



# Outfox the fox

## - *use a conservation hunter*

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### **Foxes are an ecological disaster**

The European fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) is an efficient killing machine of any native species that happens to fall within the critical weight range of 23 to 5500g. Not only do they kill for consumption, they carry out 'surplus killings' where it seems they continually kill for the sake of it and fail to consume any of their prey. There are many documented instances where they have decimated native animal populations and have left paddocks and fields littered with carcasses in a scene that resembles a killing field. They may look 'cute', but they are indeed a relentless killing machine of Australia's unique native animals. The fox is at the top of the list of the feral animals, which cause \$720 million worth of environmental and agricultural damage annually in Australia<sup>1</sup>.



### **How foxes invaded Australia**

The fox was released into the Australian environment following two deliberate releases in 1871 around the townships of Ballarat and Geelong. Since that time, they have been able to colonise much of Australia, with the exception of areas in the tropical north and some detached offshore islands. Tasmania was free of foxes only until recently and there is now a major fox eradication program underway to prevent a population explosion similar to that which occurred on mainland Australia.

### **Why foxes are a problem**

The fox was able to colonise most of Australia fairly quickly due to their wide dietary range and a high availability of food. The existence of rabbits has been a major factor in the spread of the fox across the main land. The fox has high reproductive success, which enables fast population growth and has no real predators apart from dingoes when they are juvenile.

***The overall cost of foxes to Australia is more than \$228 million per year.***

### **The damage foxes do**

The fox is Australia's number-one exotic predator. They threaten native wildlife such as rock-wallaby, bilby, numbat and brush-tailed bettong to name a few. Foxes are also predators of livestock and are responsible for killing up to 30% of new season lambs born, with a direct economic impact on sheep production alone estimated at \$17.5 million per year. The overall cost of foxes to Australia is more than \$228 million per year. This includes the cost of control activities and other environmental and agricultural impact costs. The fox also has the potential to host exotic diseases such as rabies, which could both threaten animal and human health<sup>2</sup>.



### Hunters and the SSAA can help

The conservation hunter and organisations such as the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia (SSAA) can play a positive role in the control of foxes and the protection of Australia's environment. No one method of control will solve the fox problem, but a combined effort of all the commonly used control techniques will have a higher chance of reducing fox populations. Shooters across Australia are an untapped resource in regards to feral animal control. Unfortunately, their involvement is frowned upon by naïve elements of society who simply don't understand or value the work that they can do as conservation hunters.

There are hundreds of thousands of responsible firearm owners in the community who have the skills to become involved in conservation hunting. Many of these people would be willing to donate their time similar to the many thousands of dedicated volunteers in different organisations across the country. People who volunteer to revegetate habitat should feel satisfaction in knowing that there are other volunteers out there willing to control the foxes that kill the native animals that they are trying to attract. There should be no moral distinction made between people volunteering to plant trees and those who conduct fox control. Both are very important roles that no doubt provide benefit to the environment.

Without the assistance of Australian conservation hunters, the cost of environmental and economic damage may

continue to rise above the estimated \$228 million per year. Conservation hunters donate their time and for the most part fund all the expenses incurred conducting fox and other feral animal control. These costs have not been factored into the estimated costs of control, so, in reality, the actual total cost of fox control is much higher than currently estimated.

Conservation hunters and organisations like the SSAA support conservation and play their part to preserve Australian flora and fauna through the activities they conduct across the country. Without the support of the conservation hunter, the Australia environment is at risk of falling into worst shape.

Do something practical for the environment today, support the work of the conservation hunter and the SSAA. Understand that they are part of the solution to keep the fox away from our cherished native animals. ●

**Information regarding the SSAA can be found at [www.ssaa.org.au](http://www.ssaa.org.au)**

#### References

- <sup>1</sup>McLeod R. 2004, *Counting the Cost: Impact of Invasive Animals in Australia 2004*, Cooperative Research Centre for Pest Animal Control. Canberra
- <sup>2</sup>Invasive Animals CRC, 2008, *The Fox: Australia's Worst Predator*, Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre, Bruce ACT.

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