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Dingo Control or Conservation? Attitudes towards Urban Dingoes (*Canis lupus dingo*) as an Aid to Dingo Management

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ABSTRACT: There is surprisingly little research into urban dingoes, even though urban areas in Australia are rapidly increasing, along with a concurrent increase in the number of reported conflicts with wildlife. Misguided and so-called *ad hoc* management of dingo populations, often caused by an over-reaction by the media to a situation, is commonly accredited for these conflicts. There can also be confusion over whom to contact when problems arise. A survey of the attitudes of parents of school-aged children towards urban dingoes in their area was carried out in Maroochy Shire, in South-East Queensland. Respondents generally believed that dingoes could be dangerous, but they preferred that control methods used be 'humane'. Most respondents obtained their knowledge of dingoes from television and news media; about ¾ of respondents requested information regarding dingo management issues. The Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service was selected by a majority of respondents as the preferred agency to deal with dingo management.

KEY WORDS: attitudes, Australia, *Canis lupus dingo*, conservation, dingo, predator management, Queensland, urban wildlife

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INTRODUCTION

Are dingoes (*Canis lupus dingo*) an urban pest, or a species in need of conservation? There are often polarised views within the general public over wildlife, especially when wildlife inhabits urban areas. This has become apparent in recent years in Australia with regards to urban dingo populations (Burns and Howard 2003). Dingoes are often perceived as a pest, and in some states of Australia they are intensively managed (Fleming et. al. 2001).

Another problem facing the dingo as a species is that it is losing its genetic integrity due to hybridization with domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*), particularly in urban and sub-urban areas (Corbett 1995) and within the eastern states of Australia (Fleming et. al. 2001). This can have major implications on the future management and/or conservation status of dingoes.

In Queensland, dingoes are a declared pest; this means that landowners are expected to control populations (Fleming et. al. 2001, NRM 2002). Such control methods, for example poisoning with 1080 (sodium monofluoroacetate), can create a negative reaction from the public and this has been observed in Townsville, in Northern Queensland (see Rural Management Partners 2004). However, any wildlife problem also includes people problems, usually as a result of a lack of knowledge in dealing with a situation involving wildlife, or an over-reaction to an issue (Riney 1982, NRM 2002).

The results of this study may provide information to dingo management agencies about public attitudes towards dingoes and preferred management strategies. As urban areas increase, there is often human encroachment into prime dingo territories and a possible increase in the amount of contact— and thus, conflict— between dingoes and people, particularly as urban areas can provide easier pickings for habitat generalists such as dingoes (O'Keeffe and Walton 2004, Timm et. al. 2004). There is consider-

able annual growth rate in the human population of Maroochy Shire and the Sunshine Coast, higher than that of most state capitals (State Development, Queensland 2006). There is also reported to be a chronic problem of nuisance dingoes in this area (Allen 2006; G. Doyle, Maroochy Shire Council, pers. commun.)

This study was designed to gather information regarding four main areas of people's attitudes towards urban dingoes in Maroochy Shire: 1) attitudes and perceptions, 2) the influences on these attitudes, and identification of sources from which people have gained their current knowledge of dingoes, 3) the experiences people have had with urban dingoes in Maroochy Shire, and 4) people's attitudes and opinions towards management of urban dingoes, particularly in regard to a list of possible management strategies, as well as which department should be in charge of urban dingo issues.

METHODS

This survey was conducted in Maroochy Shire, a local government area on the Sunshine Coast in South-East Queensland. Parents of school-aged children were surveyed between June and August 2006. Each participant was provided with a questionnaire and an information sheet; this detailed the study and gave information on dingoes in their area (see Allen 2006). As it was imperative that the respondent did not lose interest in the survey before completing it, the questionnaire had to be concise. The questionnaire contained a number of single-choice, multiple-choice, and Likert scale questions. Returned surveys were entered into a spreadsheet for analysis via a code book, to ensure impartial data entry.

RESULTS

From the original estimation of 2,250 surveys required, there was only 5.7% return rate. Some schools returned many undistributed surveys, as they had over-

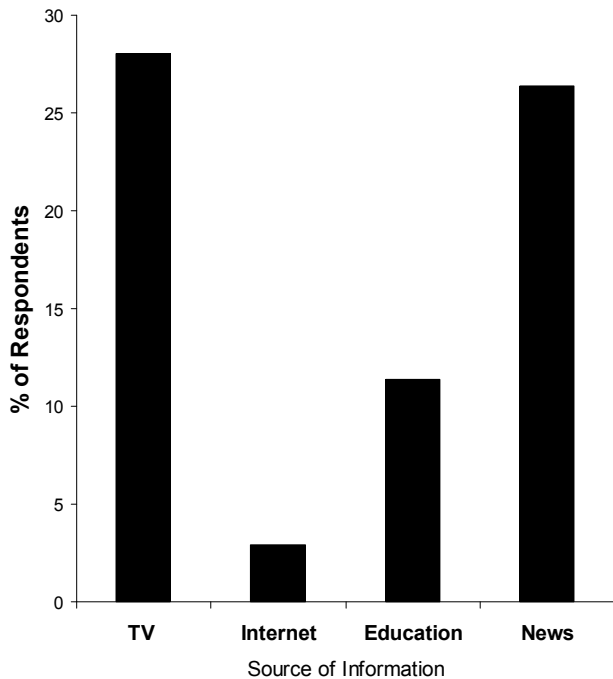


Figure 1. Source of information people have on dingoes. Respondents were asked to indicate the source from which they acquired the majority of their information on dingoes. This was a multiple-choice question.

estimated the numbers needed. As taking part in this survey was purely voluntary, the schools were encouraged to prompt parents to return the surveys, but there was no direct contact with each non-respondent from the author; therefore, little else could be done to encourage further completion of surveys.

The results from this survey have shown that, in general, people indicated they thought dingoes were dangerous, but preferred ‘humane’ control methods. Only 48% of respondents perceived that dingoes were living in their area of Maroochy Shire. The main source from which people gained their knowledge about dingoes was TV and news media, with very few people gaining information from formal education (Figure 1).

Despite only 30% of those surveyed having actually had an experience with a dingo (whether good, bad, or neutral), 74% of the respondents requested more information regarding dingoes and dingo management issues in their area. Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service was chosen as the preferred management agency (Figure 2).

DISCUSSION AND MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Previous studies have indicated a variation in attitudes toward large carnivores, with urban residents often having a more positive attitude than more rural residents (Kleiven et al., 2004, DeStefano et al., 2005). However, in Maroochy Shire overall, we found a slightly negative view of urban dingoes, but a ‘conservationist’ attitude toward their management was evident. ‘Humane’ control methods were preferred as a management strategy, with many respondents indicating they did not want problem animals to be destroyed (personal observation). How-

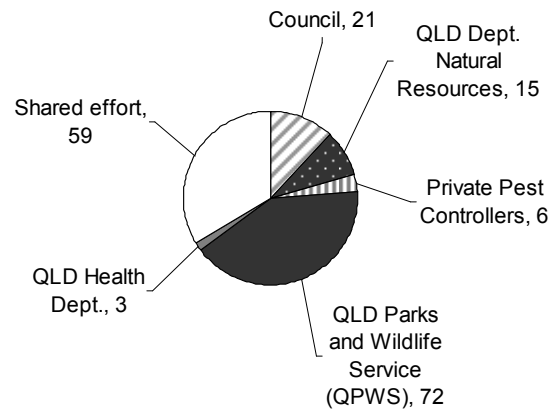


Figure 2. Preferred management department of respondents. Respondents were asked what department they preferred to be in charge of dingo management in their area. This was multiple-choice question; therefore, many respondents ticked more than one reply.

ever, many ‘humane’ control methods are much less effective in reducing the problem of pest animals. For example, Rushton et al. (2006) indicated that humane control of foxes via immunocontraception has one of the lowest success rates in reducing a problem population.

Education is needed by those who live in close proximity to urban dingoes. Members of the public also require reliable information on how to reduce conflicts with dingoes, whom to contact when problems arise, and the reasons for the use of lethal control. Involving the public in developing management strategies, as well as better understanding their opinions towards dingoes, may help reduce subsequent disagreements about management decisions.

As only a small demographic group of people was used for this study, the results should be interpreted with caution and not be extrapolated to infer the opinions of Maroochy Shire as a whole. Consequently, this study only indicates the differences in opinions within one demographic group of residents.

Further studies into attitudes of other social groups are also needed, as this could help develop a greater understanding of preferred management decisions. To effectively manage urban dingoes, future research should also be concentrated on the ecology of urban dingoes, as results from rural studies should not be extrapolated to an urban context.

SUMMARY

Views about one species or pest problem can be polarised, even in one community or demographic group. In this case, the people surveyed perceived urban dingoes in a negative way, but their opinions on management were often more conservationist, with a preference for humane control. This can affect management decisions, particularly when control measures are undertaken on problem dingoes. More education about dingoes and the reasons for their control is needed— especially to those moving to Maroochy shire— as well as greater community involvement in management decisions.

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