

# The fox that never was – fantastic tale of a 13-year hoax

## Australia

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A £27 million fox hunt in Tasmania has emerged as one of the world's longest, most expensive and wildest of hoaxes.

The Australian island state spent A\$50 million (£27 million) and more than a decade hunting foxes after wildlife officers believed rumours that hunters had smuggled fox cubs from mainland Australia to establish colonies in Tasmania.

The state has long prided itself on being free of foxes, and a haven for birds and small mammals eradicated on mainland Australia by predators introduced by settlers from Britain. When, in 2001, word reached the government of a late-night pub conversation that three hunters had sneaked 19 cubs on to the island and released them, Tasmania's great fox eradication programme began.

Tonnes of poison baits were placed, teams of hunters assembled and the island's population of 500,000 were urged to scour the island for foxes.

More than 3,000 sightings flooded in. By 2012, more than 10,000 samples of possible fox droppings had been collected across the island — and scientists had determined that 56 were probably from the animals.

When four dead foxes were found —

two beside roads, one near a chicken coup and one allegedly shot by a hunter — the hysteria on the island increased. So did the spending.

However, none of the Government hunting teams shot a fox. None was poisoned by the baits and as the hysteria died down, so did the sightings.

Now a scientific review panel has determined that the foxes never existed. Australia's leading fox expert, Clive Marks, who chaired the panel, said: "Here is an example where you can propose that something exists, when it doesn't. And if you follow that narrative with a suitable amount of media and spin-doctoring, you can get a good proportion of people believing it."

No evidence of fox activity was recorded near where the dead foxes were allegedly found. Droppings previously identified as those from foxes may have been from dogs. The panel concluded that flawed science, mass fox hysteria and hoaxers who imported dead foxes were behind the hunt for the fox that never was.

However, one sighting is not disputed. Sixteen years ago, workers saw a male fox jump off a ship — but being single and outside the breeding season, he is unlikely to have established a colony.

Tasmania's new conservative government has now suspended the hunt.