

Public Administration Committee

From: Craig Halsted
Sent: Tuesday, 25 March 2014 10:51 AM
To: Public Administration Committee
Cc: Anne Fergusson-Stewart; Mazza, Rick
Subject: Public Commission Committee - Inquiry into the potential environmental contribution of recreational hunting on public lands.
Attachments: AWC re feral animal control.pdf

For the Attention of :

Ms Lauren Mesiti
Committee Clerk
Public Administration Committee
Legislative Council
GPO Box A11
Perth WA 6837

Dear Sir/Madam,

Inquiry into the potential environmental contribution of recreational hunting on public lands

My view on this matter is as follows:

- The controlled use of recreational hunting on public lands is a simple, no-cost tool, for the control of pest animals.
- One of the best ways to determine the prevalence and impact of pest animals on more remote areas is through "feet on the ground", which recreational hunters would happily supply at no cost.
- An initiative such as hunting on public lands would clearly need to be controlled but this is neither a difficult nor untried task. In other states and territories and for that matter, in other countries, controlled hunting is undertaken on public lands with very positive results. (For those members of the committee who might not be too familiar with recreational hunting, public land is where, by and large, the common man engages in his pursuit. This is in much the same way that the common recreational fisherman engages in his particular pastime; by fishing on public waters, rivers and oceans.)
- An additional benefit of recreational hunting on public lands is that hunters spend money in areas which are often relatively remote; they buy fuel and food at local road houses, stay in motels and caravan parks, make purchases from local shops and generally use local services.
- Often, the man in the street does not have access to areas on which to hunt and public land would provide him with such access. Otherwise, the cultural benefits of hunting are simply out of his reach, as he may not know a farmer or station owner who will give him permission to hunt. The bonding benefit of hunting in the company of one's young son or daughter cannot be overestimated and the knowledge and confidence that young people gain from simply being in the bush is considerable.
- The question of the ethics of hunting will, no doubt, be brought into this inquiry and it is a debate which is almost impossible to be held without a high degree of emotion. On one hand, one group will say that hunting is cruel and inhumane and on the other hand, the other group will say that hunting and gathering is deeply ingrained in the DNA of *homo sapiens* and that it is what we do and have done as a species for 150,000 years. Irrespective of the philosophical points of view, the

target animals in this instance are feral, pest species. There is no question that they are endangered and by a large, they have a highly negative impact on native, endangered fauna. For example, a "sweet" feral cat must eat at the very least once a day and this little cat will invariably eat an endangered marsupial or native bird. The same logic applies equally to foxes and wild dogs, which play havoc amongst native animals. Feral herbivores such as camels, donkeys and goats are often to blame for loss of habitat and this translates into a loss of native species. (Please see the attached articles from the summer 2013/14 edition of Australian Wildlife Conservancy's magazine "Wildlife Matters".)

- As unpalatable as it might be to the anti-hunting lobby, it has been proven time and again that true hunters are among the best conservationists, as they deeply understand that, if they want their grandchildren to experience the same wildness and outdoor experiences that they enjoy, then wilderness, native bush and pristine habitat needs to be preserved.

In summary, there is a solid case for recreational hunting on public lands. It goes without saying that it should be controlled in a responsible way, as one clearly cannot allow a "free for all" to develop. That hunters are excellent conservationists is not an oxymoron; true hunters make great conservationists, as they know that they need to protect and nurture the wilderness that they love. Finally, there is no question here of the target species being endangered as they are feral, pest animals which do far more harm than good.

Yours sincerely

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Craig E. Halsted

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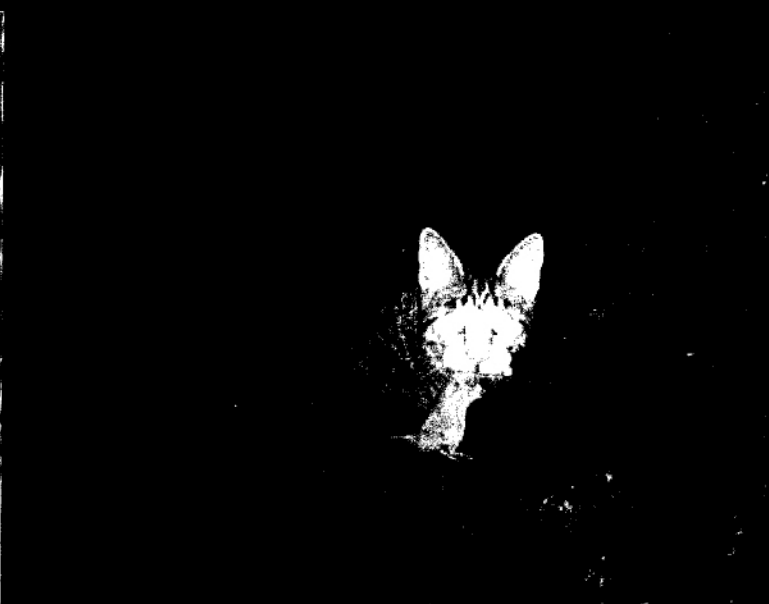
Reducing the impact of feral cats



Catahoula hound Brangul *W Lawler*

Feral cats kill an estimated 75 million native animals every night. Along with feral herbivores and wildfires, feral cats are driving the decline and extinction of native animals across Australia. Through our integrated program of targeted research and practical land management, AWC is leading the way in developing a strategy to reduce the impact of feral cats.

What single outcome or achievement would deliver the greatest benefit for Australia's native wildlife? While there are a range of factors driving the decline in our wildlife, all of which must be addressed, it is unlikely any single outcome would deliver a greater benefit than the removal of feral cats from our landscapes. Sadly, however, it appears Australian Governments are yet to fully recognise the importance of feral cat control. For example, in August 2013, the Federal Government announced over \$80 million worth of environment funding from two major programs (Caring for Country and the Biodiversity Fund) - none of it was directed at feral cats.



A camera trap captures a feral cat that has killed a small native mammal

In the meantime, AWC and our partners are continuing our quest to develop an effective strategy for reducing the impacts of feral cats. One of the key people in this effort is Hugh McGregor, based at Mornington, who is now in the final stages of his PhD examining the behaviour and ecology of feral cats. Supported by the team at Mornington, Hugh has now captured and radio-collared nearly 50 feral cats – representing the largest feral cat research project ever undertaken in Australia.

Hugh's research aims to unlock the secrets of cat behaviour – identifying how and what they kill, how they use the landscape and what factors affect their hunting efficiency. The answers will help us develop effective strategies for reducing the impact of cats by managing the landscape in ways that reduce the efficiency of their hunting and, over time, by helping devise a way to remove cats from the landscape.

The analysis of GPS data from the radio-collared feral cats is revealing startling new discoveries about feral cat behaviour. Hugh has been able to identify patterns of movements of hunting feral cats and relate those movements to fire and grazing by feral herbivores. The data shows that cats are capitalising on the effect that wildfire and feral herbivores have in reducing ground cover and exposing small mammal populations. In order to reduce the impact of cats, effective management of fire and feral herbivores, to protect ground cover in particular habitats, is critical.

The key to Hugh's success has been the ability to capture live cats in order to fit the radio-collars. Around towns and cities, cats are familiar with humans and will often enter traps. However, in the wild, feral cats are much more wary and extremely difficult to entice into traps. We needed an alternative way to catch cats ... which is where Sally and Brangul come in.



Hugh McGregor fitting a radio-collar on a cat W Lawler



Trapped in a tree by Sally and Brangul W Lawler

Sally and Brangul are Australia's premier feral cat detector dogs. They have been specially trained to detect and follow the scent of a feral cat and, after locating the cat, chase it up a tree. Once the cat is up a tree, we use a dart rifle to deliver a small amount of sedative before catching the cat as it falls into a trampoline.

Sally is the leader: she is a Springer Spaniel who is clearly passionate about her work. Sally is elated if successful in a cat tracking task, while often sulky if not. She lives for catching cats. Brangul is her back-up. She is a Catahoula hound, with an excellent nose and a very methodical approach. If Sally loses the cat in the excitement of the chase, Brangul's job is to work out whatever trick the cat has played and refocus the hunt. The two dogs make a great team.

Word of Sally and Brangul's achievements have spread rapidly. Recently, the ranger team from the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area (western Arnhem Land) sought their assistance.

As part of a collaborative project with the NT Government, funded by the National Environment Research Program, the ranger team wanted to put GPS collars on feral cats in order to collect data which will help the evaluation of their feral cat control measures. In September this year, Hugh, Sally and Brangul made the trip across to Arnhem Land to work with the Warddeken Rangers.

After three nights of spotlighting, the first cat was detected. Sally made a valiant 500 metre high-speed track through the dark but lost the cat when it doubled back at a dry creek bed. Just when it appeared the cat had evaded capture, one of the rangers gave a whoop of delight - Brangul had done her cat-sleuthing magic and was sitting calmly at the base of a tree containing a big black cat.

With one radio-collared cat under their belts, the rangers, Hugh and the dogs spent a few fruitless nights searching for more cats. One cat was detected but eluded the dogs by hiding in a cave amongst the classic Arnhem Land outcrops. Sally and Brangul were just too big to fit in the cave ... and the cat knew it. Eventually, at 3am on the last night, the team located another cat. Sally pursued the cat with her usual passion and forced it up a tree. Hugh describes it as the biggest feral cat he has ever seen. It was darted, collared and released. Since then, the Warddeken Rangers have remote-downloaded data from the collar, revealing a home range size that is much bigger than any of the cats at Mornington, possibly reflecting a lower prey density there.

Watch out for more updates on our other feral cat related projects in the next edition of *Wildlife Matters*. In the meantime, thank you to all our supporters who have contributed to our feral cat program. Hugh's work is largely funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council. The Northern Australian Hub (part of the National Environmental Research Program) supported the expedition to the Warddeken IPA, as well as other elements of AWC's science program.



Hugh McGregor with Warddeken Rangers and feral cat in Arnhem Land T Mahney

Delivering regional feral herbivore control



Mustering feral cattle at Marion Downs Wildlife Sanctuary T Barton

Australian Wildlife Conservancy has already established two large herbivore-free areas on mainland Australia at Mornington (Kimberley) and Wongalara (on the edge of Arnhem Land). In the first half of 2014, construction of a fence at Pungalina-Seven Emu will create an 80,000 hectare feral-free area of coastline along the Gulf of Carpentaria. These projects – the three largest feral herbivore-free areas on the mainland – are part of an integrated approach to feral herbivore control across all AWC properties.

Intensive feral herbivore control across 850,000 hectares of the central Kimberley

In October this year, we commenced the next phase in a project which will deliver intensive, ongoing feral herbivore control across 850,000 hectares of the central Kimberley. The project area straddles three AWC sanctuaries: Mornington, Marion Downs and Tableland. Tableland is managed as part of a partnership with the Yulmbu community.



AWC staff and Yulmbu community develop fencing and mustering plans D Swan

This project builds on the completion of a feral herbivore-free area of more than 40,000 hectares in south-western Mornington. The removal of feral herbivores from this area resulted in a doubling of small mammal numbers – given the dramatic declines in small mammal numbers elsewhere across northern Australia, this provided an unambiguous scientific case for the removal of feral herbivores.

An adjacent area of 50,000 hectares, the top of the mesa-like Baulkface Range, was destocked in 2011. This year, AWC land managers and our indigenous ranger team, comprising members of the Yulmbu and Tirralinjti communities, have delivered substantial additional progress through a combination of fencing and mustering:

- 60,000 hectares of northern Mornington has been substantially destocked, with 850 feral herbivores removed.
- On Tableland, over 2,000 feral herbivores have been removed, with a focus on cleaning up the Chamberlain Valley. A small managed cattle herd will be established, contained behind wire, for the Yulmbu community.
- On Marion Downs, 1,500 feral herbivores have been removed and 40,000 hectares destocked.

In the next 2-3 years – subject to funding – we will complete the task of implementing intensive feral herbivore control across the full 850,000 hectare project area. Covering a large proportion of the upper catchment of the Fitzroy River, this massive feral herbivore project is likely to set a precedent for regional feral animal control in northern Australia. Integrated with our regional fire management program (EcoFire), the benefits for a range of species – particularly vulnerable guilds such as small mammals (e.g. Northern Quoll, Pale Field Rat), seed-eating birds (e.g. Gouldian Finch) and riparian specialists (e.g. Purple-crowned Fairy-wren) – will be substantial.