

PREFACE

‘No dog’s allowed in here, son!’ said the storekeeper to Roland Breckwoldt in a supermarket in Port Augusta.

‘That’s not a dog,’ claimed Roland in reply ... ‘it’s a dingo!’

‘That’s okay then.’

Such is life for this Australian icon. Friend and foe. We want to keep them ... but we also want to kill them. We want to hear their lonesome chorus in the evening, but we want to hear the trapper say, ‘I killed that dog that was pestering your sheep.’

Roland Breckwoldt was the first to publish the science and the speculation about both sides of the argument. After all, the dingo that killed the sheep deserves defence since it was possibly acting much like the sheep farmer and trying to provide food for its family. It is this competition that drives the controversial culture about dingoes, and it is only we humans that can make the choice to kill dingoes or to conserve them.

Two questions: 1) ‘did the dingo take the Chamberlains’ baby?’ and 2) ‘are there any pure dingoes left?’ are the most commonly asked by people when they find out I research dingoes. It is unfortunate, however, that after 40–50 years of dingo research in Australia those answers are all people seek, and that a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ is unavailable for both questions. I wasn’t born until exactly one year after the baby incident had hit the newsstands on 18 August 1980 so I can only provide comment using available literature about the event. The most plausible explanation for the first question, however, is that a wild dingo had become habituated in the area due to the frequency of human visitors. Azaria Chamberlain, the baby, was possibly murmuring or crying in the tent and one of the local dingoes seized her in the same way that they would if they found a lone or injured joey. Aborigines may have had similar experiences with thylacines and dingoes over millennia, thus creating the rule for their children to carry a firestick with them when they left the campfire at night. Apparently they would tell their kids that it would protect them from evil spirits, and in totemistic religions, evil spirits may take the form of an animal, much like the dingo.

Question two, however, has to be answered rhetorically: ‘What *is* a “pure” dingo?’