



[<< Back to Article](#)

## Aussie 'Roo Lovers Rue Killers

Stewart  
Taggart

✉ 04.20.02 | 2:00 AM

SYDNEY, Australia -- It's the world's biggest land-based wildlife cull, and it just got bigger.

Seven million kangaroos -- national symbol and cuddly poster child -- have been approved for harvesting by gunshot this year in the Australian Outback. The issue has conservationists hopping mad.

"We're killing our national icon," says Richard Jones, a parliamentarian in Australia's most populous state of New South Wales. "We could get to the point where we seriously compromise the populations we have."

From its national coat of arms to its best-known airline, and to tourism, movies and television, the kangaroo figures in just about everything iconic about Australia.

But in rural and Outback Australia, the kangaroo is seen as a grazing pest that competes for food with sheep and cattle. Over the past 30 years, culling kangaroos has spawned a domestic industry in meats and pelts now worth roughly \$100 million annually, and growing about 5 percent per year.

On Jan. 8, Federal Environment Minister David Kemp announced a 27 percent rise in the "harvestable" quota of kangaroos to 6.9 million. He said scientific estimates of the bouncy marsupials indicated their numbers had risen to 58.6 million this year from 48.3 million last year.

While the actual number of kangaroos culled is usually only half or two-thirds of the quota, the rise nonetheless has upset environmentalists and conservationists.

They believe the culls are inhumane and could well bring cuddly Skippy to his backward-bending knees, population-wise.

Among other things, they say culling weakens the gene pool by targeting older, big males, thus leaving the resulting population overwhelmingly female and young.

And since only a small proportion of kangaroos survive to adulthood, harvesting them leaves the species vulnerable to Australia's fickle weather patterns -- particularly drought. A big drought in the future, coupled with aggressive culling, could prove a one-two punch for the kangaroo, they believe.

But Kangaroo Industries Association of Australia spokesman John Kelly said the kangaroo industry now has a vested interest in maintaining healthy kangaroo populations. Doing otherwise would be like shooting the industry in the paw, so to speak, because the animals are now a dollars-and-cents business.

"If markets for kangaroo products continue to grow, kangaroo harvesting could become a farm enterprise in its own right, rather than a damage mitigation exercise (aimed at protecting cattle forage)," Kelly says. "Ultimately, we also want to see more kangaroos so we can sustain a greater harvest."

At present, most kangaroo meat is ground up into pet food. But the low-fat, high-protein meat is increasingly being consumed by health-conscious humans as a replacement for traditional beef, particularly given outbreaks like foot-and-mouth and mad cow disease that plague traditional red-meat markets, Kelly says.

Ideally, that should lead to rising prices for kangaroo products. But there's just one hitch: The industry faces determined opposition from wildlife lovers determined to shut it down.

Among other things, industry opponents say kangaroos are killed by Outback mercenaries who blast the animals with a shot to the head and club to death pouch-bound young joeys before dragging the carcasses back to trucks where they hang for hours, fly-eaten and unrefrigerated.

The four-wheel-drive mobile slaughterhouses then rip across sensitive untracked Outback vegetation back to civilization. It's all cruel, unsanitary and ecologically uncouth, opponents say, in addition to being unsustainable.

"As far as I'm concerned, this is a rogue industry," Jones said. "We plan to put continued pressure on overseas markets and discourage Australians from eating their own national symbol."

In the U.K., for instance, activists have dissuaded food retailers from stocking kangaroo meats, and have mounted protests at U.K. soccer matches to discourage professional athletes from wearing athletic shoes made from kangaroo leather.

In addition, conservation and wildlife groups have filed an appeal against Kemp's decision to raise the quota with Australia's Administrative Appeals Tribunal, an independent body that has the power to review, and even overturn, Australian federal government decisions.

The coalition claims animal cruelty, environmental sustainability and sufficient public consultation haven't been sufficiently addressed, said Pat O'Brien, coordinator for the National Kangaroo Protection Coalition. A decision by the tribunal may not be made until next year.

Meanwhile, heavyweight members of Australia's scientific establishment have weighed in to support controlled kangaroo harvesting, saying it could be both economically viable and environmentally sustainable -- even beneficial.

One of these is Australian Museum director Mike Archer, a paleontologist and one of Australia's highest-profile scientists. He believes raising kangaroos could beneficially replace sheep and cattle raising in many of Australia's rural areas, particularly in marginal rangelands that get little rain.

Archer says two centuries of running European livestock such as sheep and cattle over Australia's fragile and arid hinterlands has caused significant land degradation. By contrast, kangaroos and their ancestors have survived millions of years in the uniquely tough Australian environment without unsustainably stripping the land of its nutrients.

By switching from raising cattle and sheep to raising indigenous animals like kangaroos for harvest, Australian ranchers could end up simultaneously rehabilitating the land and making more money, Archer believes.

O'Brien scoffs. He says Archer forgets mankind is a rough-cut bull in an environmental china shop.

"When you look at all the wild animals man has tried to harvest -- seals, whales, countless fish species that have collapsed -- it's clear that man is just incapable of running sustainable wildlife programs," O'Brien says. "It's as simple as that."

But to Kelly, something must be going right. After two decades of culling, there are still 58.6 million kangaroos out there hopping around, representing more than three kangaroos for each of Australia's 18 million people. And while Australia's kangaroo harvest may qualify as the largest wildlife cull on Earth, that's because kangaroos are now one of the most numerous large wild land mammals on Earth, he says.

But this doesn't deter opponents such as O'Brien and Jones. They question the methodologies used in estimating Australia's kangaroo population. And they say the overall numbers hide dramatic variations between species. Some, such as the red kangaroo, are becoming increasingly rare, they say.

Given how cute kangaroos are, this controversy could go on for some time yet.