

The International Harpoon

- The Paper with a Point -

Robert Hill: Minister of Double Standards Runs Australia's Animal Apartheid Policy

Australian Environmental Minister Robert Hill has a special talent for separating issues when it comes to wildlife management.

Whales are "magnificent", "majestic", "beautiful and graceful" and "should be able to live freely without the threat of being hunted." But in no way does he let such romantic notions come between himself and kangaroos.

Actually, it's difficult to be sure how Hill feels about kangaroos,

since he never speaks of them. But we do know what he does to them. For the year 2000 alone, he has passed

death sentences on some 5.7 million kangaroos. We can assume also that he has no interest in how efficiently or humanely his execution order is carried out since there is no government monitoring or statistical record of the quality of the hunt.

Winning the Extinction Race

In the short time since the Anglo-Saxons colonised Australia, seven kangaroo species have become extinct, while at least 12 others are now seriously threatened. "We have already 'won' the mammal extinction race, with 50% of all mammal losses in the last 200 years having occurred in Australia ... over 70% of our land has been highly modified through agricultural use, ecosystems are threatened by overuse," writes WWF Australia in its 1999 annual report.

Another report last year from WWF, on the conservation of native grassland, informs us that in all lowland regions of south-eastern Australia, the natural grassy ecosystems have either been eliminated or reduced to isolated pockets. "It appears certain that the existing

threats to native grassland communities will continue and are likely to increase," the report warns.

The biggest threat facing kangaroos is "habitat clearance" and not hunts, says one of Hill's men, Gerry Maynes, Director of the Ministry's Wildlife and Legislation Section, to The International Harpoon. Still, "thousands of hectares of new crops and pastures

are being established in regions that contain the last remnants of native grassland with the support and encouragement of governments and industry groups," claims WWF.

Fortunately, humans are not invading the marine habitat of whales in the same way they are invading kangaroos' terrestrial habitat. And this is may be the main reason

why humans have never driven a whale species to extinction, despite their best efforts. Although a generalisation, it is valid to say that the conservation status of marine species is far better overall than for terrestrial species.

Leading the World

In view of this, shouldn't we expect Hill to focus his conservation efforts on the threats to Australia's terrestrial species? After all, "Our country leads the world in having the most threatened reptiles and frogs," challenges the WWF in its annual report.

But no. Hill's focus is firmly on whales. "Australia is again leading the world in efforts to protect these magnificent creatures," Hill stated in a recent

speech to foreign correspondents. Searching for the phrase "whales" at the section for speeches and press releases at the Ministry's website, we get a list of 58 articles, 11 of which have the word "whales" in their headings. But a search for "kangaroos" flush-

Popularity Contest

Saving wildlife should not become "a popularity contest", warned Hill in a 1996 media release, expressing the fear that "we could become too focussed on saving majes-

tic creatures such as the Blue Whale or cute or cuddly creatures such as the Bilby" to the detriment of the less glamorous Ghost Bat, Mallee Fowl and Broad-headed Snake.

Here Hill's ability to separate two issues reaches unprecedented heights. When arguing on behalf of bats, fowl and snakes, he argues that whales should not be put on a pedestal. But when arguing on behalf of whales, he describes them as "magnificent", "majestic", "beautiful and graceful". A search of Hill's speeches and press releases turns up even fewer on snakes, bats and fowls than it does on kangaroos. Those 58 articles still place "the majestic whale" firmly at the top of the heap.

No Humane Way to Kill?

"There is no humane way to kill a whale," Hill assures us, without defining or providing criteria for judging a humane hunt. There does exist, however, a mountain of statistics on just this subject from the Norwegian and Japanese hunts.

So how about kangaroos? Does a humane method exist for killing them? This question

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An Australian professionally engaged with the whalers?

How can this be?

The Harpoon interviews Kate Sanderson of Adelaide and Tórshavn.

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Wrong again! But Why?

Greenpeace once made the outlandish claim in a fundraiser that whales "choose a partner for life". Now Greenpeace Australia has compounded the organisation's reputation for scholarly ineptitude.

In its education program for school kids,

Greenpeace Australia offers the following as its "fact of today": "Cetaceans' brains are large compared to body size." In actuality, the brains of the large whale species are relatively small compared to body size. A mouse's brain accounts for a staggering 3.2% of its body weight, considerably more than the 0.94% in the case of a bottlenose dolphin. Further

down the scale is a cow, of which 0.1% by weight consists of brain. But almost off the bottom of the scale is the mighty fin whale, whose brain accounts for a mere 0.008% of body weight. So Greenpeace has gaffed again, but why? See "The Greenpeace Missionary School" (p 14) for some possible answers.