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Food for thought as roo culling reasons come under fire

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THERE is limited scientific or environmental evidence to support the killing of large numbers of kangaroos every year, a series of reports has found.

Despite being the national symbol of Australia, more than 3 million are killed each year for their meat, or because they are considered pests that compete with livestock for food and other resources.

There is a growing movement to promote the consumption of kangaroo meat over beef and lamb as it is seen as a more environmentally sustainable option, because kangaroos emit less greenhouse gas.

But a report by THINKK, a research group based at the University of Technology, Sydney, found some of the assumptions, which allow for the largest land-based wildlife cull in the world, were misguided and not grounded on scientific evidence.

The ecologist and THINKK co-founder Dror Ben Ami said their reports, based on numerous studies, found kangaroos rarely competed for food with livestock.

"Long-term studies indicate that competition is intermittent, occurring only during a period of climatically driven food depletion," he said.

The report also found significant reductions in greenhouse gases from livestock would only occur if kangaroo meat consumption replaced beef and lamb demand.

But Dr Ben Ami said it was unlikely that farmers would choose to farm kangaroos over livestock because there were not enough roos to fill the current demand for meat in Australia, let alone an international market.

"To replace one meal a week with kangaroo meat you need to have about 130 million kangaroos in the landscape to have a sustainable industry," Dr Ben Ami said.

On average there were about 27 million kangaroos in the outback, he said.

The co-author of the reports, Keely Boom, a lawyer, said culling kangaroos presented issues of animal cruelty.

The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act stated animals could not be killed unless there was a reason to do so. Only licence owners were permitted to shoot kangaroos.

As there was limited evidence to show kangaroos damaged the environment, and several studies showing they were not pests, culling them for those reasons might be illegal, she said. Ms Boom works as a research fellow at THINKK, which is partly funded by the Sherman Foundation, a

supporter of the animal protection group Voiceless.

The reports called for the government to review whether killing kangaroos in such large numbers was necessary.

"And where it is necessary let's look at the reasons for and against, and have a quantitative means of measuring its effectiveness," Ms Boom said.

The government should also ban the killing of female kangaroos, which often had joeys in their pouches or with them, she said.

A spokeswoman for the NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water said kangaroos were protected fauna not pests in NSW.

"It is [the department's] view that kangaroos do cause damage and economic loss to the farming community, the extent of which does vary across the landscape."

She said the department stood by the legality of the licensing system.

The kangaroo expert Gordon Grigg agreed that research over the past 20 years had demonstrated kangaroos were not pests.

But he said some of the report's assumptions were not correct.

Most people realised that kangaroo meat could never totally replace beef and lamb, said Professor Grigg, an emeritus professor at the University of Queensland.

Instead it should be marketed as gourmet or as a low fat alternative to beef and lamb, he said.

The biologist Michael Archer, of the University of NSW, disputed the findings of the reports and said the sustainable wild harvesting of kangaroos was a conservation strategy.

If graziers made money from kangaroos it gave them a reason to value the native environment, and reduce their sheep and cattle population, Professor Archer said.

The findings of the THINKK reports will be presented at a free public lecture at the University of Technology, Sydney tomorrow evening.

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