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WHAT ARE VERMIN?

By A. R. TOMLINSON, Chief Vermin Control Officer, Agriculture Protection Board of Western Australia

ACCORDING to one dictionary the term 'vermin' includes "mammals and birds injurious to game or crops", "rats and mice", "noxious insects", "parasitic worms" and even "vile persons."

While the range thus presented is wide and holds interesting possibilities, the legal interpretation of "vermin" given in the W.A. Vermin Act is "any animal, bird or insect declared to be vermin under and by virtue of section 140 of the Vermin Act." This section authorises the Agriculture Protection Board to declare, by a declaration published in the Government Gazette, any animal, bird or insect, whether at large or not, to be vermin.

Once a declaration has been made, every property owner or occupier has a responsibility to destroy all of the "vermin" on and about his property. He may be prosecuted for having any on the property, or for not carrying out effective control measures.

Local vermin authorities are obliged to ensure that vermin are controlled within their districts, and they may raise funds by rating for this purpose, employ staff, direct and prosecute property owners, assist in actual destruction work or do the work at the cost of property owners. The Agriculture Protection Board also possesses these powers, excluding local rating.

In making declarations, the Agriculture Protection Board keeps in mind prevention or exclusion on one hand, and control or destruction—even eradication if possible—on the other, although both objectives may be sometimes necessary together. Some declarations are State-wide, while others are for individual districts or groups of districts.

Declarations made for prevention or exclusion include blackbirds; bulbuls; Indian or Ceylon crows, Indian mynahs; Californian quails; finches (excepting our native Australian species); hares; sparrows; starlings; African and giant toads; English thrushes; and wombats. Wombats are still actually present in the south-east corner of the State near South Australia, and are not "declared" as vermin there.

Declarations made for control or destruction include a number of introduced pests such as domestic cats, camels, dogs, pigs, donkeys and goats, run wild or at large, and also rabbits and foxes. Native animals or birds declared vermin throughout the State include dingoes and wedge-tailed eagles and the little plague grasshopper and Australian plague locust.

Other animals or birds are declared vermin in areas defined and limited in the declaration. These include white-tailed black cockatoos in some south-western shires; red kangaroos and euros in many pastoral districts; river wallabies in Kimberley shires; some parrots in a few districts; emus outside the South-West areas south of Perth and Northam, where they are protected; and galahs in a number of wheat growing districts.

The attention of some recent newspaper correspondents is drawn to dogs at large under the heading of vermin, and to the fact that there is no intention of removing sparrows from the prohibited list.

Rats and mice, which are commonly considered "vermin" in the broad sense of the term, are not included in the list. This is because they are considered primarily as a health danger to human beings and
they are dealt with by local health authorities under the general supervision of the Public Health Department.

While control of little plague grasshoppers in outer wheatbelt districts and of swarming locusts in agricultural areas is included in vermin control programmes, no other insect pests are dealt with under the Vermin Act. This will come as a surprise to many of the public who contact the Protection Board regarding Argentine ants, fleas, and so on. While grasshoppers and locusts were declared "vermin" in the early stages of their establishment in the State, the Department of Agriculture has a special section to deal with Argentine ants spraying and the Entomology Branch of the Department gives advice and information on insect control generally, including Argentine ants and fleas.

There has been some pressure lately for the Agriculture Protection Board to declare snails "vermin," but it is considered that no purpose would be served by this action. It would have the effect of making most people with home gardens subject to prosecution, and there are still problems associated with control techniques. The Vermin Act was not intended for purposes such as this, and some other approach should be used.

The declaration of all finches non-indigenous to Australia as vermin, is being reviewed following a world-wide survey of the pest potential of species kept for cage breeding. One suggestion which has been made is that the whole basis of declaring overseas potential pests vermin, should be changed by listing those animals and birds which may be brought in, rather than those which may not. This would have the advantage of covering situations where some potential pest animals or birds are found to be in the State, or someone wants to introduce them, and because of lack of previous experience or knowledge, they are not declared vermin. It could be too late by the time the legal machinery of a declaration is completed.

Western Australia's freedom from many of the pests introduced into other States and countries and progress in control programmes must be guarded jealously. In this respect, the "vermin" declarations have been remarkably successful. By careful use of declarations in a practical way and for the purpose intended, as well as by strict policing of the resulting requirements, there is no reason why this fortunate situation should not be maintained.

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