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The XXI International Grassland Congress / VIII International Rangeland Congress took place in Hohhot, China from June 29 through July 5, 2008.

Proceedings edited by Organizing Committee of 2008 IGC/IRC Conference

Published by Guangdong People's Publishing House

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Integrating kangaroos and livestock through sustainable wildlife enterprise trials

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Key words : kangaroos , sustainable use , pest control , meat production

Kangaroos are abundant in the temperate Australian rangelands where cattle and sheep are raised , competing with them in dry times and being labelled by livestock producers as pests . They are not contained and roam from property to property seeking out best pastures in response to local rainfall . Despite the existence of a commercial kangaroo industry , under current arrangements it is rare for landholders to benefit from the kangaroos on their lands or play a role in their management . To address this , Sustainable Wildlife Enterprises (SWE) trials are underway to find ways to integrate kangaroos into livestock production systems .

Kangaroo harvesting is the shooting of kangaroos for their meat and skins . The process is regulated under nationally coordinated wildlife trade management plans that have consistently been endorsed by professional ecologists and wildlife managers and their associations . Kangaroos are shot in the field at night using a high-powered spotlight and a high-powered rifle by certified and licensed shooters . A Code of Practice requires head shots and instantaneous death . Most carcasses are processed to human consumption standard and kangaroo meat is currently exported and sold in Australia to the food service industry , retail outlets and also to the pet food industry . Kangaroo harvesters are generally independent small businesses paid per kilogram for the kangaroo carcasses they supply to processors . Quotas are based on scientific studies and rigorous monitoring of population numbers and breeding patterns and are only set for species which are abundant and not threatened by endangerment .

The Figure shows population estimates for 25 years from 1981 to 2006 for commercially harvested species .

Populations can grow rapidly in years favourable for breeding and survival , for example 1996 to 2001 , and droughts can depress populations equally rapidly . Figure also shows that harvests are a small proportion of the population and unrelated to fluctuations .

Greater use of wildlife has been made elsewhere in recent years . Notwithstanding that a relatively small kangaroo industry exists , Australia has been slow to follow these examples , and in particular to involve landholders . An impediment to change is uncertainty about resource ownership . Local migration is a key part of the kangaroos adaption strategy to Australia's erratic rainfall .

But this means they move from property to property and claiming ownership or managing them is difficult . Management responsibility is further complicated by state protective legislation and the status of kangaroos as a national icon but resolving these issues is not insurmountable , as has been shown for equally iconic species , springbok in South Africa , red deer in Scotland , and bison in United States . Regional collaboration in management addresses ownership and local movement issues . The establishment of cooperatives is one solution being trialled that brings together independent livestock producers and kangaroo harvesters and assists in marketing products . Integration of kangaroos also requires landholders to stop regarding kangaroos as pests that compete with livestock and provide no benefit . Such a change in attitude would follow an increase in the value of kangaroos , which could be achieved by improved product control and marketing . Many of the initiatives would emulate the product quality and enhanced description practices being used in the beef industry . Other marketing to increase demand would be based on kangaroos environmentally friendly adaptations such as efficient use of pastures , minimal management inputs and intrinsic capability to reproduce and prosper in Australian habitats and highly variable climate . . Another significant environmental attribute of using kangaroos that will gain prominence when greenhouse gas emissions from livestock are exposed to their cost is the kangaroos low production of methane , leading to low emission meat" .

After three years , the trials show that the economic benefits of fewer cattle and sheep and more kangaroos are not immediate , and the incentives for landholders to change are weak . However , with market development , attention to quality and emphasis on a range of other environmental benefits , demand for kangaroo meat could increase and entice rangeland landholders into kangaroo production . Continuing research support is needed to advise and monitor the establishment of cooperatives , marketing , economic , ecological and social issues .

References

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