

Why do some graziers want to retain, not kill, dingoes?

May 15 2017, by Euan Ritchie



Australia has a complex relationship with the dingo. Credit: Angus Emmott, Author provided

Vast, ancient, nutrient-poor, with wild swings between droughts, floods and fires: this describes much of the Australian continent. Livestock grazing and farming in such a land is certainly not without its challenges.

Where we've failed to work with the local conditions, we see barren plains, dust storms, the extinction of native species, and the repossession

of properties by banks, among many ills.

But such a dire picture is far from universal, and belies the fact that many who live on the land are also among our most innovative land managers. [Many projects](#) offer potential [benefits](#) for [livestock production and the environment alike](#), but without support progress may be hindered.

Putting dingoes to work

One of the most contentious examples involves encouraging dingoes. Many pastoral areas require land managers to take "[all reasonable and practical steps](#)" to manage the risk of dingoes, which are classed as pest animals.

But a [growing body of research](#) argues that dingoes can be effective at controlling [kangaroo and feral goat populations](#), especially on cattle stations.

A Western Australian couple, David Pollock and Frances Jones, were recently featured on [Australian Story](#) for their decision to regenerate their property, Wooleen, by de-stocking, encouraging local flora and fauna, and investing in ecotourism.

Their neighbours, including sheep graziers whose stock are vulnerable to dingoes, feel this is an irresponsible decision. Graziers have a mandate to control dingoes ("wild dogs", to many) and dingo-domestic dog hybrids—which can't be easily and reliably distinguished in the wild.

While the [impacts](#) and merits of encouraging dingoes in sheep country are [hotly debated](#), their role in the management of cattle stations is much better understood. But restrictive legislation and the stigma attached to dingoes are frustrating for those who see them as having a vital

ecological and economic role for their properties.

Queensland grazier [Angus Emmott](#) writes that his beef cattle enterprise, Noonbah station, has benefited from leaving dingoes and kangaroos alone:



Dingoes are known to be very effective at controlling kangaroo populations.
Credit: . Angus Emmott

"We run a beef cattle enterprise in the top end of the Queensland channel country, southwest of Longreach. As a part of our management

plan, we leave the dingoes and the 'roos alone. We see a range of benefits to our operation.

When the dingoes don't have their social structure disrupted by poison baiting, trapping and shooting, only the apex bitch breeds, once a year at most. These family groups have strictly defined ranges, and they kill or chase off other [wild dogs](#) or dingoes that intrude. They also keep kangaroos down to very low numbers, which is a huge benefit in regards to pasture growth and being able to rest our paddocks. The dingoes also keep down feral pig, cat and fox numbers.

Yes, dingoes do take some of our calves, but the benefits of pasture growth and feral animal control result in a net benefit of better land condition and a greater dollar return. Dingoes also benefit biodiversity conservation and soil condition. We acknowledge this management model does not work in sheep country, including for some of our nearby neighbours, and in these cases we need to look at different forms of management, such as fencing and/or [companion and guardian animals](#)."

[Research](#) supports the financial benefits of this approach in certain circumstances. Some studies have found that, perversely, taking lethal action against [dingoes](#) can [increase the incidence of attacks on stock](#) and boost the population of herbivores that [compete with cattle for pasture](#).

Solutions for [protecting livestock against attack](#), such as guardian dogs, are also at hand and may be considerably cheaper than constructing and maintaining extensive predator-proof fences. Livestock guardian dogs have been shown to be effective in numerous locations across Australia, on large and small grazing properties. But investment from state and federal government (and related agencies) aimed at encouraging such innovation has been lacking.

Working with the land

Regardless of whether graziers take the drastic steps seen at Wooleen, now is the time to reflect on the direction of Australia's land management.

If we're to overcome the many challenges we face, including the impacts of [climate change on food production](#), then we need to support the bold new thinking emerging from rural and regional Australia, and our scientific institutions.

Such ideas could include making better use of native animals – better suited to Australian conditions – as sources of meat, and [reforming land use legislation](#) to allow new industries.

Seeing some of the worst land degradation first hand it's easy to think that it's all too hard and that environmental repair will take decades, if not centuries. This can invite inertia and apathy, the enemies of positive change.

But the stories of Wooleen, Noonbah and other [innovators](#) show us [what is possible](#). Science has helped demonstrate ecological [repair can happen faster](#) and to a greater extent than many might appreciate.

Big changes certainly carry risks, and these must be managed carefully, but [new and sometimes brave ideas](#) will always improve our understanding of the land. Whatever the outcome, such knowledge helps guide better decisions for more sustainable grazing, farming and bio-diverse conservation.

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