The violent-care of dingo conservation breeding

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Abstract
In 2019, a wild-born dingo pup named Wandi was taken from the Victorian high country to the Australian Dingo Foundation to become a part of their breeding program. Wandi was chosen because he was identified as a ‘rare’ ‘alpine’ dingo. At the point at which Wandi was handed over to the ADF, he became a captive dingo and will likely never be released. Wandi is one of thousands of dingoes who are bred and sold each year by the dingo breeding industry in Australia – both for zoos and wildlife parks to exhibit, and as privately owned ‘pets’. None of these dingoes can ever be released. Dingo captivity is often justified by dingo breeders as a necessary part of ‘essential’ conservation to combat the possible ‘extinction’ of the dingo. In this article, I question this assumption and demonstrate how it perpetuates and energises historically constructed distinctions between dingo ‘types’ (such as ‘alpine’ and ‘pure’). Here, I mobilise Thom van Dooren’s concept of ‘violent-care’ to better understand the contradictory ways in which dingoes experience life and captivity in Australia: ‘rare’ but a ‘pest’, charismatic and newsworthy but also imprisoned, evincing popular sentiments of affection and forced into captive breeding. I work with these contradictions every day as the founder of Sydney Fox and Dingo Rescue (SFDR). As dingo advocates, we have a responsibility to examine the violence dingoes experience as a result of captivity and the ‘logics’ and discourse that drive that violence, as van Dooren writes: ‘[w]hen the ‘logics’ that structure violence (or care for that matter) go unexamined, they become both invisible and commonsensical’ (van Dooren, ‘A Day with Crows’ 3).

Keywords
dingoes, sanctuaries, intersectionality, conservation

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Abstract: In 2019, a wild-born dingo pup named Wandi was taken from the Victorian high country to the Australian Dingo Foundation to become a part of their breeding program. Wandi was chosen because he was identified as a ‘rare’ ‘alpine’ dingo. At the point at which Wandi was handed over to the ADF, he became a captive dingo and will likely never be released. Wandi is one of thousands of dingoes who are bred and sold each year by the dingo breeding industry in Australia – both for zoos and wildlife parks to exhibit, and as privately owned ‘pets’. None of these dingoes can ever be released. Dingo captivity is often justified by dingo breeders as a necessary part of ‘essential’ conservation to combat the possible ‘extinction’ of the dingo. In this article, I question this assumption and demonstrate how it perpetuates and energises historically constructed distinctions between dingo ‘types’ (such as ‘alpine’ and ‘pure’). Here, I mobilise Thom van Dooren’s concept of ‘violent-care’ to better understand the contradictory ways in which dingoes experience life and captivity in Australia: ‘rare’ but a ‘pest’, charismatic and newsworthy but also imprisoned, evincing popular sentiments of affection and forced into captive breeding. I work with these contradictions every day as the founder of Sydney Fox and Dingo Rescue (SFDR). As dingo advocates, we have a responsibility to examine the violence dingoes experience as a result of captivity and the ‘logics’ and discourse that drive that violence, as van Dooren writes: ‘[w]hen the ‘logics’ that structure violence (or care for that matter) go unexamined, they become both invisible and commonsensical’ (van Dooren, ‘A Day with Crows’ 3).

Keywords: Dingoes, conservation breeding, sanctuaries, captivity
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(van Dooren, ‘A Day with Crows’ 3)

Introduction

Throughout 2019 and 2020, the story of ‘Wandi’ the ‘rare alpine dingo’ made headlines after Wandi ‘appeared to have been dropped by an eagle into the backyard of a Victorian home’ (Aldridge, 2020). The news story possessed everything needed to become a ‘viral sensation’ (Aldridge, 2020), an improbable delivery of a rare, fluffy, golden pup, a charismatic dingo, into a domestic backyard – a site of captivity and human dominion, the first of many for Wandi. Soon after Wandi was found, he was handed over into the care of the Australia Dingo Foundation (ADF), a Victorian dingo breeding facility. Wandi was DNA tested in order to assess his ‘purity’ and having met the necessary parameters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that Wandi was destined to become a part of the ADF breeding program (Aldridge, 2020). At the point at which Wandi was handed over to the ADF, he became a ‘captive dingo’. As a captive dingo, Wandi can never be released. Dingoes hold some type of pest status in almost every Australian jurisdiction; often legislated as ‘feral dogs’, their release from captivity is illegal.

Over the past decade there has been a growing push by dingo advocates and wildlife groups to define dingoes as ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’ fauna. However, the complicated origins of the dingo have meant that these efforts have largely been fruitless. In 2018 the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) removed the dingo from the Red List as an endangered species, determining dingoes to be feral dogs. Fossil evidence indicates dingoes have been present in Australia for at least 3,500 years (Fillios et al., 2012). A review by Fillios and Taçon (2016) suggested that while the exact translocation route of the dingo is unknown, the established trade routes between Indigenous communities in North Eastern Australia and regions
such as South Sulawesi, Papua New Guinea, India, Taiwan and Timor are all potential origins of the dingoes’ introduction to Australia. There is genetic evidence to support these theories with dingoes showing strong genetic relatedness to canids such as Papua New Guinea Singing Dogs and South East Asian domestic dog breeds (Aradalan 2012, vonHoldt et al. 2010). Other researchers such as Savolainen et al. (2004) and Sacks et al. (2013) have used Mitochondrial DNA and single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) to suggest introduction dates of 5,000-6,000 years ago. Since their introduction, dingoes have spread across Australia and are now present in all states and territories except Tasmania. It is these uncertain origins and arguably ‘non-native’ heritage that form the backdrop of Wandi’s story.

The circumstances of Wandi’s capture and subsequent captivity exemplify some of the devastating and wildly contradictory ways that dingoes experience life in Australia today: ‘rare’ but a ‘pest’, charismatic and newsworthy but also imprisoned, evincing popular sentiments of affection and forced into captive breeding. I work with these contradictions everyday as the founder of Sydney Fox and Dingo Rescue (SFDR), an organisation that does not exist to breed or exhibit dingoes but aims to rehome, rescue, treat and desex them. Here I will outline Wandi’s experience and those of other dingoes I have met, lived with, and cared for at my Sanctuary. Wandi’s case raises important questions about the legitimacy of captive breeding of dingoes, and whether it is in the best interests of the dingo and their ‘conservation’ as a ‘breed’. This case also points to how the definitions of ‘pure’ and ‘alpine’ dingoes are socially and historically constructed and how they underwrite conservation breeding efforts. While wild dingoes adapt and survive, captive breeding in the name of conservation continues to cause suffering to captive-bred individuals while also perpetuating the logic of breed purity that, in turn, fuels wild dingo eradication programs. Finally, Wandi’s case highlights the important role that dingo advocates could play in working towards an end to dingo captivity.
Every year thousands of dingoes are bred, sold and traded with relatively little oversight in New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, states which all allow the ownership of dingoes both by zoos and as privately-owned pets. Captive dingo breeding takes place in two main spaces: commercial facilities such as zoos and wildlife parks (where it is typically described as ‘conservation breeding’), and private breeders homes (often colloquially called ‘backyard breeders’). However, these two streams of breeding are interconnected both physically and ideologically, with dingoes moving between these two spheres of captivity. The majority of large dingo conservation breeding programs in Australia today are underpinned, both socially and financially, by the dingo pet industry. Furthermore, conservation discourse around captive breeding of dingoes shapes broader popular understandings around the need for dingo breeding and the value of dingoes as pets. One example of this multilayered relationship between conservation breeding and the pet market is Wandi’s new home, the Australian Dingo Foundation (ADF). This Victorian facility is a self-described ‘not-for-profit organisation designed to promote the conservation of the dingo’ (dingofoundation.org) Much of the support
for their breeding program is mobilised using language around extinction and the need to conserve wild dingoes:

‘In order to bring relief and a glimmer of hope to the survival of a species that if left alone, would thrive, The Australian Dingo Foundation was formed in 2006.’

‘The dingo is a unique, wild canid species that needs to be appreciated as a vital “cog”, for the functioning of the “wheel”, that is our Australian environment.’

The irony in both these statements from the ADF website homepage (dingofoundation.org), is that ADF have done everything but leave the dingoes species ‘alone’ or ‘wild’. For the past two decades ADF’s Victorian facility has bred and sold dingoes who will live their whole lives in captivity, whilst carefully manipulating their genetics through selective breeding and reproductive technologies (‘Dingoes Breeding Given a Boost’). The Australian Dingo Foundation website states that ‘Puppies [dingoes] are ready for new homes from mid-June to early October each year’ and ‘ordering’ of puppies should be done in January. A large proportion of the dingoes bred at the Australian Dingo Foundation each year are sold to private owners as pets (Hinchy, ‘A Dingo Ate Australia’), with some proven to have been illegally exported to overseas buyers (Bodkin, ‘Aussie Lyn Watson Accused of Dodgy Dingo Smuggling Ring’). Dingo pups not sold as pets are purchased by zoos, privately owned wildlife parks and other for-profit commercial facilities on an ‘order-type basis’ (Smith 283); none of them will ever be released into ‘the wild’. These types of thematic inconsistencies and mixed messaging have become common place in the world of dingo ‘conservation’ breeding.

Part 1: What Is a Pure ‘Alpine’ Dingo?

It has been my experience running a dingo sanctuary that most dingoes bred and sold as pets in Australia are labelled as ‘alpine’ dingoes. This also means the majority of dingoes abandoned, surrendered and euthanised in shelters and pounds are also alpine dingoes. ‘Pure’ alpine dingoes, as a discrete subtype, exist only in captivity, where dingo breeding facilities, zoos and backyard breeders are able to heavily regulate dingoes’ choice of sexual partners and control
their reproduction. Forced matings, artificial insemination (‘Dingoes Breeding Given a Boost’),
and human derived dingo pairings based on ideas about genetic compatibility, are forefront in
the type of ‘violent-care’ that characterises the dingo conservation movement. Thom van
Dooren defines violent-care as a process of human intervention into non-human animal lives,
occuring at the ‘dull edge of extinction’ (‘A Day with Crows’ 13) where individuals’ welfare
and lives are ‘abandoned or sacrificed’ (‘A Day with Crows’ 116) for continuity of a species
by conservationists.

As of today, SFDR have 26 alpine dingoes living at our sanctuary. These individuals are
survivors of what van Dooren has described as the ‘violent-care of captive life’ (Flight Ways 113).
None of them was born in the wild. All of them were bred in captivity (prior to coming to our
sanctuary) and all of them will die in captivity. Buckley (dumped at a rural pound), Luca and AJ
(seized from a backyard breeder), Tarka, Djarlu, Jibiru, Janarli, Tau and Maya (seized from a
private wildlife park), Tokai, Cobalt, Kimba, Sassy, Sonny and Harvey (surrendered ex-pets),
Lexi, Rocky, Rosa, Alec, CJ, Banjo, Dot, Gig, Bella, Henry, Pip (surrendered by backyard
breeders). In the last 12 months we have also rehomed 23 more alpine dingoes that have been
surrendered to us by their owners. Our shelter is always full. Many of these dingoes have
experienced such extreme violence or trauma in their former lives that they may never be
suitable for a home outside the sanctuary. We turn away many more dingoes than we are able to
help, and yet the large-scale breeding of alpine dingoes both commercially and in backyards
across Australia continues.

Why breed alpine dingoes? Van Dooren describes two criteria that act as reference
points for many modern conservation movements, ‘rarity’ and ‘nativity’ (‘A Day with
Crows’ 2). While the native status of dingoes is far from undisputed, from the perspective of
dingo conservation advocates, alpine dingoes possess both these key optics making them the
perfect candidate for a conservation breeding program. While far from rare in captivity (see
Smith), alpine dingoes in the wild have a very small native range which is under increasing threat
from urbanisation. Historically the term ‘alpine dingo’ has been used to describe a small number
of dingoes found primarily in mountainous regions of South-Eastern Australia, in particular the
Australian Alps which pass through Victoria, South-Eastern New South Wales and the Australian
Capital Territory. Dingoes in these regions often have a thick double coat, shorter muzzle and smaller stockier frame than dingoes in warmer more Northern and Western regions. It is however difficult to establish with any certainty that alpine dingoes are dwindling in numbers in the wild because there is no agreed upon genetic difference or means of conclusively differentiating alpine dingoes from other sub types, in particular the more widespread Central (Desert) dingoes. Dingoes from alpine regions regularly breed with other dingo subtypes in the wild, particularly Central dingoes. They also choose to reproduce with domestic dogs. The mitochondrial DNA of all dingo subtypes – alpine, central (desert) and northern (tropical) – is almost identical. ‘Alpine’, ‘central’ or ‘northern’ categories of dingo, as well as notions of ‘dingo purity’, are human constructs.

Biologists including Brad Purcell have acknowledged that it is often impossible to physically differentiate a ‘pure’ dingo and a dingo-dog hybrid (15-41). While still raising concerns about hybridity, Purcell reasons that the pure dingo is ‘a construct of human thought’ (30). Fiona Probyn-Rapsey expands on this concept, describing the way in which wild dingoes fail to recognise and adhere to the species boundaries and categories we humans ascribe to them (63). To fixate on dingo purity and the idea that dingo hybridization is akin to dingo extinction, is not only to deny the dingo autonomy over her choice of mate but also to erase a long history of dingo inter-breading with dogs before and after European settlement. Probyn-Rapsey has critiqued the way that ‘dingo birth’ (57) through ‘wayward’ reproduction (71) with dogs has been mobilized by humans to create myths of dingo extinction. She argues that ‘pure’ dingo is a creature constructed only through the conceptual link made between hybridity and extinction by dingo biologists (69-70). I would suggest that by the same logic that the pure dingo does not exist, neither does the rare alpine dingo. Alpine dingoes have become a proxy for human guilt and anxiety about both extinction and the messy ‘animalistic’ nature of hybridisation. When we try to deny the permeability of dingo subtypes, we create a value hierarchy, where some dingo lives are inherently more important than others. The majority of wild dingoes today live and die in the liminal spaces between these categories; pure/hybrid, alpine/central/northern. Wild dingoes are exercising their freedom to choose a mate and perhaps that is what ‘we’ humans, accustomed to managing dog ‘breeds’, cannot tolerate.
Part 2: Captive Dingo Breeding — Conservation and the Pet Industry

‘Breeding animals in captivity is in some sense breeding the wild out of the animal’ (Robert Loftin, 97).

Dingo advocates have a responsibility to examine the violence dingoes experience as a result of captivity and ‘logics’ and discourse that drive that violence. ‘When the “logics” that structure violence (or care for that matter) go unexamined, they become both invisible and commonsensical’ (van Dooren, ‘A Day with Crows’ 3). The idea of domesticating wildlife both as a potential conservation strategy and for the exotic pet trade is not unique to dingoes. Growing interest in the decline of certain Australian species has prompted some scientists to make a case to allow the sale and ownership of certain native species as pets. Archer (70-71), Hoopwood and Oakwood (365-375) and Chapple et al. (256-276) have all argued in favour of endangered native animals such as quolls being bred and sold as pets, in order not only to bolster overall population numbers but to change public perception of their worth or value. This approach to conservation has been strongly critiqued by Viggers and Lidenmayer, who raise a number of practical animal welfare concerns such as ‘stress-related and husbandry related diseases, problems with access to appropriate husbandry and veterinary care, and the potential for inappropriate breeding to select particular anatomical traits’ (131). Rosemary Collard takes this critique further, delving into the ethics of captivity. Collard argues that underpinning the exotic or ‘wild’ pet trade is a deeply ‘exploitative and uneven relationship between humans and animals’ (161) that is based on commodification of individuals bodies and lives. Collard argues that the erosion of an animal’s wildness entails ‘extraordinary degrees of violence and suffering’ (155), as animals like Wandi are disentangled from their social networks and instead become reliant on human-provided support:

captive life is harmful in multiple ways, largely because of the difficulty and even impossibility of re-creating animals’ social, intellectual, and dietary requirements. A spectrum of negative effects thus plagues captive animals: boredom, anxiety,
dysregulation, hypersensitivity to environmental change, uncontrollable aggression, self-inflicted wounding, post-traumatic stress disorder, malnutrition, disease, and death. (158)

All of these concerns are also relevant to the domestic ownership of dingoes as companion animals, and yet many dingo breeding facilities such as the ADF fund their ‘conservation breeding’ through the ongoing sale of dingo puppies as pets. Smith describes the sale of ‘pet’ dingo pups to ‘members of the public’ (283) by the Dingo Discovery Centre (AKA the Australian Dingo Foundation) as a ‘good source of income’ (283) for the continuation of facility’s breeding program. It is important to note that captive-bred or not, dingoes do not make ‘well behaved’, ‘docile’, domestic ‘pets’. Smith has noted a plethora of reasons for this including ‘they have a strong prey drive, are good at escaping and opening locks, are hard to train and difficult to socialise with humans.’ (263) These traits are what ensure dingoes a place as apex predators and safeguard their survival in the wild. But these traits are also antithetical with what many ‘pet owners’ consider the necessary behaviours for a good ‘pet’ and why so many dingoes find themselves surrendered to pounds and shelters. There are very few human families that might find themselves suitable to live with dingo companions. Firstly, such a family must include no prey animals like cats, birds, rabbits, sheep or goats that a dingo might consider food. Secondly, they must be willing to accept a dingo’s shy reclusive nature around strangers and their often incredibly destructive behaviour (particularly when they are young) such as excessive digging and chewing. Dingoes require continuous new forms of mental stimulation and large amounts of daily exercise. Combined with their ability to jump 7-foot fencing with ease, open latches and door handles and dig several meters underground to escape a yard or enclosure, the practical issues with keeping dingoes in a domestic setting become clear.

As well as the direct relationship between many dingo sanctuaries and zoos and the sale of dingoes as privately-owned pets, all conservation breeding of dingoes impacts the dingo pet market through discourse and ideology. While dingo conservation scientists rarely or at least rarely explicitly make a case for saving the dingo from extinction through ‘pet’ ownership, conservation discourse around the necessity for captive breeding of dingoes continues to shape broader popular understandings of the inherent value of dingoes as pets. One consequence of the
interconnected nature of conservation breeding discourse and the dingo pet industry is ‘backyard breeders’. These are often unaffiliated, amateur breeders, who may have purchased their pet dingoes from either a dingo breeding facility such as ADF or even a privately-owned wildlife park or zoo. These breeders typically have a very limited understanding of ecology and/or genetics, but also believe that through breeding their pet dingoes and selling their offspring that they are part of valuable efforts to conserve rare dingoes; I encounter many examples of this through my work with rescue dingoes. Some of the dingoes surrendered to Sydney Dingo Rescue who have been captive bred come from brother/sister, father/daughter matings and other forms of inbreeding that would never occur in the wild. This type of inbreeding and limited genetic variability from backyard breeding can lead to issues such as hip dysplasia and other genetic disorders. Considerable suffering and harm to dingoes takes place at these sites of backyard breeding, where hoarding and overcrowding is common, and at the subsequent, often inexperienced homes to which dingo pups are sold by these breeders.

In 2015, SFDR rescued six ‘alpine’ dingoes after they were surrendered by a backyard breeder at the direction of a Sydney council, after welfare complaints stretching back several years. When we arrived, we found 10 sickly-looking dingoes living in a tiny 60 metre square Sydney backyard with nothing but dust and a gutted car frame as shelter. There were empty plastic food bags littering the ground alongside a chewed-up kids’ paddling pool. I remember asking the former owner if any of the dingoes had ever been walked on a lead. He told me that except for Luca, who was chained to the front porch, none of them had left the backyard where they were born. A black carpet of fleas crawled up my legs from out of the hot dust as the owner told me how much he loved dingoes, and how important dingoes are to the Australian environment. As we loaded the emaciated dingoes into our car to take to our sanctuary, the owner again tried to explain his actions: ‘they’re going extinct you know … If we don’t keep breeding ‘em there’ll be no dingoes left’.

The mother of all the dingoes we rescued that day was allegedly born at Featherdale Wildlife Park and purchased by this backyard breeder several years earlier. Each year Featherdale Wildlife Park breed their dingoes and offer park visitors the opportunity to hold the dingo puppies for a paid photograph (Vesey, ‘Dingo Puppies Take Centre Stage’). At least some
of the park-goers believe that their money is going to fund dingo conservation. This is a common misconception amongst visitors to for-profit zoos and wildlife parks, who often fail to understand typical differences between legitimate sanctuaries and commercial animal businesses. Doyle states that the core mission of a true sanctuary ‘is to serve the individuals in their care by putting their interests first and foremost’ (58); this is deeply at odds with the goals of a commercial animal businesses, whose core mission is to generate profit. However, as public opinions shift toward more compassionate caring attitudes toward wild animals, it has become necessary for zoos and for-profit wildlife parks to create the illusion that they are invested in the welfare of non-human animals beyond their ability to generate profit. In large part this has been achieved by facilities such as Featherdale Wildlife Park through their claims about wildlife conservation. This mother dingo, allegedly born at a commercial wildlife park and subsequently used for backyard breeding, is just one example of the intersection where commercial breeding of dingoes and amateur backyard breeding collide. ‘Conservation’ is used here to license not only dingo breeding in zoos and wildlife parks (giving the false impression that the dingoes being bred at these facilities will perhaps one day return to the wild), but also for much less visible, private breeding for profit, often in deplorable conditions. Dingoes are not being released into the wild, they are living in tiny backyards, fighting over scraps to survive, while their owners claim to be doing ‘conservation’ work. In the case of dingoes, the word ‘conservation’ is now deeply implicated in cycles of violence cloaked in ‘care’.

Part 3: Wandi Will Never Be Wild Again

The conservation breeding movement as we know it today owes its origins in large part to a system of changes to national and international legal codes phased in throughout the 1970’s. These changes limited the ability of zoos and wildlife parks to remove wild animals from their habitats for the purposes of exhibiting them in captivity. This meant that in order to remain open, these facilities needed to begin ‘in-situ’ (captive) breeding programs (Braverman ‘Conservation without Nature’). Over time, in order to remain socially relevant and with the rise of conservation biology in the 1980s, zoos began to justify their breeding programs in terms
of sustaining ‘genetically diverse, demographically stable, and viable captive populations … that were to serve as assurance colonies should wild populations go extinct’ (Braverman, ‘Conservation without Nature’ 196). However, as Hutchins et al. note:

there are far too many endangered species and not nearly enough space to breed them all in captivity and, in many cases, far too little habitat remaining in which to reintroduce them. In addition, reintroduction programs are difficult and expensive, and they amount to treating the symptoms of species loss rather than the causes. (515)

Braverman also cautions us against seeing captive breeding programs such as those in zoos as arks especially given the suffering these programs often entail for individuals (‘Captive for Life’ 193). Van Dooren describes some of the many forms of violence the contemporary conservation breeding movement typically relies upon ‘abandonment, suffering, captivity, and killing’ (‘A Day with Crows 2), both of the species being conserved and of other sacrificial species that do not meet the criteria of ‘rare’ and ‘native’, such as non-natives and animals killed for food. Captive dingoes like Wandi are subject to all these forms of violence but here I will focus on captivity and suffering. Captivity is a form of violence we routinely inflict on non-human animals; it is perhaps the ultimate expression of human dominion over dingo bodies besides death. Captive-bred dingoes cannot legally or practically be released from captivity. Even for a wild-born dingo like Wandi, once he has been removed from ‘the wild’ he can never return home. At ADF Wandi will spend the bulk of his time living with his assigned female mate in a metal wire cage approximately three metres by nine metres in size with a plastic kennel for shelter and a single raised wooden bench. His cage is one of many matching cages laid out in neat rows to house the ADF’s pairs of breeding dingoes. Wandi has now become what Collard would describe as a form of biocapital (156), where his value as a commodity relies entirely on his ability to reproduce. Complete with electrified perimeter fencing, cleared and fenced outdoor areas for the dingoes to have scheduled exercise, and a visitors’ centre, the ADF property is reminiscent of a medium-security human prison.
In addition to the physical constraints of captivity, dingoes’ bodies are also controlled by complex, multilayered and often contradictory legislation both federally and at state and local council levels. Dingoes have some form of pest status in every Australian state. In New South Wales, for example, dingoes kept as pets are classed as domestic dogs. They must be registered with local councils and the regulation of their ownership falls under the NSW Companion Animals Act (1998) along with cats and dogs. As such, their welfare is governed by the NSW Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1979), which states that ‘a person shall not commit an act of cruelty on an animal’(Part 2, Section 5), where cruelty can be considered to be: inflicting pain on an animal, not providing reasonable care, control or supervision of an animal such as to prevent others committing acts of cruelty on the animal and not providing veterinary treatment’. Dingoes held by commercial facilities such as zoos and wildlife parks are also in theory held to the welfare standards of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, as well as animal exhibition policies regulated by the Department of Primary Industries (DPI). In contrast

‘The story of Wandi’, the Age, May 8, 2020. Online video news broadcast. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=871842356653260
to owned, captive dingoes, all wild dingoes in New South Wales are legally considered ‘wild dogs’ (Wild Dog Destruction Act 1921; National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974; Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995; Rural Lands Protection (Amendment) Act 1998) and landholders have an obligation to control and reduce their numbers using methods such as poison baits, shooting and trapping. Declared pest animals are legally exempted from the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. Under this tangled web of legislation and policy releasing a dingo/wild dog can be both considered ‘dumping’ a domestic pet, illegal under the Companion Animals Act, as well as ‘releasing a non-indigenous species’ a serious breach of the NSW Biosecurity Act (2015) carrying fines of several hundred thousand dollars.

The status of dingoes is no less complicated in other states; a brief summary regarding the state and territory-based legislation surrounding dingoes is given in table 1 below. Even within individual jurisdictions dingoes are subjected to a tangled web of legal definitions which often dictate whether they are protected or killed.

Table 1: Legislation Surround Dingoes

| State | Relevant legislation | Designation/s | Implications for dingoes |
|-------|----------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| SA    | Natural Resources Management Act 2004; Dog Fence Act 1946 | Dingoes; native dogs | Inside the ‘dog fence’: land holders required to control both dingoes and wild dogs. Outside the dog fence: dingoes are neither protected nor declared pests. |
| SA    | Dog and Cat Management Act 1995 | Dingo | Dingo ‘pet’ trade/breeding/ ownership is illegal. |
| QLD   | Rural Lands Protection Act 1985; Biosecurity Act 2014 | Wild dog, feral, introduced | Landholders required to control dingoes. Government bounties paid for dingo scalps. Dingo ‘pet’ trade/breeding/ ownership is illegal. |
| State  | Relevant Act/Regulation                                           | Legal Status Description                                                                                       |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| QLD    | Nature Conservation Act 1996                                    | Specifically excludes dingoes as common mammals (indigenous) Dingo protected only within some National Parks where they can still be controlled by Parks and Wildlife Officers |
| VIC    | Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994; Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 | Wild dog, introduced Wild dogs: landowners are required to control. Dingo are a threatened species. |
| VIC    | Wildlife Act 1975 and Order in Council 13/09/2013                | Refers to both wild dogs and dingoes Dingo are protected species except on private property or adjacent land when threatening livestock. |
| VIC    | National Parks Act 1975                                         | Dingo Dingo are protected within National Parks.                                                              |
| VIC    | Wildlife Regulation 2013                                        | Dingo A dingo may be kept, bred and sold by a member of the public with a paid license and approved enclosure. |
| ACT    | Nature Conservation Act 1980                                    | Dingo It is an offence to kill dingoes as a protected species                                                  |
| ACT    | Dog Control Act 1975                                            | Wild Dog Dangerous dogs may be destroyed                                                                       |
| WA     | Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976           | Wild dog Landholders required to reduce/control numbers where dingoes are causing damage.                       |
| WA     | Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007                 | Refers to wild dogs, dingo hybrids and dingoes as feral pests Landholders required to reduce/control              |
| WA     | Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016                               | Dingo, native species Dingo are considered a non-protected native species                                         |
| NT     | Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1993              | Dingo No obligation to control or protect dingoes.                                                             |
| TAS    | National Parks and Wildlife Act 1970; Dog Control Act 1987       | Refers to both wild dogs and dingoes Import of dingoes prohibited                                               |
Aside from the obvious legal concerns, many other issues stem from possible reintroduction programs for captive-bred dingoes. Jule et al. noted that most captive-bred large carnivores die if returned to their natural habitat (360). When reviewing forty-five different examples of carnivore reintroduction studies worldwide, Jule et al. found that the survival rate for animals such as wolves, bears, foxes and tigers and other species was on average just 33%. The most common causes of death were all human-related, closely followed by starvation. They concluded that ‘captivity negatively influences animals’ capabilities to survive’ and ‘and can result in a lack of appropriate “wild” type behaviours’ (361). This is supported by other research into behavioural variance in captive-bred animals by researchers such as McPhee. It is not difficult to believe that dingoes like Wandi’s descendants would face similar challenges if they could ever be released, particularly because of the ways in which the breeding has focussed on producing better ‘pets’.

Alpine dingoes today are bred in captivity for their ‘tractability’ (Lyn Watson, Australian Dingo Foundation). Tractability refers to traits that make them suitable as pets – traits that are often antithetical with the qualities and behaviours most needed for survival in the wild. The tractability of captive-bred alpine dingoes has increased over time and will continue to increase as dingo breeding facilities choose to selectively breed friendlier, more compliant individuals suited to life in captivity, potentially widening the behavioural gap between captive-bred dingoes and their wild counterparts.
Part 4: Working at the Intersections of Captivity and Sanctuary

‘Sanctuaries are the best we can do to make amends to animals humans have harmed. They are sites of hope but also of pain, of triumph over trauma but also of continued trauma, of new beginnings wrapped in an inescapable past and captive present.’ (Karen Emmerman, 215).

My own sanctuary, Sydney Fox and Dingo Rescue (SFDR) navigates the cultural and political terrain that surrounds dingoes on a daily basis. We advocate for wild dingo protection and an end to captivity whilst simultaneously promoting dingoes as companion animals (in order to rehome surrendered dingoes). Indeed, whilst we always try to encourage members of the public who find pups like Wandi to first try and reunite them with their families, we also care for and rehome a number of wild orphan dingo pups each year who, like Wandi, will remain as captive dingoes for the rest of their lives. Doyle argues that sanctuaries will always ‘run the risk of becoming a way for people to normalize and feel better about captivity’ (74). Every day at my sanctuary is a struggle to identify and reconcile the desires and needs of the individual dingoes with the practical elements of housing and caring for wildlife that cannot legally or practically be released. Emmerman has described captivity within sanctuaries as ‘a genuine moral dilemma that has no clear solution’ (223). This is to say that while there is no morally acceptable form of captivity, captivity within sanctuaries remains necessary. With this in mind, true sanctuaries have a responsibility to engage with and acknowledge the trauma caused by captive life and to actively work to end captivity rather than normalize it.

At present, my sanctuary SFDR runs a rehoming program for desexed rescue dingoes who can be adopted by suitable homes as companion animals. Whilst we have strict rehoming guidelines, the ethics of continuing this program are never far from my mind. Our decision to adopt dingoes from our sanctuary out to the public means that regardless of our good intentions, we are essentially participating in their continued commodification and traumatic captivity, in much the same way as dingo breeding facilities do. Our current rehoming program is driven by both practical considerations for space at the sanctuary and welfare considerations for the dingoes as individuals. The demand for space for new dingoes (predominantly ex-pets) in need
of help is continuous and overwhelming. Every day SFDR receives calls from members of the public wanting to surrender their ‘pet’ dingoes. Realistically we have space for 38 adult dingoes at the sanctuary. We are always at capacity (with 56 dingoes, puppies and adults currently in care); we also have a list of more dingoes waiting to come into care when space becomes available. Our rehoming program allows us to move dingoes out of the sanctuary and into suitable domestic homes, allowing us to rescue more dingoes who would otherwise be killed (by pounds or their former owners) or remain in unsuitable living situations. A domestic home for our rescue dingoes means that whilst they are still living with the trauma of ongoing captivity, they are able to experience more individual attention, enrichment and exercise with their human caregivers than we would be able to provide here at the sanctuary.

For most of the dingoes living at SFDR their only options were death or captivity. In the words of Miriam Jones describing her own sanctuary; ‘[w]e live in a world that requires the rescue of members of certain species because other members of our own species will hurt and kill them if we don’t; we do what we need to do, as ethically as possible, within the context of that reality’ (92). Jones describes the need within sanctuaries to strive for ‘free-feeling’ captivity (91), whilst acknowledging that ‘what we do is not the same thing as providing actual freedom to the people who live here’ (96). There are many ways in which dingo sanctuaries and dingo advocates can and should strive for more ‘free-feeling’ captivity and agency for dingoes, whilst also working to dismantle notions of non-human animal captivity. Firstly, even within spaces of captivity like sanctuaries, we can work toward granting greater agency to dingoes. We can provide large enclosures where the dingoes can choose whether or not they interact with humans and more than this, we can educate our volunteers and staff not to devalue dingoes who seek out conspecific company over human interactions and to never force human interaction upon the dingoes unless absolutely necessary. We can introduce the dingoes to many potential companions and let them choose which dingoes they would like to share their spaces with. Secondly, as long as we are rehoming dingoes and depicting dingoes as companion animals living happily in domestic settings, we also have an obligation to represent the suffering dingoes face as a result of captivity – to depict the dingo who is not happy with their confinement and who does not seek out human companionship.
Within conservation breeding discourse, love, power and possession have become intrinsically entwined when it comes to our affinity for the dingo. To ‘love’ a non-human animal is expressed through the desire to possess and contain them in order to ‘save’ them. The ultimate expression of love for a dingo has become proximal, a forced, unnatural closeness often achieved through the violence of captivity. Sanctuaries are all too often epicentres of captivity. It is our responsibility therefore to reframe and challenge this narrative of possessive, captive love and depict interspecies relationships in such a way that containment and proximity are no longer seen as necessary components of love and care. Sydney Fox and Dingo Rescue receive many messages each week from members of the public asking where they can see, ‘meet’ or otherwise interact with dingoes in captivity. SFDR have a policy of not exhibiting our animals and trying, as much as possible, to liberate them from the human gaze. We try to use our responses to these messages to explain why we do not support facilities such as zoos that exhibit dingoes and allow people to pay to interact with them. We do this primarily by reframing human-dingo interactions from the perspective of the dingo. Many dingoes are shy, reclusive animals who do not enjoy the company of strangers, meeting new humans (whether these humans are ‘dingo lovers’ or not) is a source of potential stress and anxiety for dingoes and does nothing to improve their welfare. Love for the dingo, as for any nonhuman animal, both as a species and as an individual should be based on respect and the desire for the greatest agency possible for them.

Finally, we can work toward ending dingo captivity by preventing captive breeding. All of the dingoes at SFDR are desexed. Whilst there is no denying that desexing is a violent medical intervention, as Emmerman points out, ‘[s]anctuaries ought not to be in the business of breeding more captive animals who will themselves experience lifelong captivity’(222). Over time we hope that widespread desexing of captive dingoes can and will lead to fewer dingoes living and suffering in captivity.
Conclusion

In this article I have argued that it is time we moved away from the current conservation rhetoric of violent-care. I have explored the way in which the false dichotomy between ‘pure’ dingoes and hybrids, as well as other dingo subtypes, has been used to fuel notions of a ‘dingo extinction crisis’ leading to prolific captive breeding. This is despite the incredible suffering this entails for individual dingoes and the fact that they cannot legally be released into the wild. Captivity is a form of trauma that has now been inflicted on generations of dingoes. I believe we have a responsibility to challenge this human desire for possession and mastery over animal bodies and animal lives. I have shown that sanctuaries, including Sydney Fox and Dingo Rescue, are not exempt from the need to critically examine what it means to keep animals in captivity. We must reflect on the incongruence between keeping and rehoming captive animals whilst striving for an end to captivity. To this end, I have outlined ways in which dingo sanctuaries can endeavour to create more free-feeling lives for captive dingoes whilst acknowledging that true freedom is not possible within sanctuary captivity. Looking to the future it is my belief that expressions of love and acts of advocacy on behalf of dingoes, and non-animal animals more generally, should not take the form of commodification and confinement but rather we should turn our efforts toward habitat protection and restoration, an end to lethal control methods like 1080 poison baiting and legal protections.
Notes

1 The South Australian ‘Dog Fence’ is a 5,400km stretch of fencing from the Great Australian Bight near Fowlers bay, bordering NSW and then Northeast across Queensland to the Darling Downs. It is intended to protect the South Australian sheep industry from dingoes.

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