say. I will also provide them with information and research data.

By way of background, I inform the House that earlier this year I accompanied officers of the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service and Army personnel on a shooting trip to western Queensland. I do not use guns and did not engage in any shooting activity, but those who did shot 600 cats in two nights in a six square kilometre area. I ask honourable

members to think about the number of feral cats that exist in Australia based on that statistical framework.

Autopsies of the cats that were shot on that trip revealed that each cat had, on average, three native animals in its gut. Some of the cats had consumed bilbies—the most endangered species on the Australian mainland. I ask honourable members to also keep those numbers in mind. In New South Wales alone there are approximately 8 million hectares of national parks and wilderness areas. Current research indicates that there are between one and three feral cats per hectare, which means that there are approximately 16 million feral cats in New South Wales. Each night, feral cats eat approximately 74 million native animals and birds. These statistics relate only to cats; I have not yet cited statistics for native birds and animals consumed by wild dogs or foxes. In one year, feral cats consume 2.7 billion native animals.

I now draw attention to the proliferation of pest weeds in Australia. In the once beautiful Bendethera wilderness in southern New South Wales there is now nothing but vast stretches of five-metre-high blackberry bushes as far as the eye can see. I hate to think what the great environmental mentors, Myles and Milo Dunphy, who spent a great deal of time in the Bendethera wilderness, would think of the area now. The wilderness where the grandfathers of the environment movement spent most of their time has become an area people cannot access or would not want to access.

Before I conclude, I will add one more set of statistics for honourable members to consider. Almost 50 per cent of the New South Wales coastline has been declared national park or wilderness area. In other words, the National Parks and Wildlife Service controls almost half of the coastline of New South Wales. Why is it the case that in national park and wilderness areas, which are protected from development among other things, the list of threatened species continues to increase at a rate greater than anywhere else in the Western World? Research shows that the two factors of unmanaged wilderness and high rates of threatened species are intrinsically linked. That is a problem for New South Wales because the issue of feral animals has not been addressed. I will continue to address this issue in more detail at some time in the new year.

Debate adjourned on motion by Reverend the Hon. Fred Nile.

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