

# The sheep must give way to the dingo in Australia's arid rangelands

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Western Australian pastoralist David Pollock argues much needs to be learned about how to transition Australia's vast, arid rangelands pastures from their present, significantly degraded condition to become truly

sustainable farming operations.

Overgrazing has been the overwhelming cause of the declining condition of our rangelands, yet domestic stock have contributed to less than half the total impact. Unmanaged animals such as rabbits, wild goats and kangaroos ramp up the grazing pressure, leading to a "set stocking" approach to pastoralism, a constant competition over scarce resources at the expense of plant and animal biodiversity.

Any responsible grazing system must allow the most palatable plants time to recover through a rotational grazing system, which is unworkable when so many unmanaged animals continue to graze pastures vacated by stock. Pastoralist David Pollock recommends that hardest of all things—a cultural shift.

"By far the cheapest, most guaranteed to be effective thing we can do as Australians to recover our rangeland resources, whether it be for production or conservation, is to stop killing the dingoes," he argues.

In an article published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, David illustrates how the large properties involved in the infertile, dry soils of the rangelands make animal-proof fencing economically unviable. "The most viable option on larger properties is to make use of the [dingo](#) to control unmanaged grazers, with one important caveat—cattle must be run instead of sheep."

"As a nation, we need to start the conversation about how to transition from our current practices, which have proven to be immensely destructive, towards those that restore and sustainably utilize our resources. And there is a lot at stake, as pastoralism in semi-arid and arid regions is the predominant land use in Australia, covering around 40% of Australia's land mass."

David believes the change must start at the top. "The fiction of the wild dog has been created over the past twenty years to enable the Australian Government to continue to fund dingo culling." He points to "a sustained campaign of misinformation that is directly contrary to the available science."

## **Australia's maligned apex predator**

Throughout Australia dingoes are maligned by primary producers, through adherence to the long-established cultural norm of believing that the dingo is their enemy, and by the public, through a sustained campaign of misinformation that is directly contrary to the available science.

David considers the substitution of the term 'wild dog' for the term 'dingo' conjures up very different mental images and is a deliberate fiction that enables the Australian Government to continue to fund dingo culling.

"The single most influential move towards restoring the dingo to its rightful level of immense ecological and productive worth would be for all government departments to discontinue the use of the term '[wild dogs](#)' to describe dingoes," David claims.

"This move could easily be justified by the recent, current and ongoing genetic research, which overwhelmingly shows that public funds are not currently being used to kill wild dogs, because they are so few in number that it is arguable they don't even exist in Australia's wild places."

Currently, the definition of the term 'wild dog,' as described by government agencies, includes pure-bred dingoes.

## Transitioning from sheep farming

David is resolute: "Sheep and dingoes cannot co-exist and without the dingoes on large properties to manage the total grazing pressure, there is almost no likelihood that the landscape will be managed sustainably. If we continue to degrade our soil and pasture, then sheep will not survive there for much longer anyway."

So, is this the end of sheep farming in the rangelands? Not necessarily. If the land becomes more productive with the sheep gone and dingoes "managing the unmanageable," then it's likely pastoralists can transition to owning smaller, more productive properties that will be a cheaper proposition on which to maintain exclusion fencing. "It is also the point at which management becomes intensive enough that those properties have the capacity to control their unmanaged grazers themselves."

## Good news all round

David points out that dingoes are not just essential for good grazing management, but also the survival of native flora and fauna in rangeland areas. "Wherever dingoes have gained a foothold they have completely removed the fox in the southern rangelands. They have also affected cat numbers."

"Australia has the largest extinction rate of mammals in the world, and that will continue for as long as we deny the dingo its ecological role."

**More information:** David Pollock, Managing the unmanageable: reinstating the dingo for pastoral sustainability in Australian rangelands, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria* (2021). [DOI: 10.1071/RS21005](https://doi.org/10.1071/RS21005)

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