

**National Dingo Preservation and Recovery Program# Submission to the Northern Territory
Coronial Inquiry into the death of Azaria Chamberlain, February 2012**

22.02.2012

Ernest Healy,
643 Pascoe Vale Road,
Oak Park,
Melbourne,
Victoria 3046

The Coroner, Elizabeth Morris,
The Coroner's Office,
Magistrate Courts,
Nichols Place,
Cnr Cavanagh Street and Harry Chan Avenue,
DARWIN NT 0800

Re. Credibility of Fraser Island Dingo incident data

Dear Coroner,

I am writing to provide information which I believe may be useful to your deliberations in the Azaria Chamberlain inquiry, due to commence on February 24th, 2012.

The information relates to the credibility of dingo aggression data provided to the inquiry by the Queensland Department of Environment and Recourse Management (DERM) and to the credibility of the view held by DERM that dingoes that are 'habituated' to humans pose a particularly serious threat to human safety.

The National Dingo Preservation and Recovery Program considers that DERM's understanding and definition of dingo aggression and, therefore, its recording of incidents of dingo aggression towards humans has been seriously flawed. We submit that DERM's records of dingo aggression on Fraser Island do not provide an accurate indication of the propensity for dingoes to be aggressive towards humans. These records of dingo aggression reflect the mistaken assumptions about dingo behaviour which, unfortunately, underpin the Fraser Island dingo management policy (and about which the Queensland authorities have been constantly criticised), rather than any actual propensity for dingoes to pose a risk to humans.

The unreliability of the records derives from the fact that DERM has applied a ridiculously loose standard in labelling contact between dingoes and humans on Fraser Island as 'attacks' or as 'dangerous'. The Department has applied a no-tolerance approach to dingo-human contact, whereby virtually any contact at all may be labelled as 'aggression' on the part of the dingo. DERM has persisted with categorizing the most trivial forms of contact as aggressive, for which large numbers of high-conservation-value dingoes have been destroyed. Essentially, DERM's strategy since the death of Clinton Gage on Fraser Island in 2001 has been to attempt a complete separation of the island's dingo population from the now massive tourist population. In this context, virtually any dingo that presents itself near humans has been treated as threatening by DERM operatives.

The key assumption within the Fraser Island management Strategy used by DERM in enforcing a no-tolerance approach to dingo-human contact is that dingoes which become 'habituated' to humans lose their fear of humans and, as a result, are prone to be aggressive towards them. An investigation into the sources cited in the Fraser Island Dingo Management Strategy, and other DERM documentation, in justification of this assumption reveals that it is lacking in supportive evidence. Indeed, the key source cited does not support the 'habituation = aggression' assumption. Nevertheless, this is an idea that has been so often repeated by DERM management, and more broadly, that it has taken on a life of its own. On this issue, I invite you to read the document accompanying to this letter, in which I have investigated the sources cited by DERM in justification of their position. I believe it casts serious doubt on the credibility of the 'habituation = aggression' hypothesis.

I would like to emphasise to you that this criticism of DERM on these matters is not motivated by animosity towards DERM on my part, or on the part of the National Dingo Preservation and Recovery Program. Nor is it motivated by any naïve attempt to cast the dingo in the best light possible, regardless of the facts. My principal fear is that the false assumptions that have underpinned the mismanagement of the dingo population on Fraser Island may be used in context of the Azaria Chamberlain inquiry in a way that would lend further legitimacy to these false assumptions. I assure you that I am agnostic on the issue of the cause of Azaria Chamberlain's death. It would be an unfortunate outcome, however, if the conclusions of your enquiry were to be based on flawed data concerning dingo aggression and the poorly supported, but often stated, assumptions of the dingo management authorities on Fraser Island.

Thank you for your consideration of these matters.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Ernest Healy –

President, National Dingo Preservation and Recovery Program (**Inc. A0051763G**)

The National Dingo Preservation and Recovery Program is a non-profit organisation that brings together environmental scientists, conservation organisations and concerned individuals to ensure the protection of the dingo as an integral part of Australian ecosystems. The organisation aims to:

- * encourage legislative and government policy change to ensure the protection and survival of the dingo in the wild, and

- *inform and educate the public and government as to the cultural, ecological and historical significance of the dingo.