

The conflict between animal welfare and conservation

GRAHAM R. FULTON¹ and HUGH A. FORD²

IT is a measure of a civilized society that its inhabitants are concerned about the welfare of animals. Furthermore, there has been increasing concern about conservation, especially of threatened species. In many countries, including Australia, there is now extensive legislation to cover both animal welfare and the protection of many native species. Whereas welfare deals with individuals, conservation is concerned with populations. Thus, researchers must always weigh potential gains in knowledge against the consequences of their activities (see Gaunt and Oring 1997). Ironically, management for conservation often involves the killing of individuals of one species, typically predators or competitors, for the good of the population of another species. In Australia many of the animals that are killed are feral (e.g., foxes and rabbits). As some feral species also have major impacts on agriculture, the need to control their numbers is generally accepted and attracts little attention. However, there is mounting evidence that a number of native species may pose threats to declining or endangered native species. For instance, Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina* are known to be nest predators and Noisy Miners *Manorina melanocephala* are known to drive most other small birds from the vicinity of their colonies. Many woodland birds are experiencing long-term decline and it has been hypothesized that Pied Currawongs and Noisy Miners contribute to this decline (Ford *et al.* 2001). We set out to test experimentally the hypothesis that Pied Currawongs are major nest predators.

Our study involved culling a vertebrate species that is believed to have contributed to the decline of many other bird species in rural and urban areas. The science is presented in Fulton and Ford (2001). We wanted to see how much the

removal of Pied Currawongs led to reduced predation on artificial nests. The most efficient and perhaps only realistic method of removal was by shooting breeding adults and their young. In our experiment seven adults, two juveniles and four nestlings were culled. The Pied Currawong is a native species; a status that elicits extra sympathy, which is undoubtedly exaggerated by its familiarity. Lunney (1999) argued that if your research animal has large eyes, particularly forward-facing, and its young are fluffy, if it is not commercially valuable, and not venomous; then your research protocol will be subjected to greater scrutiny than most other protocols.

Well before the experiment, HAF obtained general approval for the cull from local NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service personnel as well as a small research grant from NSW NPWS. He also gained support in principle from the Regent Honeyeater (*Xanthomyza phrygia*) Recovery Team, because nest predation by Pied Currawongs had been suggested as a factor in reducing the breeding success of this endangered species. We obtained a NPWS scientific licence for the experiment and applied to the University of New England Animal Ethics Committee (AEC) for authority to carry out the work. The AEC discussed the proposed experiment at length and returned to us with a number of questions, which is not unusual. We replied to these questions and were subsequently given AEC authority.

The day before the planned cull the University of New England Animal Ethics Committee asked us to postpone the experiment. They did this because the Animal Research Review Panel of NSW Agriculture had received a complaint disapproving of our planned experiment and had asked the AEC to withhold permission for the experiment until

a number of questions had been answered. Permission was subsequently given to us to carry out the experiment, but two weeks later than planned. Our results showed significantly lower predation after culling of Pied Currawongs. However, the change may have been greater had we carried out the cull at the time we had planned. Pied Currawong families with fledglings and failed breeders were moving through the experimental plot when the eggs were placed in the artificial nests, so that predation was probably heavier than it would have been had the cull been carried out when most Pied Currawongs had had eggs or small nestlings.

Conservation biologists clearly need to consider the problem that any research and management intended to assist declining species that involves killing native species is likely to elicit strong opposition from proponents of animal welfare. We obviously do not suggest that animal welfare should be ignored or that a welfare committee should not subject animal experiments to scrutiny. However, we need to be aware that some welfare activists focus on the welfare of individual animals rather than on the conservation of populations. Furthermore, we believe that conservation needs to be taken into account when welfare is being evaluated. This is not to say that there needs to be a conservation benefit for an experiment to be justified. We also feel strongly that once researchers have received approval from the relevant conservation and ethics authorities that they should be allowed to undertake their experiments without further hurdles. In our case, we believe that our experiment was halted in the absence of reasonable scientific or thoughtful ethical justification.

Animal Ethics Committees and legislation have evolved principally

to protect the welfare of domestic animals, such as livestock and laboratory animals, whereas conservation legislation has been developed to protect native species in the wild. If it is accepted that all animals have the same rights without consideration of any deleterious effects that they may cause to other species, then we are ignoring our responsibility to more vulnerable species and to biodiversity generally. Scientists working on native animals need to consider the effects of research and management on both populations and individuals. To help facilitate this we would like to see a single committee dealing with research on

native species, probably as a part of a state agency (e.g., NSW NPWS), which would consider both conservation and welfare together. Such a committee needs to avoid attracting activists with only their own agenda to pursue. However, this is unlikely to happen without strong pressure and persuasive argument from conservation biologists and others working on our native animals.

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¹ grahamf2001@yahoo.com.au

² Zoology, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia 2351.