

Forensic Science and the Dingo

In the vile jargon now endemic amongst social workers and others, and which seems to be creeping into the law, the Chamberlain case took us almost to the interface of law and science. The two did not quite meet, however, but seemed to pass like ships in the night, neither quite understanding the other.

Mr. Justice Morling's inquiry often seemed like running through treacle but we discovered nevertheless, a lighter side to forensic science. A question frequently raised was how it might be determined, by controlled experiments, what a dingo would do in the circumstances postulated by the defence. There were difficulties. The first was that, on any view, a great many facts remained unknown. Other difficulties were practical. Consider the nature of the dingo. He is a hunter, not far removed from our pet dogs, but not the same: genus, *Canis*; species, *Familiaris*; subspecies, Dingo. Not *Canis Lupus*, but not far away. He is similar to a coyote, (but not the same) identical to the wild dog of India and South-East Asia, and a larger edition of the singing dog of Papua New Guinea.

There are very few dingoes in captivity, and those that are behind wire have adjusted to a placid existence untroubled by the need to hunt for survival and be constantly alert for predators bent upon their destruction. Dingoes in the wild demonstrate no ready compliance in submitting themselves to scientific experiment, no matter how worthy the cause. It was arguable anyway that dingoes at Ayers Rock would behave eccentrically because of their contact with tourists over a number of years.

One suggestion made was to capture some wild dingoes, equip them with radio transmitters, leave out for them meat sewn in the clothing of babies, let them go and see what would happen. A place available for such an experiment on the coastal plains of the Northern Territory near the South Alligator River was discarded as a reasonable proposition, partly because the probability was that neither the dingoes nor the transmitters nor the clothing would be seen again, and partly because the meat would also be of great interest to wild pigs, eagles, and crocodiles, which would probably intrude to the extent of depriving the exercise of any relevance.

A suggestion that it be done at Ayers Rock was discarded partly because of the presence of a large number of domestic dogs owned by Aborigines, partly because of the dingoes' exposure to people, and partly because of the inevitable attraction the exercise would have for journalists, whose interest in the Chamberlain case verged upon the obsessive, and who might be expected to very quickly reduce any such experiment to a sort of circus, at least in the public perception. Another factor of course was the cost.

So it was decided to do the thing in a more modest way. There is a wildlife sanctuary in Victoria which contains a few contented dingoes who apparently have adjusted

to domestic life to the extent that not only do they not hunt for food; they are happy to eat Pal out of plastic bowls. To me it says little for the basic integrity of the dingo that he is prepared to forego hunting, and eat Pal, but there it is. I suppose his first instinct is survival.

There were two experiments. Each excited much debate as to its true significance. Each in the end may not have been of much value. In the first instance some pieces were removed from the bodies and heads of some plastic dolls. The cavities were filled with Pal and the holes covered with pigskin. The dolls were given to the dingoes, who were then filmed. Not much happened. On one view the result showed no more than that dingoes fed on Pal in bowls have little interest in extracting the food from the bodies of plastic dolls. Some expressed the view that the experiment demonstrated the finesse with which a dingo might deal with his prey.

In the second experiment the animals were fed fresh meat sewn inside fabric. This experiment did excite their interest. Perhaps it was more of challenge, but the fabric did not for long remain intact. What it all proved was a matter for debate, beyond demonstrating what damage a dingo might be expected to inflict upon fabric with meat sewn inside it. From a scientific, and forensic, point of view, the basic difficulty was trying to replicate circumstances many of which were unknown.

On another memorable occasion a dingo fancier proceeded to attempt to demonstrate to the Commissioner and others how a dingo could get his jaws around an object the size of a child's head. The object used was not a child's head, none being readily available, but a No.3 chicken, which the man attempted to induce the animal to grasp

by forcing it into the dingo's mouth. The immediate result of the exercise was that the dingo took great exception to being so used and, to the untutored, the limbs, if not the life, of the animal's handler seemed to be in some jeopardy. Unfortunately, at that moment the man himself was suddenly and acutely troubled by an old back injury, which froze him in a crouching position next to an increasingly indignant dingo. A terrible crisis was averted when the animal gave us all a glance of withering contempt, and stalked off.

One way and another the experiment failed. One reason, as the dingo owner explained, when he was able to assume an upright position, was that the animal had unfortunately only recently undergone dental treatment, which accounted for his apparent hostility. Such are the vicissitudes of scientific endeavour. The question is, did the lawyers really appreciate what the experts were doing? Did it matter?

We returned to the hearing, to listen to textile experts talk about the behaviour of cotton and nylon fibres under stress. Dingoes under stress were more interesting. □

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