



**CRUEL
TO BE
KIND**



Hunting for pleasure? Or hunting as a valuable contribution to society? **Felicity Carter** gets the “protector and caretaker system” in her sights.

WHEN YOU'RE FORCED to sit completely still on a wooden platform for four hours, looking out onto a recently ploughed field of corn, you develop a heightened appreciation for the natural world. The shape on the pole ahead suddenly becomes a glowering buzzard looking for dinner, while the rustling in the bushes turns into the sound of a four-footed animal.

“I hate that sound,” whispers Benjamin. “It makes me think something’s going to come and eat me.”

The fact that Benjamin’s hands are wrapped around a high-powered rifle doesn’t seem to reassure him. Nor does the fact that the landscape in front of us is hardly a wilderness from which ravening beasts are unlikely to spring. We’re perched in a field in Germany’s Rheinhessen region, one of the most domesticated landscapes in the world. To our right is a small patch of sunflowers. To the left is a wind farm, whose steel windmills turn slowly in the still twilight. Every now and then a car zips by, heading for Frankfurt, whose lights twinkle in the distance ahead. It’s hardly the setting for a primal struggle between man and beast, and yet that’s exactly what it is. Benjamin - who is happy to have *Fast Thinking* along, but who won’t give his name - is a highly trained sharpshooter, licensed to kill. Hidden behind the wind farm is his friend Kristine Bader, in a similar box.

This is hunting, German style. While many of the country’s 330,000 or so hunters can and do roam the great forests, making trophies from the game they shoot, just as many can be found sitting on German farmlands, waiting patiently with rifles. But it’s not just their presence so close to built-up urban areas that makes German hunters different. It’s their claim that they are an integral part of the German landscape,

helping to regulate and maintain the health of the natural world.

“All the big predators are gone,” explains Benjamin. “The wolves, the bears. There is nothing left to keep the foxes and other animals in the right balance.”

So the hunters claim they have stepped in to do the job. To get a licence here, potential hunters must spend up to 120 hours in training, learning animal husbandry, behaviour, biology and land care, sharpshooting skills and a study of age-old hunting customs, before undertaking a written and oral exam. Once they’ve gained the licence, hunters become part of the ‘heger and pfleger’ or protector and caretaker system, where they are expected to maintain the health of the animals and land in their hunting area. According to a 2002 study done by the German Hunter’s Association (DJV), hunters spend more than 40 million euros and carry out more than 70,000 habitat improvement projects every year.

Could there be a lesson in all this for Australia? Apart from the dingo, which poses a significant threat to sheep and cattle, Australia also has no top predators. But the continent does have a plague of feral animals that wreak havoc on the landscape and threaten native species. Why not set recreational hunters on them as part of an eradication program?

Since March 2006, accredited hunters have been allowed into 143 state forests and two crown areas in New South Wales, specifically to help control feral animals. According to the Game Council of NSW - who also coined the term ‘conservation hunters’ - the problem is so big it needs all hands on deck: there are 2.6 million feral goats, 7.2 million foxes, up to 23 million feral pigs, and 18 million feral cats roaming the country.

“Since we started hunting on public land, we’ve got about 4,500 licensed hunters and have shot close to 7,500 animals,” says Brian Boyle, CEO of the Game Council. “We’re developing some forest plans for specific animals, like the fox.”

Boyle says the Council is also helping farmers manage both the native and introduced animals that cause problems, and are mapping plans for dealing with deer in urban environments. “They cause road accidents,” he says. “In the last month there were 27 accidents in Wollongong.”

Boyle also says that hunters spend money in rural economies, bolstering regions hard hit by drought. He is aware of the system in Germany, and agrees it’s an enviable one, though he acknowledges that Australian hunters have nothing like the knowledge of animals or the environment of their German counterparts. “Hunters can be an integral part of land management, but it can’t be implemented overnight,” he says. “It’s been going on in Germany for more than three hundred years, where we’re looking at a generational change and educating new hunters as they come in.”

Kristine Bader, an editor in her early 30s, became a hunter because she was interested in conservation. She took *Fast Thinking* on a walk through the fields and vineyards surrounding her Rheinhessen house.

“This animal must have been three years old,” she says, stooping to pick up a jawbone lying on the ground and pointing at its teeth. Bader knows how to read bones, thanks to her hunter’s training. But she wasn’t sure how it got there - hunters don’t usually leave the remnants of their kill lying around.

With a population of 80 million, Germany has no wild land left, apart from the forests. Every strip of green land is in use, whether as a vineyard, a farm or



a designated recreation area. Even out here, in rural Rheinhesen, there's barely a patch of ground left to its own devices. It's not an environment for wild animals - except that they're doing fine, according to Bader. Behind one copse of trees is a henhouse, where the game birds know they will always find grain, scattered especially for them. A few metres away is a pole, which holds salt.

"It keeps the deer healthy," says Bader.

Later, when it's time to meet up with Benjamin and go hunting, Bader unlocks her steel gun cabinet and removes her rifle. The ammunition is kept separately, in a safe in the hall. Everything is packed away neatly in a carry case and laid in the boot of the car, because it's illegal to display firearms openly in the car. Benjamin is waiting for us outside his home, his rifle case slung over his shoulder.

As we drive, Bader and Benjamin point out the animals. For the life of me, I can't see what they're looking at.

"There are five of them," says Benjamin impatiently.

And suddenly, as though my eyes have come into focus, there are hares on the slope. Then we drive past the vines, looking for deer. Again, I can't see any until they point out an entire herd hiding between the vines. Finally, we get out and look under a bush. All my amateur eyes show me is a pile of dirt, but according to the hunters what I am looking at is a badger's set, a burrow which can run for miles underground. Badgers are hunted by sending terriers into the sets to flush them out. Neither hunter seems bothered by the idea of a wild animal being torn at by a dog, a reminder that this is, after all, a blood sport.

Australians in general are far less comfortable than Americans or Europeans with the concept of blood sports and making hunting more widespread would face stiff opposition.

"We're not opposed to the control of animals, whether they be native or introduced, where that is deemed to be necessary," says Dr Bidda Jones, chief scientist of RSPCA Australia. "But we are opposed to the hunting of animals for fun and entertainment."

She says she has no problem with commercial shooters, who aren't hunting for fun. "The difference between commercial and non-commercial shooting of kangaroos has a lot to do with competency training," she explains. "Commercial shooters are accountable. They have to shoot the kangaroo in the head or they will lose their licence."

Non-commercial shooters have a code of practice, but it's not enforced. "It's very difficult to enforce in Australia, where [all you have to do] to get a licence for a gun is filling in the form," says Jones. "While you have to get a licence for kangaroos, you don't have to demonstrate anything, even that you've read the code of practice."

Worse, Jones says hunters themselves are part of the reason Australia has such a problem with feral pigs and deer. Hunters have been known to release pigs and deer into new areas, to give them something to hunt. She's therefore sceptical about the idea of recreational hunting being for conservation.

Another sceptic is Ian Cohen, the NSW Greens' MLC who has been fighting to reverse the decision to allow recreational shooters in state forests. "I have no objection to a properly controlled cull," he says.

"But having a recreational hunter going out and having a go is not the answer. These are people with nine to five jobs without the inclination to go through the training."

Cohen says the 'conservation' hunters are so inept they have trouble reading maps, ending up shooting in the same areas as bushwalkers. "Last summer there was a guy out collecting firewood with his dog, when a shooter stepped out and shot his dog," he says.

Yet there are some signs that properly trained hunters can help reduce feral populations, such as reports from Victoria that suggest that hunters have reduced feral goat numbers in the You Yangs Regional Park and Murray Sunset Park by up to 25 per cent.

The key would be the level of training and enforcement imposed, both of which Cohen and Jones are dubious about. "These hunters aren't as interested in getting rid of feral animals as they are in being able to hunt," says Cohen.

And, in fact, even conservation groups in Germany are sceptical about the motives of German hunters. Conservation groups, such as the Komitee gegen den Vogelmord (The Committee Against Bird Slaughter), claim that the feeding of deer and pheasant is done to artificially boost their numbers, leading to forest damage. They also claims that the destruction of foxes, badgers and weasels is more to ensure that these animals don't damage the game, rather than any care for ecological balance.

Benjamin - who studied the writings of animal rights ethicist Peter Singer at university - agrees that the actual hunting is what he enjoys, and also because he likes the income he can make from selling fresh game meat to butchers.

"You know, a deer has a nice life until one day he comes around the corner and gets a bullet. He knows nothing about it," says Benjamin. "Why is that worse than eating something that has spent its whole life in a factory?"

Not that any of it matters in the end, because by the time night has fallen and we're so stiff with cold we can barely climb out of the hide, Benjamin hasn't managed to kill anything. Neither has Bader.

It's not until we're on the road back into town that we finally draw blood. There are mice darting all over the road, their eyes gleaming in the headlights.

"Dammit," says Benjamin after we hit one. "I hate killing things."

Killing things in a disorderly, random way, he means. Which is as German as you can get.

"Australians don't have the same attitudes," says Jones. "We have more the view that you should be able to do what you like on your own time."

But could hunters be made to undergo rigorous training and encouraged to turn their guns solely on feral animals? Maybe it's something worth thinking about. ★