# Damages Licenses for Wedge-tailed Eagle Take

Position Statement of the
Society for the Preservation of Raptors Inc.

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## Introduction to the Wedge-tailed Eagle

The Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Aquila audax*) is in the same genus as the largest eagle, the Golden Eagle of the northern hemisphere. The Wedge-tail is considered about the fourth largest eagle in the world (depending on the measure used – wingspan, height, weight etc.)

As with most diurnal (day time active) raptorial birds, the female is larger than the male. Eagles form a pair bond for life, only changing partners when one of the pair dies. Wedge-tails usually only breed every other year, and only when their prey is abundant. Although they lay two eggs, usually only one chick survives to fledge. As with most raptors, many juveniles do not survive to maturity, which is at 6 or 7 years of age for Wedge-tailed Eagles. These are long lived birds, living to over 30 years of age (over 40 years old in captivity).

Wedge-tailed Eagles prey on a variety of foods. In Australia, there are no vultures, and the eagles have taken on the role of carrion eater. They may live along country roads where numerous animals are hit by road trains and trucks on a regular basis. Eagles that are unable to hunt successfully often fall back on this food source, though they put themselves at risk of becoming road casualties. Eagles in livestock farming areas benefit from dead or dying livestock, mis-mothered lambs and afterbirth (when lambs and calves are being born).

Despite their carrion eating habits, Wedge-tails are powerful predators. In an undisturbed Australian ecology, they would have hunted many of the medium sized mammals, such as wallabies and numbats. Since the ecosystem here has been dramatically modified, the eagles have changed their diet to include feral rabbit, fox and cat. They still regularly take young kangaroos, monitor lizards and wallabies. They have also been observed hunting black cockatoos.

## Threats to the Survival of the Wedge-tailed Eagle

Because of their large size and habits, Wedge-tailed Eagles are easily observed. There is a long history of eagles being seen to eat livestock. As a result of these observations, the birds have been heavily persecuted through intentional trapping, shooting and poisoning throughout Australia and Tasmania for well over 100 years.

In more recent times (the past 50 years) eagles have increasingly fallen victim to habitat destruction, car collisions, power line collisions, electrocution, inadvertent poisoning, entanglement and nest robbing. Unlike other raptors that have endured these human causes of mortality, Wedge-tailed Eagles mature and breed slowly, making them more vulnerable to population decline.

## The History of Persecution of Wedge-tailed Eagles

Bounties for dead eagles were paid in Western Australia up until 1968 and in Queensland until 1974. Over a 50 year period (1923 to 1974) it is estimated that more than one million Wedge-tailed Eagles have been killed under the bounty system, Australia wide. (Western Australia and Queensland between them accounted for more than 13,000 eagle scalps per year between 1958 to 1967.) [1, 2]

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## The History of Persecution of Wedge-tailed Eagles (continued)

Until May 1989 in Western Australia, the Wedge-tailed Eagle was still considered vermin and listed on the open season list on private land. From this date it was listed as 'protected' but subject to a damages licence. This licence enables members of the public to apply for a permit to destroy or relocate fauna if they consider it to be causing economic damage. It is unclear how many of these licences have been granted for the shooting of Wedge-tailed Eagles. One government source gives a figure of three damages licences being issued for the past three years. Other sources give different numbers. It is known that a licence has been granted as recently as 2002.

In December 2000 the Wedge-tailed Eagle was finally removed from the list of pest species administered by the WA Agriculture Protection Board. It was removal because it was no longer considered in need of population control[4].

## Research on Wedge-tailed Eagles

CSIRO studies on Wedge-tailed Eagles were first undertaken in 1964. The first study briefly examined the food eaten by Wedge-tails in south-eastern Australia. In 1966 a similar but more extensive 10 year study of the Wedge-tailed Eagles in the arid zone of Western Australia was begun. These papers were published many years ago, starting in 1969, with the most recent paper on the morphometrics (measurements of sizes of body parts) published in 1996.

The 1964 study, and the 10 year study that followed it showed clearly that Wedge-tailed Eagles do not play a significant role in killing lambs. An average of 20% die of illness or mis-mothering. The eagles accounted for much less than one percent of lambs eaten in a sheep farming area[3].

## The Current Situation

To our knowledge, there is no estimate of the overall population of Wedge-tailed Eagles in Australia or Tasmania before white settlement. Nor are there estimates of the current population (in 2003). Some researchers suggest an estimate of 100 000 Wedge-tailed Eagles Australia wide at present. Many long time bird watchers and researchers agree that fewer eagles are being seen, while some pastoralists claim that they are seeing 'plagues' of eagles. No current research exists to support these observations.

Even though Wedge-tailed Eagles are no longer considered a threat to agriculture in WA, the Department of Conservation and Land Management still issues damages licences. Except for the Northern Territory, damages licences can still be obtained in every state of Australia. In Tasmania, the Wedge-tailed Eagles are a distinct subspecies, unique from those on the mainland. There are only 292 Tasmanian Eagles left. In Tasmania, illegal shooting may be a large factor in the decline. It is obvious that the Tasmanian eagles could face extinction in the near future.

The long history of persecution and delayed reactions from government managers shows a great disregard for the conservation of the Wedge-tailed Eagle. The studies mentioned cite habitat loss as a greater threat than persecution. This is, however, a good reason for persecution to cease. If habitat destruction continues, then the shooting of eagles may prove to be an extremely significant factor in the species survival, as shown by the extinction of the Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) in England.

## Conclusion

Regrettably, Wedge-tailed Eagles are still viewed with fear and hatred by many pastoralists. At many of the Society for the Preservation of Raptors Inc. educational displays, our members meet farmers who openly boast of destroying Wedge-tailed Eagles in large numbers. The eagles are shot and poisoned intentionally and illegally because of these peoples' ignorance.

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## **Conclusion** (continued)

This is a similar story to that of aviculturists who illegally destroy other diurnal raptors. However, smaller raptor species are more able to recover from losses, and their losses are concentrated in areas of high human population density. Our agricultural lands comprise a large percentage of the remaining Wedge-tailed Eagle habitat. These large eagles are conspicuous, breed slowly and require large territories to survive. These factors make them vulnerable to population decline.

While farmers will continue to shoot eagles with or without a licence, the Society for the Preservation of Raptors Inc. feels that the current use of the damages licence gives the impression that there is still justification for Wedge-tailed Eagles to be considered a major threat to agriculture. Licences that allow members of the public to shoot a given number of eagles or a particular individual are likely to be abused, and such offences are likely to go unnoticed. In addition, giving members of the public permission to use firearms in human inhabited areas is a grossly irresponsible act.

Until the Wedge-tailed Eagle is totally protected by our government, with large fines and or jail terms for offences, (as in the case of America's Bald Eagle, and the Golden Eagle) this unique large eagle will continue to decline in numbers, perhaps to the point of extinction.

## Recommendations

The Society for the Preservation of Raptors Inc. proposes the following recommendations in order to reduce the threat of extinction of the Wedge-tailed Eagle:

1. Suspend the current damages licence, pending proper investigation of current Wedge-tailed Eagle populations, and changes to conditions under which the licence is issued.
2. Train Wildlife Officers and Agriculture Officers in the skills needed to identify forensic evidence of what animal was responsible for the death of livestock.
3. Amend policies governing issuance of damages licences such that a thorough, documented investigation by a qualified Wildlife Officer, Agriculture officer or veterinarian is required to identify the cause of livestock deaths before licences are issued.
4. Only in cases where evidence that a predetermined level (such as percentage of income) of economic damage is exceeded should a licence be issued.
5. Under no circumstance should a member of the public who is issued a damages licence be given permission to 'take' eagles themselves, rather this task should be reserved for a Wildlife Officer.
6. Additional funding should be made available to the Department of Conservation and Land Management, and the Department of Agriculture for :
    - Advertising / public education on the availability of damages licences, and the reasons that unauthorised take is illegal;
    - Literature review and research on Wedge-tailed Eagle population, age demographics and distribution trends;
    - Employment of additional Wildlife Officers to enforce the Wildlife Act, including illegal take offences and investigations for issuance of damages licences;
    - Training of all relevant field personnel in the identification of causes of death to livestock;
    - A study of investigations for, and issuance of, damages licences to assess their usefulness and impacts;
7. These recommendations or similar should be considered for all native fauna, emphasising the need for factual, documented evidence of economic damages before licences are issued, and moving the responsibility for 'take' of protected fauna under licence to qualified Wildlife Officers.

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