Social and cultural dimensions of commercial kangaroo harvest in South Australia

D. A. ThomsenA,B and J. DaviesA

ASoil and Land Systems, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, Faculty of the Sciences, University of Adelaide, Agronomy Building, Roseworthy Campus, Roseworthy, SA 5371, Australia.
BCorresponding author. Email: dana.thomsen@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract. Kangaroo management is important to the sustainability of Australia’s rangeland landscapes. The commercial harvest of kangaroos assists in reduction of total grazing pressure in the rangelands and provides the potential for supplementary income to pastoralists. Indeed, the commercial kangaroo industry is considered by natural resource scientists as one of the few rural industry development options with potential to provide economic return with minimal environmental impact. While the biology and population ecology of harvested kangaroo species in Australia is the subject of past and present research, the social, institutional and economic issues pertinent to the commercial kangaroo industry are not well understood. Our research is addressing the lack of understanding of social issues around kangaroo management, which are emerging as constraints on industry development.

The non-indigenous stakeholders in kangaroo harvest are landholders, regional management authorities, government conservation and primary production agencies, meat processors, marketers and field processors (shooters) and these industry players generally have little understanding of what issues the commercial harvest of kangaroos presents to Aboriginal people. Consequently, the perspectives and aspirations of Aboriginal people regarding the commercial harvest of kangaroos are not well considered in management, industry development and planning. For Aboriginal people, kangaroos have subsistence, economic and cultural values and while these values and perspectives vary between language groups and individuals, there is potential to address indigenous issues by including Aboriginal people in various aspects of kangaroo management. This research also examines the Aboriginal interface with commercial kangaroo harvest, and by working with Aboriginal people and groups is exploring several options for greater industry involvement. The promotion of better understandings between indigenous and non-indigenous people with interests in kangaroo management could promote industry development through the marketing of kangaroo as not only clean and green, but also as a socially just product.

Introduction

The commercial harvest of kangaroos is important to the rangelands and cropping regions of South Australia where there is a need to reduce total grazing impact through the removal of overabundant macropods. Indeed, the harvest has been advocated as being an ecologically sound land use for Australia’s rural regions with significant economic potential (Grigg 1987). While demand for kangaroo products has previously limited the industry, efforts to develop markets have been successful and supply is now reported by some meat processors to be the limitation. As the harvest of kangaroos has been proven over time to be ecologically stable, social and institutional factors are important to explaining supply problems. We are exploring opportunities and constraints to industry development through current research supported by RIRDC (Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation), AIATSIS (Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), and LWA (Land and Water Australia). This research project examines the social, institutional and cultural issues of the commercial harvest of kangaroos through in-depth interviews with landholders, meat processors, field processors (shooters), Aboriginal people and representatives of government regulatory authorities. This paper is based on preliminary findings of this research.

Commercial harvest of kangaroos

The commercial kangaroo industry emerged as a self-funding pest control mechanism necessitated by the problems for rangeland livestock production caused by high populations of kangaroos and their impact on grazing resources (Pople and Grigg 1999). It has developed over time and currently contributes over AUD$200 million per year to the Australian economy and employs about 4000 people (Kelly 2002). Much industry activity occurs in rural Australia, where its economic contributions are particularly valued.

Under current legislation kangaroos are managed by the Crown and their harvest is controlled by State National Parks and Wildlife authorities and the Federal agency, the...
Department of Environment and Heritage (formally Environment Australia), through a quota allocation system. The national commercial harvest quota approved by The Department of Environment and Heritage for 2003 was 6.55 million. Four common species of kangaroos are commercially harvested, the red kangaroo, eastern grey kangaroo, western grey kangaroo and the common wallaroo or euro (Environment Australia 2003). State governments are primarily responsible for developing and implementing kangaroo management plans. Consequently, the management of kangaroos varies to some extent from state to state within the framework set by Federal government legislation. Despite some variance in approaches to management, current kangaroo management plans of all states emphasise conservation values and aim to maintain species across their ranges while reducing deleterious impacts on pastoral activities (Ramsay 1994). In addition, all states enforce the Code of Practice for the humane shooting of kangaroos and have legislation regarding animal welfare matters (Environment Australia 2003).

The social issues of commercial harvest in South Australia

Much of the research effort regarding the commercial harvest of kangaroos has been directed at justifying the ecological sustainability of the industry and has focused on the ecology and population monitoring of harvested species. Research has demonstrated that the harvest of overabundant kangaroos is sustainable under current management systems (Pople and Grigg 1999; Olsen and Braysher 2000). However, despite ecological sustainability of kangaroo harvests, the harvest quota is rarely taken in most states. Environment Australia (2003) report that harvest rates over the past 5 years are on average 30–50% lower than available quota allocations and in South Australia only half of the available quota is harvested in most years. The industry’s relatively consistent inability to take quota coincides with periodic failure to meet market demand. Fluctuations in climatic conditions (and thus in kangaroo populations) do not adequately account for failure to take the full harvest quota. Social and institutional issues influence the situation because access to harvestable kangaroos is dependent on factors such as decisions of individual landholders about whether or not to cull kangaroos, the availability of field processors, and communication between industry stakeholders.

Preliminary research findings

Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key local and regional stakeholders the social issues that affect the commercial harvest of kangaroos are being explored. Stakeholders in kangaroo harvest relevant to this study are landowners, government conservation and primary production agencies, regional management authorities, meat processors, marketers, field processors (shooters) and Aboriginal groups for whom kangaroos have subsistence, economic and cultural values. The questions that we are asking research participants include: how people make their harvest decisions; costs and benefits of kangaroo harvest; legal or policy barriers to the implementation of harvest decisions; economic and other flows of benefits from commercial harvest. We have been discussing these questions with research participants in 3 case study regions of South Australia: the northern Flinders Ranges, the far north of SA (Marla/Oodnadatta), and the Port Augusta region.

Preliminary analysis of interview data collected in this research suggests that there are 4 main factors that contribute to answering the question of why only about half the available quota of kangaroos for SA are actually harvested:

(i) accessibility: dependent on several variables such as kangaroo density; available infrastructure, such as roads and chillers; landforms and vegetation; weather conditions; abundance of feed and water;

(ii) the regulatory environment: for example, lack of flexibility in the tag allocation system, as discussed below;

(iii) economic considerations: for example, the economics of harvest effort and increasing costs to field processors; and

(iv) shortage of field processors (in the opinion of some stakeholders): attributed to low economic returns and the social disadvantages of the occupation, such as isolation and night work.

The preliminary results listed above are in the process of being explored through in-depth interviews with industry stakeholders and through the utilisation of spatial data which is helping us to understand issues of geography and economics. For example, spatial data analysis using Geographic Information Systems will help us to answer questions such as: how do land systems impact on accessibility for a field processor (shooter), and what are the economic implications of accessibility problems?

Better understandings of the social and economic dimensions of commercial kangaroo harvest will assist in appropriate policy development for the industry and the rangelands. Features of the current policy and the regulatory environment are discussed below, drawing on preliminary findings from this research. Following this we discuss indigenous aspirations and perspectives regarding the commercial harvest of kangaroos, an important consideration for development of a sustainable industry, and an area where we hope our research will help promote understanding.

South Australian system for quota allocation

The commercial harvest of kangaroos in South Australia occurs on leasehold and freehold land that is used for primary production. All macropods harvested in South
Australia are utilised for meat and skins and every animal is harvested according to the guidelines for human consumption. The quotas, or maximum number of kangaroos that can be harvested in a calendar year, for each harvested species are determined by the Federal Minister for the Environment based on recommendations from state government agencies and a wildlife use advisory committee representative of various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and scientific interests (Ramsay 1994). South Australian kangaroo harvesting quotas are set regionally and currently are set at up to 20% of the estimated population of red kangaroos and 15% of the estimated population for western grey kangaroos and euros (South Australia Department for Environment and Heritage 2002).

In South Australia, the state’s quota is allocated at property level by the South Australia Department for Environment and Heritage (2002). This occurs in October each year by offer to landholders. Landholders can choose to accept all or part of the offered quota, or reject it. In accepting an offer of quota allocation, the landholder must nominate the meat processor that will harvest the kangaroos from the property and may also nominate the field processor (shooter). While the landholder may choose to purchase the sealed tags that must be attached to each commercially harvested kangaroo, sealed tags are generally purchased by the nominated meat processor and distributed to the field processors who supply product to the meat processors. Allocation of sealed tags is property and species specific. Thus, the identification number on a sealed tag can be used to determine the property, the field processor and the species.

The South Australian quota allocation system has the advantage of allowing for economic return to landholders because the number of kangaroos that may be harvested from particular properties in 1 year is known. Currently, there are a few landholders in South Australia who receive around A$1 for each kangaroo that is harvested from their property as a fee paid to them by the field processor who shoots the kangaroos, or the meat processor who purchases the carcass. However, there is opposition from processors to paying landholders. This is generally related to the low-product value of the kangaroos. For example, the typical explanation from a field processor or meat processor arguing against such payments is that their businesses cannot sustain the additional cost imposed on them. A point which adds weight to their argument is that the removal of overabundant kangaroos is of benefit to the pastoralist through the reduction of total grazing pressure. These arguments suggest that the value of kangaroo products is not yet high enough to generate a monetary return to pastoralists.

Currently, South Australia is the only state to allocate commercial quota at the property level. In NSW, quotas are allocated at the regional level, while in Qld and WA quota allocations are set across the State. Allocation of quota to property level in SA gives potential for landholders to receive payment for harvest of their quota of kangaroos. However, as noted above, low product value makes processors resist doing so. The capacity for landholders to be paid for access to their quota is also problematic because of the mobility of kangaroos and their ability to respond to rapidly to changing conditions. For example, an isolated rain event can cause kangaroos to move rapidly from 1 property to another. Preliminary findings of this research suggest that the South Australian quota allocation system does not contain the flexibility required to adequately address such localised fluctuations in kangaroo populations. This approach to quota allocations for kangaroo harvest is currently under review.

Aboriginal perspectives and interests in the commercial harvest of kangaroos

Indigenous involvement in sustainable wildlife harvest has been advocated as an avenue for economic development in indigenous communities in numerous reports (e.g. Williams et al. 1995; Altman et al. 1996; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and Department of Primary Industry 1997). Some ideas put forward for indigenous involvement in wild animal industries include making contribution to the effective marketing of kangaroo products, public education, and operating, or working in, businesses based on the harvest of wild animals. Yet despite such recommendations Aboriginal people have very little involvement in the management of kangaroos or in the commercial kangaroo industry. Aboriginal rights and interests in kangaroos are not widely understood and this is possibly a factor in the exclusion of Aboriginal interests from decision-making processes in government programs for kangaroo management. This project is generating information to address this lack of understanding and strengthen planning for the development of a sustainable industry.

Statutory regimes for kangaroo management in different states vary in their recognition of Aboriginal rights to hunt kangaroos. In South Australia, Aboriginal people have the right to hunt native wildlife ‘as food for the hunter or his or her dependents; or solely for cultural purposes of Aboriginal origin’ (Section 68D of the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972). This research has uncovered problems with the interpretation of this part of the National Parks and Wildlife Act (1972) in that different government agency representatives provide differing advice on how they interpret the specifics of the legislation. For example, the question of how many animals may be harvested as food or for cultural purposes generated varied responses. Because clear policy guidelines regarding the interpretation of this part of the Act are lacking, the legislation tends to create more questions than it answers. Who can be included as the dependents of the hunter? What constitutes the family unit...
for an Aboriginal person? Does the term ‘cultural purposes’ include supply of harvested animals to members of the Aboriginal community who are unable to harvest themselves? Different interpretations of the legislation create confusion for Aboriginal harvesters, landholders and representatives of government agencies while the absence of any policy on these matters makes it difficult for Aboriginal people to interact with the commercial kangaroo industry.

Indigenous issues may present either risks or significant opportunities to industry development, depending on how they are approached. At present, confusion regarding the rights of Aboriginal people to hunt native wildlife and the broad exclusion of Aboriginal people from the industry provides the industry’s critics with further moral arguments against kangaroo harvest. Allegations of racism and subversion of indigenous rights could have powerful economic impact in existing and potential overseas markets. Conversely, there is a strong basis for securing indigenous support for the development of a sustainable commercial kangaroo industry. A marketing advantage for promotion of the industry as socially just, in addition to clean and green, could emerge if industry management and development is pursued in a way that recognises and supports the recognition of Aboriginal rights and interests in kangaroos, their harvest and other aspects of management. To address indigenous issues in kangaroo management we need good understandings about the Aboriginal interface with the commercial kangaroo industry. Part of our research focus is directed at gaining an understanding of this interface by consulting with Aboriginal people in South Australia. We consulted with individual, authoritative Aboriginal people from two language groups, the Western Desert region (primarily Pitjantjatjara and Antakarinya) and the Flinders Ranges (Adnyamathanha). Some of the key findings from these consultations are introduced below (and see Davies et al. 2004).

Cultural concerns

Some commercially harvested species, most notably the red kangaroo, have very strong Aboriginal ceremonial traditions associated with them. Cultural traditions and associations with particular kangaroo species vary between language groups. For example, the customary law of Western Desert people embeds cultural beliefs and norms regarding the red kangaroo that preclude any involvement in the commercial harvest of kangaroos. Indeed, for senior authoritative people the commercial harvest of kangaroos is culturally offensive and they are adamant that commercial harvest should not occur on their country. For Western Desert people and some Aboriginal people from other language groups it is common for only the tail of a commercially harvested kangaroo to be consumed. The fact that the tail may be purchased, cooked and consumed is a cultural adaptation permissible because the tail is severed from the body before further preparation according to traditional practices. For Adnyamathanha people the cultural traditions regarding kangaroos are quite different and some of these people say that the tail of the kangaroo is the only body part that they will purchase from stores because the tail is supplied with the skin left on which allows for accurate species identification. For these people it is important to know what species of kangaroo they are eating because they have customary prohibitions on eating animals which are their totem.

Thus, our research shows that it is culturally inappropriate for some Aboriginal people to purchase kangaroo meat that has been processed according to non-indigenous laws and practices. However, there are Aboriginal people, such as old people and people who do not have a gun or vehicle, who have difficulty accessing kangaroos that have been harvested according to Aboriginal law. This has led one Adnyamathanha man in South Australia to put forward his vision for culturally appropriate harvest and supply of kangaroos to Aboriginal people. He proposes a system which allows Aboriginal harvesters to sell kangaroos that have been harvested according to cultural norms to the people who cannot harvest for themselves, at a low price. This proposal is important to improving the physical and cultural health of Aboriginal people and it helps to address the social and cultural dimensions of sustainability within the kangaroo industry. Proposals like this, where Aboriginal people have identified how current kangaroo management could be altered to meet their needs and aspirations while not impacting on other stakeholders significantly, have the potential to lead the way in negotiated agreement between landholders, state governments and native title claimants about sustainable kangaroo management. Such negotiated approaches are increasingly advocated as the most practical and effective way forward for securing mechanisms for coexistence between Aboriginal and other stakeholders rights and interests in land and resources (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2003; Davies 2003; Farley 1999).

Engaging Aboriginal people in kangaroo management

The theme of consultation or negotiation about commercial harvest of kangaroos arose in many of our discussions with Aboriginal research participants. A frequently iterated message was that Aboriginal people want to be involved in kangaroo management at all levels and several ideas about potential mechanisms for participation were raised. Some Aboriginal research participants requested that government agency and industry representatives either visit them or invite indigenous representatives to regional forums to discuss kangaroo management. This would work well in addressing kangaroo management issues at the local level. At a broader level, the establishment of an indigenous advisory council for
kangaroo management was suggested as a way to give representation to different cultural regions across South Australia. In short, the advice provided by the Aboriginal people that we consulted during this research is simply that they want to talk and have the opportunity to feed their views and issues about kangaroo management into decision making processes. Although our consultations were focused on commercial kangaroo management, Aboriginal people want to have their views heard on other kangaroo issues too. A big issue for Adnyamathanha people is the ‘shoot and let lie’ culling that government park managers undertake to reduce overgrazing by kangaroos in Flinders Ranges National Park. As with commercial kangaroo management issues, Aboriginal people here want their views to be taken into account in decision making, and to put forward their practical solutions for others to consider.

Talking and listening is a sensible starting point for an industry that has the potential to lead the way in addressing social justice issues for Australia’s indigenous people and reap the benefits of marketing their products as clean, green and socially just.

Conclusion

This paper has presented some preliminary findings of current research that is addressing the need to improve understanding of social, cultural and institutional factors that influence the sustainable development of the commercial kangaroo industry. The findings suggest that there are several social and institutional issues that impact on the kangaroo supply chain and on industry development. Further analysis of the extensive interview data will give greater understanding of these issues and will elucidate appropriate policy options. This research is also exploring options for greater indigenous involvement in the industry and highlights the importance of cultural considerations. There is potential for the commercial kangaroo industry to lay claim to being an industry that is clean, green and socially just.

References

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