

Capital may take up arms against a kangaroo glut

By ROD McGUIRK – 21 hours ago

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — They bounce across the roof of Parliament House. They collide with cars. They come in through the bedroom window.

Canberra, Australia's capital, has a problem — too many kangaroos.

Authorities have tried giving them vasectomies and oral contraceptives, to no avail. They say trucking them to new and distant pastures is too expensive. Now they're proposing a cull. But many people are aghast at the idea of their best-known marsupial being shot en masse in the national capital.

A government survey has found that more than 80 percent of Canberra residents think the wild kangaroos should stay.

On the other hand, in a different survey, 17 percent of drivers in the district reported having collided with a kangaroo at least once.

Canberra's latest man-vs.-roo horror story concerns a confused beast, standing about 5 feet 9 inches on its powerful hind legs, which last month bounded through a closed bedroom window onto a bed where a couple huddled with their 9-year-old daughter, then hopped into their 10-year-old son's bedroom.

The animal was wrestled out of the house by the father, Beat Ettlin, and headed for the hills, leaving claw marks on a bed and a trail of blood from broken glass.

Maxine Cooper, environment commissioner for the government of the Australian Capital Territory, says humans aren't the only ones at risk — the kangaroos are destroying the grassy native habitat of endangered species such as a six-inch-long lizard known as the earless dragon.

But "Compare that to anything furry with big eyes — the human emotions generally respond to furriness and big eyes," Cooper said.

In fact, culls are nothing new. Barry Stuart, who runs a kangaroo abattoir 220 miles north of here, shoots more than 25 on most nights with a license from the government. "You don't like to destroy them, but when the time comes, you've got to do it."

"They're a beautiful bloody animal," said Stuart, 60.

But a cull in the capital is likely to be a different matter.

Last year, during the killing of about 400 kangaroos that had eaten themselves close to starvation on fenced military land in Canberra, the protests were so heated that the killers, using stun gun and lethal injections, had to work behind screens.

This time the opposition will be no less vigorous, warns Pat O'Brien, president of the Wildlife Protection Association of Australia, whose patrons are the family of the late "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin.

O'Brien insists that, earless dragons notwithstanding, Canberra's kangaroos pose no environmental problems.

"It's disgraceful that people want to shoot our national symbol," O'Brien said. "The days when wildlife is managed with a gun should be long passed."

No one knows how many kangaroos are at large in and around the city of 340,000 people, but its forested hills, grasslands and parks make it perfect kangaroo country and Cooper says their number needs to be reduced by thousands, and urgently.

Populations began exploding after European settlers arrived some 220 years ago and felled forests into which the plant-eating kangaroos swarmed and multiplied.

The struggle to manage and control Australia's flora and fauna, native and imported, seems never-ending. Fences thousands of miles long have gone up to keep out rabbits and wild dog called dingoes. Up to 1 million feral camels introduced as pack animals in the 19th century are denuding the central desert regions.

Last month Australians slaughtered thousands of poisonous toads whose forebears were imported from South America in 1935 to protect sugarcane plantations.

The larger of the more than 60 kangaroo species have bred so abundantly in some areas that they threaten crops and denude their own natural habitat.

Government-licensed hunters nationwide shoot an annual quota. They head out at night when kangaroos are at their busiest, and often return with carcasses dangling from hooks on the back of their trucks.

The quota varies. For 2009 it's about 4 million, the Kangaroo Industry Association of Australia says. Many more will be shot by farmers, who are allowed to kill them to protect crops.

The meat, once widely considered only good enough for pet food, now reaches European restaurants as steaks, and the hides make premium leather.

The public has until May 11 to make its views known. Sometime after that a decision will be made and a quota set.

The government, citing "economic, social and regulatory factors," says the carcasses will be buried rather than sold for meat.

That's a pity, says Stuart, but so are culls.

"No one likes wild animals more than I do — I'm a real softhearted old bugger," he said. "But you've got to manage them, otherwise you'll be overrun by the bloody things."

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