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1887.

PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA.

RABBITS' DESTRUCTION ACT:

REPORT FOR 1886.

Presented to both Houses of Parliament by His Excellency's Command.



RABBITS DESTRUCTION ACT.

REPORT BY CHIEF INSPECTOR.

SIR,

I HAVE the honor to report to you the working of "The Rabbits Destruction Act" for the year ending the 30th June, 1887.

The rapid increase of the pest during the last twelve months is most marked and alarming for the future of this Colony, requiring to be dealt with promptly and energetically.

During the month of May of last year a meeting was held at the Town Hall, Hobart, under the auspices of the Southern Tasmanian Agricultural and Pastoral Society; the attendance was large, as might be expected when such an important subject was to be discussed—namely, "The best means to be adopted for the destruction of Rabbits throughout Tasmania." Delegates attended from most of the country districts, wherein meetings had been previously held to discuss and thoroughly sift the subject.

Much diversity of opinion was expressed as to the best mode of destruction; but the expression of the meeting was unanimous that the question had assumed such dimensions that it was of vital moment to the well-being of Tasmania, and must be grappled with.

The outcome of the meeting was that a Committee of practical gentlemen acquainted with the subject assembled; discussion ensued as to the measures that should ultimately take effect; after lengthy and mature consideration certain Resolutions were adopted. The Committee, by appointment, waited upon the Honorable J. S. Dodds, the then Attorney-General; the Chairman, J. Meredith, Esq., placed the decision arrived at before him, respectfully requesting to have a new Rabbit Destruction Bill prepared. The Minister fully recognised the importance of the question as affecting town and country, promising to place the views of the deputation before his colleagues at an early date. This action resulted in the new Rabbits Destruction Act being presented to Parliament. Unfortunately for Tasmania, the Bill was not passed into law: consequently the Rabbit Act of 1882, with the subsequent amendments, is still in force, but without the machinery in the shape of a sufficiently large staff of Inspectors to carry out the provisions strictly.

I may inform you that I was called upon, in December, 1886, to reduce the staff of three inspectors to two; consequently I reluctantly intimated to Mr. Malcolm W. Harrison, he being the junior inspector, that his services would not be required after 31st December. This step was considered necessary in consequence of the Scab Act Fund available being insufficient to meet expenditure. I am exceedingly sorry to be deprived of the services of this officer, who has performed good work for the Department, and trust he will shortly be reinstated.

This course of action has up to this date left Southern Tasmania without supervision, and all the good that had been effected up to 31st December last is now undone.

Since my Report of last season there are many converts to the poisoned grain method of destruction on some of the large estates in the Midland Districts; the deaths resulting from this mode are most gratifying.

I feel convinced that wire netting erected to limit the area over which it is desired to do effective work must precede whatever ultimate action an owner of land adopts for extermination of the pest. This, with phosphorised grain laid to first clean off the thick of the rabbits, and continued so long as the vermin will take the bait, to be followed by any known effective mode of destruction, the reduction of rabbits could be surely attained.

I desire to point out one most objectionable system that is now recognised as effective to destroy rabbits,—viz., the paying men to trap on properties, and receive remuneration at so much per dozen skins, large and small. The method is simply encouragement to rabbit farming, and the employment of roving labour is most objectionable.

I suggested when addressing meetings at Bothwell and Hamilton, that instead of adopting this practice, owners of land should employ men permanently in this way; viz.,—in the old days of scab, now happily a thing of the past, settlers had upon their establishment shepherds to look after sheep running over so much ground. They will now have to revert back to those days, and employ men to destroy and keep down rabbits over certain defined areas of land. If the pest is not reduced and kept down, discharge your man, and find those who will perform the work to your satisfaction. Remunerate the man or men at a rate to be fixed per week. When the run is clean the labourer will know that his work is less, and that his employment does not cease with the reduction of the vermin, but will be stimulated to increased vigilance to keep his run free, and will not quietly suffer it to be again overrun with neighbours' rabbits. This, in my idea, is the solution of this difficult question, having for its watchword—permanent employment, with rabbits reduced to a minimum, *versus* roving labour and rabbits increasing.

I am aware that the method above proposed is open to criticism, and is directly opposed to those I have heard advocated by gentlemen who are large landed proprietors, no doubt wishing for the destruction of rabbits, but who are much enamoured of and favour the scalp system.

This mode points directly to a vote of money from the Consolidated Revenue, which, even if granted, would leave the desired end unattained.

I have to inform you the experience of this scalp system has proved its utter failure in South Australia, New South Wales, and New Zealand. I hope the Government will not consent to follow in the footsteps of these known and recognised failures.

I cannot divest myself of the opinion I have always held upon this important question. I hold that the landowners throughout the Colony must kill and destroy rabbits on the private lands at their own expense, and that the expense of destruction upon the waste Crown Land must be defrayed out of a vote of money from the Consolidated Revenue for that purpose. The adjoining Colonies recognise this important fact, and vote money for the Crown Estate.

I beg to suggest that wire-netting, phosphorus, phosphorising machines, and bi-sulphide of carbon, all used for the destruction of rabbits, be admitted into the Colony free of duty. South Australia admits wire-netting for erecting rabbit-proof fencing free of duty, when formerly 30s. per ton was paid upon this article; that Government also carry the netting at half freight over their own line of railways, thus offering every facility to limit the area over which rabbit destruction is to be carried on with the view to exterminate the pest: this assists the squatter to cope with the evil, and to increase his income, and it also adds largely to the Revenue of the Colony.

Whatever is the outcome of the influential meetings that are being held throughout the country districts, one fact is patent, that owners are now becoming alive to the annual loss they are sustaining, not only in loss of sheep, wool, and lambing per-centages, but from the destructive effects rabbits have upon the carrying capacity of their lands. The herbage is surely disappearing, the land becoming poisoned by the excreta of the rabbits; this alone should be a strong incentive to the passing of a stringent Rabbit Act, which must contain clearly defined sections securing compulsory and simultaneous action, with power allowing Inspectors to enter upon land of the negligent and careless owner to destroy rabbits at the cost and risk of the owner, who shall pay all expenses so incurred. I am warranted in stating that a very large majority of pastoral owners, also agriculturalists, are strongly in favour of a most stringent law being passed. I have now in the office of this department correspondence from all parts of the Island calling my attention to the increase of the pest in agricultural districts. In the north of the Island—and, I may say, the granary of the Colony—serious statements have been made to me respecting the increase of the rabbits as tantamount to the abandonment of farming operations: yet it is in this locality that certain gentlemen assert that the rabbit is a boon to the farmers, as affording sport and a table luxury; a statement of this character seemingly carries more weight than the injury farmers sustain from the ravages of the rabbits. One large farmer in this northern district writes that when he commenced poisoning this season he must have had upon his property "the boon in the shape of rabbits to the extent of 100,000." I should say the luxury in this case is more than complete, and that now legislation of a stringent character must be adopted to suppress this rabbit nuisance without trifling with the subject any longer.

The rapid increase of rabbits in the south of the Island, now that there is no Inspector to see that action is taken to cause their destruction, shows conclusively that, without the necessary staff to supervise, rabbits will take the place of sheep and agriculturists. This being the case, I shall, in my report under "The Scab Act," furnish estimates, and ask for an increased staff of Inspectors, so that the infested lands can be successfully dealt with.

I beg to draw your attention to the Report of the Australasian Stock Conference, held at Sydney in September and October, 1886, page 69, in which will be found some very interesting information on the subject of rabbits' destruction.

I have the honor to be,
Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

THOMAS A. TABART, *Chief Inspector.*

The Hon. P. O. Fysh, Chief Secretary.

The Custom House report shows the number and value of rabbit skins exported as under :—

	Rabbit Skins exported.	Value.
1883.....	1,735,857	£20,367
1884.....	1,730,626	£14,537
1885.....	2,872,896	£22,572
1886.....	1,184,862	£7400