



Kangaroos, states and conservation

**Some kind of control
is necessary, but
states' rights interfere**

by William Scholes

A growing human population and consequent settlement pressures inland have created demands on Australia's resources. Much concern has been expressed over the fate of the kangaroo, the country's national symbol.

The Federal Government and the Opposition agreed May 14 to appoint a select committee of the House of Representatives to study the whole problem of preservation of wildlife, especially the kangaroo. At the same time, members of Parliament have discussed banning exports of kangaroo meat and skins, including shipment of a million skins scheduled for export to three United States companies from Queensland this year. The Queensland Government has introduced a bill to limit sites from which kangaroo shooters can operate, but it places no limit on the number that can be shot.

The shooting of kangaroos in Australia in recent years has been compared to the decimation of the bison in the Western United States. But despite the wholesale and sometimes cruel slaughter, there are probably more kangaroos in Australia today than before European settlement. And although there certainly will have to be control measures, the kangaroo as a species is apparently less endangered than was feared, except in certain local situations.

The problem of kangaroo management is an immensely complex one. There is not a single animal called the kangaroo but six species, each with its own special diet and habits. And there is no absolute problem of competition for forage between kangaroos and domestic animals. In fact, the over-all increase in kangaroos since settlement is attributed to subtle ecological changes in rangelands caused by the sheep, which coexist well with kangaroos if there is no overgrazing. Kangaroos have built-in mechanisms for preventing overgrazing. If there is insufficient forage they simply breed less.

It was the proliferation of kangaroos in certain areas, viewed as a threat to the grazing industry, that gave the kangaroo-shooting industry its first impetus. During recent years drought, which inhibits kangaroo reproduction, has prevailed, and with the shooting there has doubtless been a major decline in kangaroo populations. But the drought is over now, and according to Dr. H. J. Frith of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Corporation, the nation's leading kangaroo expert, generally kangaroo populations are increasing in most areas.

Back in 1968, when red and gray kangaroos, the two most common species, had declined as much as 75 percent in some places, Dr. Frith expressed concern that "the industry does seem to be, in some areas, in danger of shooting itself out of business." Now he agrees that there should be some restrictions, but believes the estimated current kill of two million kangaroos a year is not unreasonable. Other scientists agree that the harvest is not excessive, if there is management to spread the kill over the populations.

Suggested in Parliament as one form of management has been a nationwide kill ratio. This would involve killing only the excess each year, thus keeping the population stable. Also suggested has been actual farming of kangaroos, in combination with domestic animals. This might be the most economic use of the land because more kangaroo meat can be raised per acre than mutton or other protein.

The House Select Committee will study this problem along with many others relating to wildlife and conservation. One difficulty is that the states assert their constitutional rights over their own resources and wildlife, and any bill will have to take this constitutional question into account. Sen. J. A. Mulvihill of New South Wales proposed consideration of a wildlife bill like the one passed in the United States Congress in 1966, which gives the Interior Department control over wildlife only "after consultation with the affected states."

Even though the kangaroo may not now be endangered, in the 200 years of European settlement in Australia, 30 unique species of birds and animals have been exterminated. Moving for establishment of the Select Committee, Rep. E. M. C. Fox of Victoria said that although the prerogatives of the states would have to be recognized, Parliament has the responsibility of guarding Australia's natural heritage and cannot drift along allowing each state to establish its own conservation policies without regard to the policies of other states.

Matters the committee will inquire into—besides kangaroo management—include the need for a comprehensive survey of wildlife populations, the adequacy of the national park system, the effects of pesticides and pollutants on wildlife, the need for interstate and international agreements on effective wildlife conservation and the need for an Australia-wide conservation authority.