



Speech by

Hon. R. WELFORD

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

Hansard 21 October 1998

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT
DNA Wildlife Typing Project

Hon. R. J. WELFORD (Everton—ALP) (Minister for Environment and Heritage and Minister for Natural Resources) (9.43 a.m.), by leave: One of the greatest threats to our natural heritage is the illegal trading of wildlife. Rare and threatened species are being taken from the wild by unscrupulous and unprincipled people, kept for breeding purposes, or traded illegally within Australia or overseas. All Australians would agree that this type of criminal activity is an affront to the very core of our national being and a real threat to the richness and diversity of our wildlife—wildlife which needs our protection today for tomorrow's generation to enjoy.

I am pleased to inform the House that Queensland will lead an Australian-first trial of world-class technology to protect our wildlife against these cheats. Taking advantage of the most scientifically advanced methods yet available, our Government is introducing genetic typing, or DNA fingerprinting, of animals as part of Australia's toughest measures against this illicit trade.

The State Government has entered into an 18-month contract with the Queensland University of Technology's School of Life Sciences to provide these new measures. We are placing these wildlife cheats on notice. The Government is providing total funding of \$95,000 this financial year for this project, including the salary of a full-time research scientist to further advance the technology. This project is initially concentrating on four bird species classed in Queensland as restricted and kept by specialist recreational wildlife licensees. These birds are the golden-shouldered parrot, the red-tailed black cockatoo, the yellow-tailed black cockatoo and the glossy black cockatoo. Various other varieties on the Opposition benches will not be protected. Like many of our unique birds, they are potential targets in the illicit wildlife trade.

The project will later be extended to focus on the rare green python, which can also be kept by specialist recreational wildlife licensees. In Australia, this rare snake is found only in northern Queensland and related species are found in some parts of Papua New Guinea.

By commencing this trial with recreational keepers, the Government is not implying these keepers are criminals. On the contrary, most are ordinary Queenslanders who go about their chosen hobby with full respect for their animals and the law. These procedures will, however, enable this Government to free recreational keepers of the small minority of cheats who operate amongst them. Under this trial project, licensed keepers will be required to take these species to a veterinarian where, in the presence of departmental officers, trace samples of blood or scales will be taken for scientific typing at the Queensland University of Technology. At the same time, the animals will be electronically tagged, providing a method of tracking their whereabouts.

The samples sent to QUT will be used to create a unique genetic type for each individual animal. Using these DNA fingerprints, the scientists will develop a database that will enable checks to be made on protected wildlife claimed to have been bred in captivity or purchased legally. In the first round of sampling, it is estimated that DNA material will be isolated from around 400 animals in the target group.

The real benefit will occur in the next breeding season, when we will have a foolproof method of ensuring that eggs or chicks are not stolen from the wild illegally. If, for example, we have a claim from a licensed keeper of extraordinary success in breeding the green python, we will have a foolproof method of checking this claim by referring to the DNA database. Similarly, if we apprehend a person in

possession of one of the target species, we will be able to use the DNA fingerprinting to verify the origin of the animal. With further time and work, it is possible that even the geographic origin of a particular animal could be determined using this technology. This combination of DNA fingerprinting and electronic tagging is supported by far-sighted legislation introduced in 1994 by the previous Labor Government, which makes it mandatory for specialist recreational keepers to present their animals for sampling.

Since this project was announced, I am pleased to inform the House that we have been contacted by the Commonwealth who have expressed interest in establishing a national database of rare and restricted species. The establishment of such a national database would create possibly the most far-reaching deterrent against wildlife thieves and smugglers ever seen in this country.

Queensland and, indeed, Australia has some of the most sought after and unique species of wildlife in the world. Despite the best efforts of our State wildlife enforcement officers, our Federal Police and customs services, it has always been difficult to detect and stop illegal trade. These advanced scientific methods being trialled in Queensland by the Beattie Government are a significant contribution to long-term solutions to protect our natural heritage.
