

Kangaroo trade ban: To have or have not

Tie the kangaroo ban down, sport. That request from several animal welfare groups came on the heels of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's recent proposal to lift its ban on commercial importation of kangaroos and kangaroo products.

The ban was imposed in December 1974 when Australia's red, eastern gray and western gray kangaroos were listed as "threatened" — likely to become "endangered" (in danger of extinction through all or part of their range)—under the Endangered Species Act. At that time, the Service suspected that the annual mortality rate for the kangaroo was exceeding its reproductive capacity due to the killing of the marsupial by graziers and landowners, competition with livestock and inadequate control and monitoring of the kangaroo commercial harvest. But the Service, even though it intends to maintain the pouched mammals on the threatened species list, now thinks the kangaroo populations have bounced back enough to justify lifting the trade ban.

"It's an outrage," says Craig Van Note, executive vice president of Monitor — a consortium of about 33 conservation, environmental and animal welfare organizations that may take the kangaroo issue to court to guarantee continuance of the trade ban. "You can't say that a species is threatened and open up importation of its skins. . . . It's a gross hypocrisy."

Moreover, says Van Note, "The proposed lifting of the import ban was a straight political decision by the administration to reward the Australian government for support on a number of issues." The Monitor representative explains that after the United States imposed the trade ban, Australia flooded other markets with its kangaroo products. When these markets curtailed imports to protect their own domestic industries, Australia was left with vast stockpiles of slaughtered kangaroos. Then, says Van Note, the Australian government "let it be known in no uncertain terms that the United States better shape up on the kangaroo issue if it wants to have cooperation on other issues."

But Terry Wolkerstorfer, aide to Assistant Secretary of the Interior Robert L. Herbst, says, "It's absolutely untrue that it was a political move. . . . Sure, the Australians have made no secret as to how they want this to come out, but that has had no effect on us." Instead, says Wolkerstorfer, the proposed action is based on a review of recently obtained data and information indicating boosted kangaroo populations and an improved management program for Australia's estimated 20 million to 40 million kangaroos.

Part of the review data was gathered by David Anderson, a population dynamicist



National Geographic Society

The 1974 trade ban on kangaroos included the eastern gray shown here.

from the University of Utah at Logan, during his April visit to Australia. "There were kangaroos just everywhere," says Anderson. "You could see them at high noon; you could see them in the dead of the night. . . . We even had trouble landing on several airstrips because of them."

But Van Note says that the Anderson trip is "the biggest crock we've [Monitor] heard," that Anderson spent too brief a time in too vast a country to accurately judge the kangaroo population status and that the Australians "naturally took him to an area where there are huge concentrations [of kangaroos]." Van Note maintains that there still is "no scientific rationale" behind the proposed trade ban lift. "What we're calling for is a good aerial survey," he says. "No one has done a good survey."

On the contrary, says Anderson, four aerial surveys conducted in the past five years over the entire commercial kangaroo zone by a University of Sydney group provided "scientific rationale" for the proposed trade ban lift. Monitor continues to advocate the trade ban in the face of such evidence because "they are really anti-hunting oriented whether there are millions or just a half million of a species," says Anderson. "It's really distressing because there are about a dozen smaller animals over there — the yellow-footed rock wallaby, for example — that need public sector support and these groups won't lift a finger for these animals. Their only interest is in protecting animals that are hunted."

Counters Van Note, "That's totally incorrect; we're the ones that got the wallabies listed on the International Treaty [signatory countries of the treaty agree not to trade listed animals]." Furthermore, Van Note describes Monitor's philosophy not as one of anti-hunting, but rather as one of anti-trade. "We are trying to discourage trade of all wildlife, because you can't control the populations once trade is opened."

But if kangaroo trade is reopened, Interior Department spokesman Wolkerstorfer says, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will adopt "a very cautious approach to the whole thing." The Service would review the situation again in two years to determine whether the importation ban should be reimposed. □

Environmental cancer on the rise

The incidence rate for cancers among white Americans increased roughly 10 percent during a seven-year period beginning in 1969. According to a report by the President's Council on Environmental Quality, increasing exposures to toxic chemicals may have been a notable factor in that increase.

"Toxic Chemicals and Public Protection" reports on the research, findings and recommendations of a 16-agency federal Toxic Substances Strategy Committee. Its task was set on May 23, 1977, when President Jimmy Carter asked CEQ to develop a program "to eliminate overlaps and fill gaps in the collection of data on toxic chemicals, and to coordinate federal research and regulatory activities affecting them." Acknowledging that it couldn't study every chemical and pathway to exposure, TSSC focused its attention. For example, it gave risk assessment for cancer more attention than for other health effects and regulatory mechanisms to control exposure more attention than voluntary ones.

Already hotly contended is TSSC's assertion that the average annual increase in cancers rose between 1969 and 1976, from 346.6 cases per 100,000 white males and from 271.5 to 301.2 for white females — an annual rise of 1.3 and 2 percent respectively. (The figures come from National Cancer Institute statistics reported earlier this year.) While an estimated 80 to 90 percent of all cancers have been attributed to environment — diet, lifestyle and pollution — NCI and two other environmental agencies suggest 20 to 38 percent are associated with occupation. A direct causal link between disease and jobs, however, has been estimated to involve only five percent. □

Synfuels bill to Carter

Helping private industry gain the wherewithal to build 10 synthetic-fuels plants — each capable of producing the equivalent of 50,000 barrels of oil daily—is the purpose of a 400-page bill signed into law by President Jimmy Carter on Monday.

A key component of Carter's revised energy plan, it earmarks \$20 billion in loan, purchase- and price guarantees for the initial phases of the program. It also provides for creation of a U.S. Fuels Corp. — a federal entity to speed production of synthetic crude oil from coal, shale oil and tar sands. The complicated rule — 18 months in the making — should also spur conservation and wider use of renewable energy sources such as wind and biomass through development of federally insured "banks" offering loans and subsidies for appropriate investments. □