

As the national symbol, the kangaroo is Australia's pride and joy. It is the star of the tourism industry and represents the exotic wildlife of its home. Sadly, Australia also profits from the meat and leather of millions of kangaroos each year. Unlike farm animals, they are according to guidelines depicted by the Code of Practice for the Humane Shooting of Kangaroos. The Code itself, however, is flawed, allowing brutal cruelty in the interest of convenience. The hunting process is also virtually unmonitored, leaving "humane death" subjective to the integrity of the individual hunter.

The Australian government insists that the kangaroo is "a serious pest" to justify the kangaroo cull. Kangaroos are accused of placing "environmental sustainability of the region...at risk" by competing with domestic livestock for food, a phenomenon known as damage mitigation, and disrupting agriculture. It is further said that the industry "actually plays a significant role in ensuring the environmental sustainability of these regions". (Kangaroo Industry Association of Australia) Many studies, however, demonstrate that kangaroo grazing has negligible impact on farms and that "competition is intermittent, occurring only during a period of climatically-driven food depletion". (Ben-Ami, qtd. in the Sydney Morning Herald) The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization also revealed in a study that kangaroos do not even enter 95% of wheat crops. RSPCA Australia also points out that generally, harvesting quotas "no longer relate population reduction directly to damage mitigation", basing them on population surveys instead. This indicates that the government has come to view kangaroos as a resource rather than a pest. The protection of domestic farm animals is a mere myth.

Each year, tags are made according to the harvest quota and sold to hunters. Processing plants accept only tagged animals to ensure that kangaroos are not overhunted, and hunters are government-licensed through a training course and a shooting assessment. Additionally, the Code states that adult kangaroos must be killed humanely by a shot to the brain. It is agreed that “an animal killed instantly within its own environment is under less stress than domestic stock that have been herded, penned, transported”. (RSPCA, 1985) On the surface, the rules appear reasonable, but this is far from the truth.

Kangaroo hunting takes place at night when they are most active. Weather conditions, sudden movements from the animal, and the dark make it difficult to hit such a small, long-range target. Even the difference of a few inches could result in hitting the mouth or neck instead, instigating slow and painful death. In many such cases, kangaroos manage to escape only to die in agony over several days. The Code obligates hunters to make “every reasonable effort...to locate and kill” kangaroos who survive shots, but it is difficult to find and euthanize a terrified animal in the dark. Many processing plants do not accept kangaroos with body shots, with the exception of a heart shot. As a result, hunters lack incentive to spend the time and bullets on kangaroos that are now worthless to them. It is impossible to determine how many are left to suffer and die.

A survey conducted by the Australian government on “Kangaroo Shooting Code compliance” in 2000 states that 91.6% to 98.3% of kangaroos at processing plants were head-shot. The majority of the remaining were heart-shot, less preferred but still considered humane. These statistics however, fail to mention several matters. Overall, the actual number of kangaroos body-shot “was a conservative one as it represents only those kangaroos take to processors, and many processors will only accept head-shot kangaroos”. (RSPCA, 2002)

“Kangaroos shot and injured but not retrieved by the shooter” are also unaccounted for. RSPCA notes that “such injuries are a regular occurrence during a shoot”. Finally, these numbers do not account for the joeys that are “euthanized”.

The Code states that when a doe is shot, her joeys must be killed too. In-pouch joeys are to be killed through decapitation or forceful blows to the head “to destroy the functional capacity of the brain”. The Code recommends using vehicle tow bars and metal pipes for larger in-pouch joeys, citing them as “perfectly humane activities”. The idea of these activities alone is sickening. In 2007, the American Veterinary Medical Association updated its report on euthanasia. On the topic of euthanasia by a blow to the head, it states that those who use this method “must be properly trained and monitored”. On decapitation, the report once again emphasizes that “personnel who perform decapitation techniques must have been properly trained to do so”. Although all kangaroo hunters must undergo licensing, RSPCA Australia notes that “they do not receive any training in how to kill joeys”. It is impossible to estimate how many hundreds of thousands of joeys die cruelly at the hands of untrained hunters.

As for young-at-foot, joeys that have outgrown their mother's pouches, hunters are to aim for head or heart shots if conditions are ideal. These young are difficult to shoot accurately as they are frightened and unpredictable. Chances of survival if the young escapes depends on a variety of factors, but nearly all will either starve, as they still depend on their mother's milk, or be eaten. Unfortunately, studies and interviews with hunters have revealed that “the main method of disposal of large pouch young was by releasing them into the bush”, due to the difficulty of safely killing them. (Ben-Ami, 23) Without their mothers, most young-at-foot die within days. The suffering inflicted when a female kangaroo is shot is undeniable.

Shockingly, harvesters are also allowed to use shotguns in shooting young-at-foot. In 1985, RSPCA Australia wrote a report on cruelty in the kangaroo industry. It asked the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service to ban shotguns as “existing data tends to show that a humane kill is not always possible using a shotgun at 30 metres”. RSPCA later carried out a study that indicated less than half of marsupials die instantly from shotgun. Survivors either escaped to die in excruciating pain or died through another gunshot, living their last moments of life in torture. RSPCA Australia currently recommends that “any reference to the use of shotguns...should be removed from the Code of Practice”, yet the revised Code of 2002 failed to make this change, unbelievably endorsing the brutal suffering of kangaroo joeys. Despite the anger from the RSPCA and other animal welfare groups, the Kangaroo Industry Association of Australia even said it was “generally happy” with the new code. John Kelly, executive officer of KIAA, boldly asserted that “Animal welfare is precisely what this code of practice is all about.” The Code has undoubtedly failed to do its job. Animal Liberation, an Australian animal rights group, calculates that “a conservative estimate for a harvested female kangaroo with young at foot is 25%, not including young still in pouch”. The massacre and suffering of half to over one million joeys each year is cruel and absurd.

One of the first steps towards protecting animal welfare should be the instigation of monitoring kangaroo hunting. More resources should be invested in ensuring compliance with the law. Currently, inspections in the remote outback are nearly nonexistent, allowing hunters to do as they please. The euthanizing of young should also be inspected and assessed from time to time.

As for the matter of joeys, the most basic improvement should be in-depth research in the best way of euthanizing. In its 2010 scientific seminar report, RSPCA Australia addresses the

“concern that current methods of euthanasia for in-pouch young are not the most humane and that alternatives should be investigated”. Decapitation and sharp blows to the head have little research to support that they inflict humane deaths on joeys. If it is against the law to “euthanize” domestic pets with metal pipes and tow bars, why should it be any different for kangaroos? Furthermore, kangaroo hunters “do not receive any training no how to kill joeys”. (RSPCA Australia 2009) As mentioned earlier, 25% of does have joeys with them, yet hunters are expected to dispose of the young with only the brief guidelines from the Code to assist them. This is simply unacceptable and undoubtedly results in cruel deaths that could be prevented. Euthanizing training with emphasis on a swift and humane death should be immediately made mandatory for all hunters, both new and experienced. As the RSPCA recommended, shotguns have been proven to be inhumane and should immediately be banned. Looking at the overall picture, there is inevitable suffering when does are shot. The best way to avoid this may be to completely stop shooting females as “it would appear that cruelty to joeys will continue unless the killing of female kangaroos ceases”. (THINKK)

Amidst all the policy improvements, there is also the importance of awareness. Many people outside of Australia have no idea of the horrors that occur in the outback. Few realize that their Adidas soccer cleats are made of kangaroo skin or that the Australian government considers death by shotgun “humane”. Pet owners, too, are often unaware that they may be feeding their pets with kangaroo meat. While the industry is prominent in Australia, many of its profits arise from its exports. If more knew about the suffering of kangaroos, the government would be pressured to implement improvements. We as consumers control the market and decide what sells. Buying power may be the most effective tool in protecting kangaroos, and anyone can help by refusing kangaroo products.

In the midst of its greed, the kangaroo industry fails to acknowledge the cruelty it endorses. It is truly disappointing that the Australian government can show off the kangaroo as the face of a 6 billion dollar tourism industry only to turn around and approve its murder. Its so-called Code mocks the very definition of “humane”. As the RSPCA Australia sadly states, “questions remain about the humaneness of kangaroo shooting”. We as humans set ourselves apart with our ability to think, but our conscious comes with moral obligations. Kangaroos should not be allowed to die cruelly for mere profit.

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