

# Feral violence: The Pelorus experiment

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## Abstract

In early July 2016, two male dingoes were brought by ferry to a small island called Pelorus in the Great Barrier Reef, off the coast of north Queensland, Australia, as part of an experimental ‘feral’ goat eradication project. What was remarkable about this project was that the two dingoes released on the island had been implanted with a slow-release capsule containing sodium fluoroacetate, commonly known as ‘1080’. These so-called ‘Tik Toks’, produced by a firm called Scientec, were designed to release their poison into the bodies of the dingoes in approximately 600 days, after they had served their purpose as goat exterminators. The public and political backlash that the Pelorus experiment aroused reveals a gap between the team’s ambitions to ‘set the platform’ for the conservation of ‘pristine’ islands and community sentiment concerning animal cruelty. Just how this ‘bizarre’ experiment (as it was described in State parliament) gained ethics approval is one part of this story. Another relates to implants themselves and what this ‘innovation’ (‘the stuff of horror films’ as one petitioner described it) reveals about attitudes to ‘killing for conservation’. The Pelorus experiment also shows us what is frequently concealed by eradication programmes, which is that they rely not on a single act of eradication, but a cycle of violence that we describe here as a form of ‘feral violence’. In the case of Pelorus, the ‘implants’ tipped Conservation’s motif from the romance of ‘rescuing nature’ to that of horror, imperilling the social licence that conservation projects assume.

## Keywords

Animals, wildlife management, conservation

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An experimental ‘feral’ goat eradication project conducted in July 2016 saw two male dingoes brought by ferry to a small island called Pelorus in the Great Barrier Reef, off the coast of north Queensland, Australia. The team that devised and ran the experiment included staff from the local council, Hinchinbrook Shire Council (HSC), Queensland’s Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) and Dr Ben Allen, a wildlife ecologist from University of Southern Queensland (USQ). The overall aim of the project was to ‘protect’ the island, as an HSC pest management officer told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC): ‘We are going to protect so many of these islands in the long term. Once this island is successful, it will set the platform for many other island managers to follow through and carry out similar projects’ (Schwartz, 2016a). What is remarkable about this project to eradicate goats via an orchestrated predation scenario is that the two dingoes released on the island had been given an experimental toxic implant, a capsule containing sodium fluoroacetate commonly known as ‘1080’. These so-called ‘Tik Toks’, produced by a firm called Scientec (Scientec, 2004), were intended to slowly degrade in the body of the dingoes, eventually causing their death. The ‘little time-bombs will go off’, Ben Allen claimed (Schwartz, 2016a) and would kill the dingoes in approximately 600 days, after they had served their purpose as goat predators. The other remarkable thing about the Pelorus experiment is the public and political backlash it aroused, exposing a gap between the team’s ambitions to ‘set the platform’ for island conservation and community sentiment regarding cruelty and ‘killing for conservation’ (Duffy, 2001).

In this article, we analyse this ‘bizarre’ experiment (as it was described in Queensland’s state parliament by Minister for the Environment Steven Miles, Queensland Parliament Questions without Notice (QP QWN), 2016: 2976) and do so through materials sourced by Animal Liberation through an Right to Information (RTI) application made in 2016 and subsequently shared with us,<sup>1</sup> Animal studies researchers who both work on dingoes, ferality and violence (Lennox, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2021a, 2021b; Lennox and Probyn-Rapsey, 2021; Probyn-Rapsey, 2016, 2017, 2020). The data shared with us include emails between the Pelorus experiment stakeholders, minutes (largely redacted) of meetings of the Animal Ethics Committee (AEC) that approved the project, Animal Ethics (AE) applications, internal DAF situation reports, maps, media reports, local government media plans and the Animal Liberation advocacy guide to the Pelorus project.

These data provide insight (though partial) into the workings of the AEC that approved the experiment, which we examine in part 1, ‘approving Pelorus’. The material from the AEC provides a unique insight into the bureaucratic mechanisms and presumptions that make such a violent and ‘novel’ experiment possible. With reference to Animal studies scholarship on the limitations of AECs (O’Sullivan, 2008; Russell, 2012, 2013), we consider why AE processes failed to meet animal welfare expectations of some of the AEC members, as well as the broader public. In part 2, ‘promoting Pelorus’, we discuss how pre-arranged media coverage of the project highlighted a significant gap between the project’s methods and public tolerance for violence against animals, showing that this experiment has ramifications for the future of conservation work in Australia, and its relationship with public interest in animal welfare (Eeden et al., 2017). In part 3, ‘developing nature’ consider how the project’s co-shaping by local and state government agencies, along with university researchers, and later tourism interests help to explain its ethical failures. In part 4, ‘feral violence’, we examine the forms of violence that are meted out to animals designated ‘feral’. With reference to literature on killing and conservation (Collard, 2012; Hodgetts, 2017; Ramp and Bekoff, 2015; Srinivasan, 2014, 2017; Wallach et al., 2015, 2018, 2019) and Animal studies scholarship focused on routinised violence against animals (Adams, 1990; Arcari et al., 2020; Pachirat, 2011; Wadiwel, 2015), we propose that what happened on

Pelorus was ‘feral violence’, a form of violence that may be normalised within mainstream conservation practices but is quite specific in its *spectacular* levels of harm to animals. The logic of ferality serves to make extreme violence a normalised, taken-for-granted part of the conservation paradigm. But feral violence is a form of violence that also turns the spotlight back towards conservation’s mission and social licence and raises questions about the harms conservation work does, and how those harms can exceed those caused by so-called ‘feral’ animals.

## Part I: Approving Pelorus

Multiple parties – a government department (DAF), a local government (HSC), a commercial operator (Scientec) and an AEC – orchestrated the Pelorus experiment, with Michael Nash (Terrain Natural Resource Management) singled out by Ben Allen et al. recently as having ‘conceptualized the Pelorus Island dingo-goat biocontrol project and provided technical and logistical support throughout the project’ (Allen et al., 2020: j). Responsibility for the project was distributed across personnel from these agencies and bodies, including veterinarians and academic researchers who are each regulated by institutional codes of conduct and ethics regarding animal cruelty. An examination of the AE approval process for the Pelorus experiment highlights the cultural and scientific apparatuses that make experiments such as Pelorus possible and ‘legitimate’. Usually the public does not have the opportunity to see into the decision-making processes of AECs. Denise Russell (2012, 2013) and Siobhan O’Sullivan (2008) have both pointed out that AECs are frequently out of step with community sentiment regarding animal use, partly because the committee structure favours practices that normalise animal ‘use’ (see also Schuppli, 2011).

The data we have been granted access to, via Animal Liberation’s successful RTI application, provide us with a partial view of how the project came to be approved by an AEC and how ethical considerations for goats and dingoes were framed as secondary to the overall mission to ‘protect’ Pelorus Island. AEC approval provided legitimacy to the project and was used by its organisers as pre-emptive defence from criticism. The fact that an AEC approved the Pelorus experiment is important from the point of view of the media and communications strategy that the HSC devised. In the event that members of the public, or politicians, questioned the experiment’s animal welfare implications, organisers would be able to use the approval of an AEC that ‘reflect[s] a national standard’ (Jackson, 2003) as an endorsement of their standards for animal welfare and wellbeing. AEC approval provided a ‘way out’ for the project team when it came to locating ethical responsibility for the questions that the project raises. Significantly, the approval of an AEC also provided a ‘way in’ for complaints to be mounted to governing bodies that oversee standards of animal care and experimentation. For example, Animal Liberation was able to raise important questions about the research project’s legitimacy by focusing on whether or not the project complied with National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) regulations. The question then becomes whether or not this specific AEC’s decisions do indeed reflect appropriate standards – national or otherwise – and how it is that AECs in general incorporate and reflect community standards when their operations are not usually subject to public scrutiny (O’Sullivan, 2008).

The DAF AEC that approved the Pelorus experiment was ‘a committee constituted in accordance with the requirements of the Australian code for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes (known as the scientific use code)’ (DAF, 1995–2019: n.p.) *The Australian code for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes* (National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), 2013) requires an AEC to have, at a minimum, members

from four categories: category A is ‘a person with qualifications in veterinary science’ that are suitable for Australian registration, with ‘experience relevant to the institution’s activities or the ability to acquire relevant knowledge’; category B is a ‘person with substantial and recent experience in the use of animals for scientific purposes relevant to the institution and the business of the AEC’ with a suitable ‘higher degree in research or equivalent experience’. The category A and B members of the AEC are often ‘staff or students of the institution’ and category C is ‘a person with demonstrable commitment to, and established experience in, furthering the welfare of animals’, who is endorsed by an animal welfare organisation. Category D is a ‘completely independent’ person who does not fit the requirements of any other category (NHMRC, 2013: 20). Importantly, ‘Categories C and D must together represent at least one-third of the AEC membership’ (NHMRC, 2013: 20). One of the criticisms made of AECs is that they make it very difficult for laypeople to contribute meaningfully to the processes when animal use is presumed to be a norm from the outset and technical and animal welfare issues may be inadequately understood and addressed by the committee as a whole (see Russell, 2012; O’Sullivan, 2008).

AECs are constituted as independent bodies whose decisions cannot be overturned by outside bodies. This was the subject of parliamentary debate in relation to the Pelorus experiment in October 2016, when the Labor Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries Leanne Donaldson was asked by the Liberal-National Party member for Hinchinbrook Andrew Cripps if she supported the independent decision-making role of AECs (Queensland Parliament Personal Minister’s Statement (QP PMS), 2016: 3324). Minister Leanne Donaldson describes the AEC as having the capacity to make ‘independent decisions relating to the use of animals for scientific purposes’ and says that she ‘supports the independence of the committee’s decision’ but does ‘not support the use of dingoes to remove goats’ (QP PMS, 2016: 3324).

The application for the Pelorus experiment was considered by the DAF AEC at a meeting in May 2016. The application was titled, ‘Capture, handling, preparation, transport and release of dingoes from mainland North Queensland and onto Pelorus Island and the subsequent non-invasive monitoring of dingoes and goats’ and was submitted by staff from Biosecurity Queensland. The application lists all participants (veterinary scientist, HSC pest managers, HSC environmental manager, Lee Allen from Biosecurity Queensland and Ben Allen from USQ) and details each of the 13 proposed stages of the experiment. It describes how HSC and DAF will host a ‘wild dog’ trapping programme with landholders from which:

four young, healthy, male dingoes (preferably associates of each other or siblings) will be chosen to be released on Pelorus. All excess animal [sic] will be humanely euthanized by firearm by professional trappers, wild dog control officers and other authorised and skilled persons. This program will complement Hinchinbrook Sire Councils annual wild dog management program. (File B, 2020: 10)

The application outlines how the ‘chosen’ dingoes will be transported to the pound in Ingham and kept there, in cells with air temperature at or below ambient air temperature, and given ad lib water, kibble and 500–1000 grams of raw chicken necks or beef mince supplied once daily in the afternoon. They will be sedated, given a health check and tick, flea and worm treatment. Stage 8 of the protocol is called ‘Implanted with controlled release delivery system’:

While anaesthetised an additional ‘microchip’ containing the toxin sodium fluoroacetate (or ‘1080’) will also be surgically inserted subcutaneously between the shoulder blades. The outside coating of this ‘microchip’ will break down over a period of time, and is expected to release the

contents of the ‘microchip’ approximately 18–24 months post-insertion (or perhaps earlier). This ‘microchip’ is designed to kill the dingoes once the contents are released. The ‘microchip’ will act as a further safe guard to prevent impacts caused by dingoes beyond the life of the project. (File B, 2020: 11)

According to the application, the objectives and purpose of the proposed animal use are to document the ‘efficacy of dingoes as a novel vertebrate biocontrol tool for eradicating feral goats from offshore islands’ and ‘[m]onitoring and recording the animal welfare issues associated with such an approach, and providing published recommendations for future similar exercises’ (File B, 2020: 13). The applicants state that there are no alternatives to using live animals because other methods of attempting to remove goats from islands (aerial shooting, ‘Judas’ goats, trapping) had failed. They note that

Acceptable examples for biological control for mammals are rare, and no natural pathogen to manage feral goats in Australia is available and acceptable (Parkes et al. 1996). Using a native predator (the dingo) to control an introduced pest (feral goats) is a novel exception. (File B, 2020: 14)

The word ‘novel’ is repeatedly used to describe the project, but the Pelorus experiment had precedents on Townshend and Sunday islands, neither of which could be called ‘successful’ in that both resulted in non-target species being killed (Allen et al., 1996). It is possible that the AEC decided that these negative impacts were outweighed by the benefits of island restoration, which, in the AE application, are framed in relation to a global mission to remove goats because they are ‘a serious pest on many offshore islands worldwide’ (File B, 2020: 12) (see also Campbell and Donlan, 2005).

For the dingoes, a more localised, specific and individuated set of descriptions is deployed in the AE application, as these animals were actually being ‘used’ for a scientific purpose. The application lists three activities that could impact on the dingoes’ wellbeing: trapping programme, transport of dingoes to the pound and impounding of the dingoes (File B, 2020: 14). In turn, the AEC focused on these stages of the protocol. The impact of possible starvation or the release of the 1080 capsules on the dingoes may have been mentioned in the redacted sections but is absent in the documents that we have before us. Under the heading ‘Fate of the animals at the end of the project’ the applicants state an expectation that the dingoes will be ‘euthanized’ by a licensed operator with a firearm or, as a safety net, the 1080 will release and kill them.

Chaired by the Principal Veterinary Officer of DAF, Lex Turner, minutes of the meeting show that approval for the project is conditional on more information being provided, including dates being corrected and more detail about ‘how these procedures will be done’. The applicants are to supply photographs of the pens, and to ensure that feed and water ‘are available as necessary’, and cages are secure. The AEC notes that dingoes are ‘class 2 pests under the current Land Protection Act and [...] not regarded as native animals in this area’. The legislative categorisation of dingoes as ‘not native’ and class 2 pests places them in the same ‘killable’ category as the goats. Subsequent amendments to the application, considered by the AEC in their June meeting focus on the 1080 implants. In their amendments, the project team now wanted to use four dingoes with two different formulations of the ‘Tik-Tok’ implants. The justification given is that:

using two doses and two formulations will allow additional data to be collected on 1) performance of the coatings at the end of their expected life and the 2) performance of different formulations while imposing negligible additional impacts on the study animals.



This amendment highlights a contradiction in the project plan, which seems to have been picked up by members of the AEC: were the Tik Toks a ‘back-up’ or ‘fail-safe’ in the event that the dingoes were unable to be ‘humanely euthanized by licensed firearms operator’ (File B, 2020: 12)? Or was testing these ‘novel’ 1080 implants now part of the Pelorus experiment? The AEC approved the requested amendments with the following condition: ‘Please also ensure the animals are shot as per the approved protocol at the end of the trial and are not kept alive longer than necessary to test the capsules’ (File B, 2020: 4).

A USQ AEC approved Ben Allen’s monitoring of flora and fauna pre and post goat eradication. According to DAF situation reports between September and October 2016, the university also ‘reviewed’ the HSC’s media and communications plan (File C, 2020: 51, 63, 73), a plan that situated USQ staff member Ben Allen as the ‘go to’ person when it came to the 1080 implants: ‘Dr Allen has asked Scientec to prepare a controlled release delivery formulation’ (Hinchinbrook Shire Council (HSC), 2016: 13). We don’t know if the university ethics committee saw the details of the 1080 implant and approved it. Given that 1080 is used as a bait throughout Australia for killing wild dogs, its *adaptation* as a subcutaneous implant may not have been seen as especially concerning. However, in this case it was purportedly being used as a ‘euthanasia’ drug, which implies a *humane* death. 1080 poisoning results in a slow and agonising death for canids.<sup>2</sup> A *delayed*-release 1080 device, whose effectiveness and dosage appear to have been a matter of guesswork between a non-veterinarian (Ben Allen) and a biotech company (Scientec), and based on trials undertaken on cats, could not be expected to produce a pain-free death nor ‘rapid loss of consciousness’. This should have raised significant doubts for the AEC about its use in the Pelorus experiment.

Furthermore, if a veterinarian implanted the 1080 device questions could be raised as to whether this treatment contravenes veterinary codes of conduct. The data we have are not entirely clear about who inserted the 1080 capsules. In an email dated 4 August 2016, Lex Turner, Principal Veterinary Officer of DAF and chair of the DAF AEC, writes: ‘The capsules were inserted during desexing surgery by the local vets as requested by the council as part of their program’ (File A, 2020: 35). But the HSC communications plan stipulates the services provided by Tropical Vet Services, Ingham, would be ‘animal husbandry’ and procedures ‘*excluding* the 1080 slow release chip’ (HSC, 2016: 10 emphasis added). All Queensland vets are expected to follow the Australian Veterinary Association Code of Professional Conduct and the first requirement of the code is that they should ‘consider the health, welfare and respectful treatment of the animal’ at all times (Queensland Government Business Queensland (QG BQ), 1995–2019: n.p.) including the ‘humane management of domestic and feral animals’, and when ‘the euthanasia of animals (companion, domestic or feral) is deemed necessary, it should be carried out as humanely as possible’ (QG BQ, 1995–2019: n.p.). The NHMRC also requires that the ‘method and procedures used for killing an animal’ must be ‘humane’, that is, the method must ‘avoid pain or distress and produce rapid loss of consciousness until death occurs’ (NHMRC, 2013: 66). It is likely that the use of ‘Tik Tok’ in the Pelorus experiment would have been well outside of acceptable practices approved under the Australian Veterinary Association Code of Professional Conduct.

However, as Simon Coghlan points out in his study of veterinary ethics, ‘the basic moral role of veterinarians, especially compared to the role of human health professionals, remains unclear and contested’ (Coghlan, 2018: 352). Moreover, the dingoes and goats were designated class 2 pests so their treatment under the *Animal Care and Protection Act 2001* could

fall well short of ‘community standards’ that pertain to non-pest animals, as a response from DAF to Alex Vince of Animal Liberation explains:

the [ACPA] provides high levels of care and protection to all animals, as well as provisions for controlling feral and pest animals in ways that might not be acceptable under normal circumstances. This includes feral and pest species. This ACPA provides an offence exemption for the control of pest animals as long as the control is done in a way that causes the animal as little pain as is reasonable. (Vince, 2017)

It is possible that the role of experimentation, the classification of animals as ‘feral’/‘pests’ whose treatment could involve an ‘offence exemption’, and the big-picture claims of island restoration framed out these ethical issues for those involved. However, the public debate that ensued insisted that those issues could *not* be framed out.

In the midst of increasing public comment about the project, and upon receipt of correspondence outlining concerns, Lex Turner, the Chair of the DAF AEC, forwarded a letter that ‘could be described as a complaint’ to the rest of the committee. One committee member replied with, ‘Not surprised by this reaction’ (File A, 2020: 48), while another commented: ‘I was under the understanding that the dingoes [sic] nature would be to kill any goats under attack quickly without the goats being left to suffer’ (File A, 2020: 51). This response indicates that the AEC’s discussion about dingo predation and dingo behaviour may have been limited. One of the AEC members responded to the complaint with:

I also believe the 1080 release was to be a back-up kill method for the dingoes only if humane death by gunshot was not at all able to be achieved. I stand by these understandings when haven [sic] given my approval. (File A, 2020: 51)

These comments indicate that members of the AEC may not have understood the implications of what they had helped approve. The original application is not clear about whether the endpoint for the dingoes is death by gunshot or death by 1080 – both scenarios appear. Nevertheless, if the project’s organisers ever intended to ‘humanely euthanase’ the dingoes with rifles at the conclusion of the experiment, they now argued against the Interim Conservation Order (ICO) passed by authorities in response to the controversy that ordered HSC to remove the dingoes from the island. The project team cited the difficult terrain on the island making shooting ‘highly unlikely to succeed’. By 10 October 2016, after having spent \$60,000 trying to kill the dingoes by gunshot, HSC ceased their efforts. At the time of writing, the fate of the dingoes remains unknown. What we do know is that the 1080 implants did not kill the dingoes in the expected 600-day time frame.

## Part 2: Promoting Pelorus

The 1080 implants and the cruelty of the experiment to both dingoes and goats gained public prominence courtesy of another attempted controlled release that also did not go according to plan. The Pelorus experiment project team had put together a communications plan to ‘[p]romote the project to the broader community through ABC *Landline*’, a national television show that specialises in rural and regional affairs. Eradication projects that include killing large numbers of animals would be commonly perceived as gruesome, so it is perhaps surprising that the Pelorus experiment organisers actively sought media coverage. It suggests a level of naivete about community sentiments, especially regarding the dingo, whose status

as a ‘pest’ is not uniform across the country, and who has especially strong advocates ranging from sanctuary operators and breeders to ecologists.

The communications and media strategy identified four main public interest risks for the project: that people may be concerned about the impact on non-target species; that releasing dingoes would involve ‘animal welfare issues’; that the dingoes could pose a threat to humans; and that there was a risk that ‘Animal rights advocates or members of the community [may be] concerned with the perceived inhumane killing of goats’ (HSC, 2016: 5). HSC’s predictions of community concerns about the inhumane killing of goats proved correct, but the issue of 1080 implants was not flagged as a risk. The communications plan that we have seen (stamped ‘draft’) includes templates of media releases pre-prepared to deal with ‘animal welfare’ concerns that not only obscure the role of the 1080 implants but also refer to the dingoes dying of ‘natural causes’: the ‘project has an inbuilt fail-safe due to the dingoes being desexed, so the animals will eventually die out through natural causes’ (14). Not for the first time, the word ‘natural’ is used to obfuscate human interference, such as trapping, releasing, desexing, a point to be taken up in later, in part 4. There is no template for a media release about the 1080 implants that we have seen as part of the RTI data. However, one of the final points made in the plan that we have seen relates to ‘enquiries concerning the “1080” controlled release delivery system’. The proposed action in response is to refer such inquiries and concerns to Dr Ben Allen who has ‘expressed interest in assisting HSC in using certain proprietary technology’ and that ‘Dr Allen has asked Scientec to prepare a controlled release delivery formulation’ (p. 13). It seems that the communications plan itself is designed to put some distance between HSC and the 1080 implants, which are not otherwise mentioned in the standard templates. HSC’s reluctance to be associated with the implants as part of that positive news story of conservation was well judged given the public and political backlash that ensued.

The media coverage agreement negotiated between the ABC and HSC stipulates that the ABC would have access to the island, would film the ‘dogs’ in a trap, in the pound, receiving health checks, being wormed, neutered and released on the island, and they would film an interview with Ben Allen and Lee Allen. Nothing in the media agreement that we have seen suggests that a 1080 subcutaneous implant would be part of the coverage. The first media report the ABC released was headlined, ‘Death row dingoes set to be the environmental saviour of Great Barrier Reef’s Pelorus Island (Schwartz, 2016a), written as a promotional piece for the television screening to follow the next day (Schwartz, 2016c). Both print and television stories mention the implants. In the televised version, journalist Dominique Schwartz’s voiceover explains to the ABC audience:

it won’t be *happy ever after* for the dingoes. Once their job is done, they will be too. To ensure the dogs don’t become entrenched pests themselves on the island, each is being implanted with pellets which in roughly two years’ time will release a deadly dose of 1080 poison. (emphasis added: Schwartz, 2016c)

Within days of the *Landline* report, the RSPCA, concerned mainly by the impacts on the goats, called for an end of the project. CEO Mark Townend commented that the goats would be ‘partly eaten and then left to die a horrible painful death’, adding that the project displayed a ‘wrong attitude for 2016’ (Townend quoted in Schwartz, 2016b). The Australian Conservation Foundation praised the ambition to control goats but ‘not at the destruction of these dingoes which they are using’ (Schwartz, 2016b). Lyn Watson from the Australian Dingo Foundation described the project as ‘immoral’ as it would push the dingoes to starvation before they turned to preying upon goats (Schwartz, 2016b). In Queensland



parliament, Steven Miles, Labor Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection and Minister for National Parks and the Great Barrier Reef, received a petition against the use of the 1080 capsules signed by 4645 people (STOP, 2016). Another petition against implanting dingoes ‘with the horrendously cruel time-activated poison, 1080’, signed by 928 people, was sent to the RSPCA and Queensland police calling for the Allens, HSC and HSC Mayor Ramon Jayo to be charged with breaching Queensland’s animal cruelty laws (Paul, 2016). *The Australian* newspaper took up the story and published an HSC-approved interview with Ben Allen under the macabre (and inaccurate) headline ‘*Self-culling* dingoes could be a conservation model’ (The Australian, 2016 emphasis added).

The Pelorus experiment was discussed in Queensland parliament in the following months. On 18 August Aaron Harper, Labor member for Thuringowa, asked Miles, ‘Will the minister advise the House what the Palaszczuk [Labor] government is doing in response to community concerns about using wild dogs to control feral goats on Pelorus Island?’ (QP QWN, 2016: 2976). Miles answered, ‘Many members have contacted me concerned about a bizarre plan from the HSC to release dingoes on to Pelorus Island so that the dogs could hunt down feral goats’ (QP QWN, 2016: 2976). Opposition members shouted ‘Pelorus!’ and Miles continued:

Apparently, the dingoes have been surgically sterilised and implanted with time delayed poison pellets. The Queensland community has quite rightly reacted with alarm. Members of the public, the RSPCA and even some members opposite have opposed the plan. The member for Whitsunday [LNP Jason Costigan] has written to me to say the plan was inhumane and that it involved outright cruelty that should not be allowed. The member for Moggill [LNP Christian Rowan] has told me that Queenslanders were appalled and considered the situation to be as horrendous as the recent live-baiting greyhound scandal. (QP QWN, 2016: 2976)

The ‘greyhound scandal’ Miles refers to had occurred a year earlier in 2015, and was also the subject of an ABC current affairs expose when investigative journalists from the *Four Corners* programme uncovered the routine use of live animals as baits in the training of greyhounds for racing; and the subsequent ‘destruction’ of ‘failed’ racers, buried in mass graves. The coverage resulted in a temporary ban being placed on the greyhound industry in NSW and multiple investigations across other states. The parallel being drawn between the Pelorus experiment and greyhound racing suggests that the ‘dingo-on-goat’ predation scenario was not perceived as it was intended by the Pelorus experiment’s organisers as conservation rescuing ‘nature’, but rather, as a ‘sport’, where the ‘game’ or event is designed for the satisfaction of humans. These perceptions may have been exacerbated by the ways that ecologists spoke in glib terms about the project in the media:

Just like wild dogs do an absolute devastation on sheep and goats in a livestock setting, we’ve seen from past experience that wild dogs do an equally good job on feral goats in an island setting, Dr Lee Allen said. (Schwartz, 2016a)

In September 2016, Minister Miles issued an ICO directing that ‘no further dingoes are to be released and that existing dingoes must be removed within 14 days. This order will effectively end the death row dingo plan’ (QP QWN, 2016: 2976). Ostensibly the ICO was made to protect a population of shore birds – the beach stone curlew – a non-target species endemic to Pelorus and probably vulnerable to dingo predation. By focusing on the beach stone curlew, rather than the cruelty to both goats and dingoes, the ICO preserves a dominant conservation ethic (killing in order to save others) and deflected what could

have become more protracted and engaged public debate about the violence of eradication practices.

### Part 3: Developing nature

Animal geographers' analyses of conservation projects show that conservation is generally biopolitical in its framing (Collard, 2012; Hodgetts, 2017; Srinivasan, 2014, 2017), with an avoidance of counting individuals in favour of collectives/species and attempts to balance, in the form of a metrics of life and death, the simultaneous presence of care *and* harm at the level of populations (Srinivasan, 2014). Srinivasan argues that this is what makes it possible for conservation projects to work with economic interests in a 'win-win' scenario, where ecologies, economies and communities all 'win' because the logic of trade-offs and 'ontologies of the collectivity' make it possible for individual harms to be displaced by scale (2017). This applies to Pelorus when it comes to the goats, who are framed by the project as a 'global' pest, and to the dingoes whose individuality became more difficult to displace as media interest grew. Interestingly, Srinivasan also draws attention to the ways in which biopolitical framing can help understand how it is that human subjects come to care for, and restrain their capacity to harm, animal others (2017). There are examples of this in relation to living with dingoes in Australia (see Boronyak et al., 2020; Johnson and Wallach, 2016; Rose, 2011; Wallach et al., 2017) but Pelorus is not one of them.

Pelorus was an experiment principally designed to assist in tourism commercialisation (see Lennox and Probyn-Rapsey, 2021). It is better understood as 'necropolitical' rather than biopolitical, the distinction between them is that while conservation projects that make 'trade-offs' (to make live and let die) between co-habiting populations are biopolitical, conservation projects like this one that seek to wipe out whole populations to service tourism have no such trade-offs as a goal (because tourism would compromise any 'pristine' protection for endemic species, despite the rhetoric of 'restoration' used to justify it). To use Margulies' phrase, necropolitics emphasises how human-animal 'entanglements' are 'mortal' (2018: 5). The issue that seems to have arisen for the Pelorus experiment was perhaps the challenge of making a tourism development project look more like a conservation project (a point we take up in forthcoming work, Lennox and Probyn-Rapsey, 2021).

The Pelorus experiment was showcased in the media as an island *restoration* project. Island restoration projects are increasingly displaying their own successful 'restoration' projects as part of maintaining and seeking funding for further work. But even these projects (see for example *Island Conservation* <https://www.islandconservation.org> or The Nature Conservancy <https://www.nature.org/en-us/>) tend to obscure the actual work of killing, instead showing footage of conservationists at work, and before and after shots of landscapes 'restored'. As Vasilie Stanescu (2017) points out in his reading of The Nature Conservancy's feral pig eradication on the Santa Cruz Islands, the organisational investment was largely aimed at the 'production of nature' (68), removing animals (and indigenous histories) that were in the way of a particular view of 'nature'. In such cases, where nature is 'disneyfied' (70) for a certain image (and largely for tourism), the media message is fixed upon the restoration and not the carnage that precedes it and must continue with 'upkeep'.

The ABC Landline story, featuring the Allens and their descriptions of dingoes and goats, couched in statements like 'no happy ever after' (Schwartz, 2016b), made the mistake of *showing* the animals that some viewers clearly felt should not be treated or spoken about in the ways depicted. One can only speculate that the 'happy ever after' phrase that Schwartz used in her coverage of the story, is one conjured up on the shores of what looks like a

beautiful island, blue skies and beaches. The phrase conjures up the ‘disneyfied’ setting that Stanescu draws attention to, and yet is immediately undone by the contradictory framing of the dingo as somehow both criminal (on ‘death row’) and also ‘saviour’ in a fight for conservation against goats. How do these messages of ‘pristine nature’ and capital punishment get so entangled? These depictions – on the one hand a Disney island romance and on the other a criminal execution – reflect the ambivalence at the heart of ‘killing for conservation’ (Duffy, 2001). The Pelorus experiment breached one of conservation’s unspoken rules which is to not *individualise* the animals who are being killed, because, doing so risks empathetic engagement (Ramp and Bekoff, 2015). Individualising the dingoes risked creating a sense of compassion for them that Compassionate Conservation (a field of conservation critical of its tradition of violence against animals) promotes as a restraint on violence. Proponents of Compassionate Conservation (notably Daniel Ramp, Marc Bekoff, Arian Wallach) are critical of the ways in which ‘killing for conservation’ has become something more like the inverse: conservation *for* killing, as if conservation cannot imagine other ways of living with animals. At its core, Compassionate Conservation calls on the acknowledgement of the ‘intrinsic value and welfare of individual animals’ (Ramp and Bekoff, 2015: 2) regardless of their designation ‘pest’, non-native, ‘feral’ (see Wallach et al., 2019, 2020) and calls for ‘outcomes in which the interests of others supersede those of humans’ (Ramp and Bekoff, 2015: 9).

On the AE application, the Pelorus dingoes were depicted as both species (the committee noted that they are ‘pests’ and not regarded as native animals in the location that the experiment was to take place) and individuals; the applicants were very specific about what sort of individual dingoes they wished to use: young, healthy males who were preferably associates of each other or siblings. In the media and to the public, the Pelorus organisers framed the dingoes as individuals. But this framing, perhaps designed to make the experiment more popular with the public, backfired because it exposed the incommensurability between conservationist understandings of animals as species versus popular understandings of animals as individuals. This rupture, we contend, was one more reason for community outrage about the treatment of these two dingoes. Another reason was the ways in which the scientists spoke about the predation on goats, unleashing a form of violence that is well known on the mainland and leads to the persecution of the dingo (in the name of protecting sheep and cattle). Here, the word ‘natural’ was invoked repeatedly to describe the predation, and also, importantly, to disguise and distance the project team from the ethical implications of orchestrating predation.

The ruse of ‘nature’ persists throughout the data about the project. In the AE application, in media releases, and in stakeholders’ public statements and correspondence, dingo/goat predation is repeatedly referred to as natural/nature: ‘This is nature. The dingo is a predator, the goat is the source of a dingo’s affection, so we believe that, yeah, just put nature together and that’ll sort out the problem’ (HSC Mayor Jayo, qtd in Schwartz, 2016a). ‘Naturalness’ therefore masks a series of human interventions that remain unseen in this focus on the dingo’s behaviours and habits. For the Pelorus project, ‘nature’ serves as an enduring alibi, an ethical ground zero. Nature’ is not something that AECs are usually tasked to consider; they decide questions of animal ‘use’ not animal ‘nature’. It also forms the ideological backdrop for the restoration of the island, where ‘nature’ is re-presented as returned to a ‘pristine’ state, but only through a cycle of human interventions and animal killings that are made invisible by the fantasy of ‘nature’ without humans in it. Indeed, the term ‘nature’ and the ambivalence surrounding which species are ‘in’ nature and who on the outer, is nature’s principal characteristic (see Arcari et al., 2020). The ambivalence satisfies a free-floating signifier but also a ruse of power that situates humans as nature’s overseers,

orchestrating but not 'of' nature. This is a fantasy that underpins more recent conservation scholarship led by Ben Allen, which seems to want to argue that predation scenarios be best understood as 'non-anthropogenic' (Allen et al., 2019).

When it was launched in 2016, the Pelorus experiment was supposed to be the start of a whole series of island restorations using 'biocontrol' methods, where predation by dingoes would be orchestrated or instrumentalised to eradicate other animals. Subsequently, in a 2019 article, Ben Allen and a team of researchers in Australia and South Africa examine whether projects that use predators to eradicate 'pest' species are morally acceptable as methods of control, and whether predation causes more suffering in prey species than other methods including traps and toxins. Their conclusion is that 'predation and/or fear of predation produces more harm to target animals than most other alternative human tools assessed' (Allen et al., 2019: 266). Their analysis also points at rewilding projects, such as the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park, or dingoes to areas in Australia inhabited by foxes and cats, and suggests that the suffering of wolf and dingo prey 'should not be ignored or dismissively assumed to be negligible'. While this might appear as an admission of cruelty of the methods used on Pelorus, the authors go on to argue that these predation scenarios could be seen as 'non-anthropogenic', that is, not the moral responsibility of humans (who merely re-introduce predation), consequently making 'concerns about the welfare effects of using large carnivores as vertebrate biocontrols...void' (267). According to this argument, the human agents whose visions of 'nature' are at the core of the project to 'restore' do not bear any responsibility for amoral nature.

This argument has a perverse effect of potentially giving the Pelorus experiment an equivalent moral status to rewilding projects and compassionate conservation projects premised on non-interference between predator and prey. But it would be wrong to claim this equivalence. Rewilding projects involve predators being reintroduced into areas where they were once common, into a context where predators are tolerated as part of the ecological functioning of a whole system (see Wallach et al., 2015, 2018). The Pelorus experiment was neither of these. Moreover, the 'novel' 1080 implants pushed this experiment well beyond claims to be 'non-anthropogenic'; its failure to appreciate human responsibility is epitomised in the phrase 'self-culling' to describe a dingo who had been surgically implanted with a slow-release toxin. There is nothing self-culling about this scenario. Indeed, the only 'self-culling' going on is where the researchers attempt to slip out of the scene that they have created: it was they who inserted the 1080 implants.

Given the liberal use of 1080 in baiting programmes across Australia, as well as shooting and trapping of wild dogs/dingoes, it is important to consider why the use of 1080 in the form of an *implant* pushed the project into the realm of the 'unacceptable' for politicians and the public. The inherent cruelty of 1080 as a toxin that produces a horrible death is part of the explanation, but not all of it. There is an added layer of 'horror' involved, as one of the comments on the petition suggested: 'the stuff of horror films' (Petition, 2016). Implants that control and limit life are a prominent feature of horror and thriller films, from early alien invasion films like *Invaders from Mars* (Menzies, 1953), political thrillers like *Manchurian Candidate* (Demme, 2004), techno futurist take-overs as in *Upgrade* (Whannell, 2018), *Hardwired* (Barbarash, 2009) and *In Time* (Niccol, 2011). The 'horror' elements of this implant genre include mind/body control from a nefarious external force. In these films, the implant restricts free will and agency, turning the human into a mere instrument of someone's or something's design (against which a usually male hero must do triumphant battle). So, what does this tell us about the difference in reactions to dingoes being poisoned by baits or killed by delay-release implants? In part, this question is inspired by research conducted by Collard and Dempsey who ask (in a different context), 'what is so

objectionable about lively commodification?’ (Collard and Dempsey, 2013: 2685), so as to understand the shape and nuance of different reactions to similar phenomena. In the usual bait form, the dingo ‘takes’ the bait and sometimes learns to avoid it – thus preserving some sense that the dingo’s intelligence is part of the method of ‘baiting’, that the dingo is an independent agent that has to be tricked. In this small difference alone, there is space for the recognition of the dingo’s intelligence, independence and critical regard for human interference; they learn to avoid us and our poisons. But as an implant, the dingo cannot choose not to take the bait, he/she is forcibly given the bait and dies at the whim of a controlling other, to whom he/she is kept intimately connected through the implant, but who can choose to absent themselves from bearing witness to the animal’s suffering, with a distance of time and space. The dingo is made an instrument, a tool in the service of goat eradication, and those who implant it. In Hollywood’s version of the ‘implant’ horror film genre, the ones who implant and instrumentalise are the aliens or authoritarians, of government or of biotech companies. They are not heroes. So, the 1080 *implants* were likely a major factor in the public backlash. It switched public perceptions of the Pelorus experimenters: they could not be perceived as conservation ‘saviours’ if they were also the ones instrumentalising the animals with death implants. By doing so, they had inserted themselves into a different cultural frame – ‘the stuff of horror films’ (Petition, 2016), in which they became the nefarious invaders they accused the goats and dingoes of being. In this sense, the message of the implants was very different to the image being pursued. For an important but brief moment, the Pelorus Island goat eradication project redirected the public gaze away from the damage that ‘feral’ animals do, to the damage that is done *to them* in the name of conservation.

#### Part 4: Feral violence

Feral animals are ‘good to think with’ because their refusal to abide by our taxonomies, fences and presumptions of human mastery expose human folly (see O’Gorman and van Dooren, 2015; Rutherford, 2018). Feral animals have breached human control and seemingly relinquished the ‘protection’ that comes with domestication (Probyn-Rapsey, 2016, also Crowley et al., 2018). In light of their ‘escape’ from our epistemological frames, it can be productive to see feral animals as emblematic of a productive ‘ferality’. Van Patter and Hovorka’s (2018) work on feral cats makes the important point that feral cats are often seen as belonging to ‘people’ rather than ‘places’, meaning that they are treated as out of place because they can’t be imagined as having a place *without* humans. Rutherford (2018) also notes the productive potential of ‘ferality’ for rethinking this presumption, this sense that animals *need* us and our taxonomies of belonging. Instead, along with O’Gorman and Van Dooren (2015), Rutherford invokes Haraway’s call to ‘love our monsters’; ferals and pests whose breaches of categories can be celebrated as openings for new thinking. This is important work because it encourages us to reconsider how concepts of purity (pristine islands, untouched ecosystems) produce the ‘monsters’ in the first place; nothing is ever ‘pristine’. It also pushes ethics in the direction of loving monsters rather than killing them. But in a sense, this move risks un-feralling the feral and epistemologically rehomeing them, changing the meaning of feral from one that has ‘lapsed into a wild from a domesticated state’ (OED Online), to one that is re-domesticated, at least epistemologically, as a posthuman companion. The shift it risks obscuring the violence that attends the word ‘feral’.

Another meaning of feral is ‘of a deadly nature’, or ‘fatal’, and it is these two meanings together (*fatally lapsed*) that draw attention back to the work that the word ‘feral’ does to ‘make killable’ (Haraway, 2008: 80). The Pelorus experiment is another example of how the label ‘feral’ is employed to do significant work to push particular animals into a zone



beyond moral consideration, where usual standards of care do not apply, indeed, where an animal could be described as, bizarrely ‘self-culling’. In previous work, Probyn-Rapsey has argued that feral animals are subject to feral violence, ‘spectacular and unhinged from usual ethical constraints’ (Probyn-Rapsey, 2016: 21), a kind of violence that is different in degree (rather than kind) to the industrialised and normalised violence meted against other animals.

Animal studies scholarship focuses on violence and domination at the core of animal human relations. Dinesh Wadiwel’s work, for example, argues that the biopolitical and sovereign power that dominates non-human animals constitutes a war against animals that is so total that we fail to see it, exemplified in ‘animal welfare’ doctrines that are fundamentally palliative, and only makes sense from a position of total domination to decide what constitutes ‘good’ treatment in life and death (2015). The killing of billions of animals for their body parts is a routine feature, hidden in plain sight (Pachirat, 2011) in our cities and rural areas (Arcari et al., 2020). The industrialised and to a certain extent sanitised killing style of these industrial processes is managed by various strategies of displacement (both visual and rhetorical, Adams, 1990) and cultivation of various psychological strategies of containment (Bastian et al., 2012) that have been analysed throughout Animal studies scholarship. These strategies of containment are frequently breached, only to be re-assembled by ‘improvements’ in animal welfare practices that reinstate ‘community standards’ (and the human community’s right to apply them). None of this changes the fundamental relation of violence of human towards animal. Animal welfare puts caveats and public relations reassurances about ‘best practice’ into circulation, to enable the practice to continue, not to end it. This kind of violence against domesticated animals is routine, but supervised by regulations, albeit contradictory in its application (see O’Sullivan, 2011).

Yet for feral animals there is less pretence, less investment in appearing ‘lawful’ or meeting ‘community standards’. Clive Marks, previously head of the Victorian Government’s Vertebrate Pest Research Department, has described ‘pest control’ in Australia as ‘caught in an innovation death spiral, largely because the suffering of pest animals has not been valued or considered a sufficient priority to warrant appropriate investment in better approaches’ (Marks, 2014). According to Marks, animal welfare and conservation biology are locked in conflict over this issue (Marks, 2014; see also Marks, 2013, Ramp and Bekoff, 2015). Examples like Pelorus, where public scrutiny also plays a role, make those tensions even more visible and threaten conservation’s social licence, as Eeden et al. suggest: ‘If we fail to manage and incorporate contemporary public values in decision-making, we may witness a decreased role for science in shaping wildlife management, with serious consequences for conservation’ (Eeden et al., 2017).

The violence that is inflicted on ‘ferals’ is, we suggest, a *feral violence*; in its own zone of ‘exceptional’ violence that makes it categorically different to the routinised violence that characterises other human/animal relations. Non-feral violence or routine violence is still *invested* in not being *seen as* violence whereas feral violence is not so invested in that chimeric. The difference is one of degree rather than kind. And in an important sense, the feral does not need to be made killable, because they are constituted as already dead, as in the meaning ‘*fatally lapsed*’, reminiscent of ‘self-culling’. If feral violence is a ‘monstrous’ breach of ‘community standards’, then we would be hard pressed to ‘love’ those breaches, or even resituate them within ‘acceptable’ levels of animal care. The point that we are making here is that the concept of ferality can be rehabilitated in the case of the animal whose ‘breaches’ reflect on us, not them, (but who would likely still ignore our pleasant conceptual re-homing!), but the concept of ferality cannot be rehabilitated in the case of violence. In the case of feral violence, the breach of categories such as ‘community standards’, cannot be celebrated,

tolerated, or represented as an opening to ‘new thinking’. Feral violence should be left to ‘fatally lapse’. The only thing to be ‘celebrated’ is that the feral animal is, for once, perceived to be less of a threat to conservation’s moral basis than its practitioners, those who practise feral violence as a norm within eradication programmes. With a media spotlight on the Pelorus experiment and the intense critical scrutiny of the public, including animal advocates, the question of who, exactly, figures as a ‘feral’ threat to conservation, can be asked.

## Conclusion

How the ‘bizarre’ Pelorus experiment gained ethics approval is one part of this story. Another relates to the implants themselves and what this novel killing tool tells us about the ‘innovation death spiral’ (Marks, 2014) of eradication programmes. While dingoes are subjected to violent eradication programmes across many parts of Australia, the public reaction to the experiment exposes something particularly unsettling about the use of 1080 in the form of an implant with delayed release – ‘the stuff of horror films’ (Petition, 2016). Added to this is the orchestration of a predation scenario situated under the alibi of ‘nature’; a scenario that actively cultivated the kind of animal suffering that has led to the vilification of dingoes and their persecution by sheep and cattle graziers throughout Australia’s colonial settlement (Probyn-Rapsey, 2017). The project brought some criticism from within the field of conservation biology itself, especially calls for greater attention to ‘science communication’ training for practitioners (Eeden et al., 2017), but it remains to be seen how the field will respond to the implications of Pelorus in the long-term given calls for ‘greater adoption of this approach’ (Allen et al., 2020). Our analysis also draws attention to the wider distribution of beliefs about killing and the cultivation of tolerance for feral violence through multiple institutions – media, local government, universities and AECs. In forthcoming work on the Pelorus experiment, we shift our focus to the socio-cultural context in which an experiment like this was possible; including the settler colonial (and carceral) history of the islands, and how this dovetails with ‘restoration’, terra nullius fantasies of island tourism. We further develop our analysis of the *necropolitical* territorialisation (Margulies, 2019; Mavhunga, 2011; Mbembe, 2003) of Pelorus. We also consider in greater depth how the goats and dingoes on Pelorus might have experienced this event (Lennox and Probyn-Rapsey, 2021). Here, we have focused on their instrumentalisation and discursive capture as ‘ferals’ and ‘pests’, but their existence beyond being discursive figures for ‘ferality’ motivates our thinking deeply.

## Highlights

- The ‘Pelorus experiment’ is a controversial Island conservation project using dingoes as ‘biocontrol’ to exterminate feral goats in 2016
- The dingoes had been fitted with slow-release implants containing 1080; a ‘novel’ experiment that, we argue, compromised the project’s social licence
- We examine how the project gained Animal Ethics approval (using data obtained under Freedom of Information)
- We examine how the project exposed a gap in community sentiment and ‘killing for conservation’ ethos

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2. The effects of 1080 poisoning on canids can include vomiting, shaking, incontinence or diarrhoea, excessive salivation, frenzied behaviour, violent seizures, choking and collapse over a period of up to 24 hours as brains are deprived of oxygen. See <http://www.crookwellvet.com.au/AnimalCare/Dogs/1080poisoning.aspx> (accessed 7 June 2019); <https://ban1080.org.au/resources/>
3. <https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/sites/gateway/files/1080%20characteristics%20of%20use%20PDF.pdf> (accessed 7 June 2019); The World League for Protection of Animals, 2010, '1080 poison' website, [http://www.wlpa.org/1080\\_poison.htm](http://www.wlpa.org/1080_poison.htm) (accessed 7 June 2019).

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