

55 Central Avenue
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Dr John Kingston
308 Lennox Street
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Dear John

Re: Dingos on Fraser Island

It is with alarm that I learned recently of the practice of tagging the ears of dingos on Fraser Island. Apart from the obvious animal welfare concerns with such a practice, I believe it is indefensible in scientific terms.

I have chaired several animal ethics committees during my working life, and in my opinion it would be most unlikely that those committees would have approved the ear tagging of any small carnivore, let alone one as important in Australia as the dingo. The probable reasons for rejection of an application are:

1. Very few populations of this, the only extant native carnivore in Australia, remain as a result of interbreeding with domestic dogs. Australia has a poor record in preventing extinction of native species, including mammalian species. The Fraser Island population is particularly important because it is one of few populations of genetically pure dingos remaining. Any programme using invasive techniques to study the population should be examined extremely closely, and rejected unless, after very close public scrutiny, it is justified on the basis that the benefits strongly outweigh the intervention. Such justification is certainly lacking in the case of Fraser Island dingos.
2. I believe that, in contrast to feral dogs and crossbreds, dingos pose negligible risk to human beings. Their intelligent and faithful nature is evidenced by the domestication of them by several concerned owners who maintain them in response to concerns for the possible loss of the species through cross-breeding. This includes dwellers of inner city suburbs who now keep dingos as pets. Dingos were present in Australia before European settlement; it is believed possible that they were introduced by aboriginal immigrants, and certainly they were kept by them and valued as useful hunting companions. I know of no evidence that those people found them other than non-aggressive to them.
3. Ear tagging is a most inappropriate means of individual identification of any carnivore. Apart from the singularly unaesthetic appearance rendered to tagged animals, they are predators, and the senses of hearing (and olfaction) are critical to predatory success. The ban on feeding of dingos by humans on Fraser Island means that predatory success is vital for survival. Even in the absence of distortion of the tagged ear, a tag large enough to recognise an individual from a distance must interfere with the mobility of the ear, which is a vitally important component for pinpointing prey. The fact that in some cases damage to the ear cartilage causes major distortion makes the situation significantly worse.

Yours sincerely

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