



The first camel in Australia was imported from the Canary Islands in 1840. Since then, camels have taken very successfully to Australia's deserts and rangelands. Hans Boessem

New tactics for the camel plague

Camels have no Dreaming, say Aboriginal people; they don't belong in country. But more than a million camels roam through much of central Australia, and next year there will be 80 000 more as the population doubles by the decade.

In December 2008, camel researchers gathered in Canberra at the 2008 *Camel Science Conference* to come up with a national management plan.

Jan Ferguson, Managing Director of the Desert Knowledge CRC, launched the report 'Managing the impacts of feral camels in Australia: a new way of doing business', and a program of speakers detailed their research.

Professor Murray McGregor, one of the lead authors of the report, has strong views about the damage feral camels are doing. He also sees the potential for the creation of livelihoods for Aboriginal people.

'While a developed camel industry will be an important component in managing Australia's herd,' says Professor McGregor, 'it will only have a minimal impact on the damage that camels are doing. As a country we need to make a hard decision about whether we want to protect our natural resources and the oldest living culture in the world or allow feral camels to seriously impact both.'

The camel debate has familiar elements. Much of the strategic thinking could apply to carp, rabbits or brumbies. The one certain conclusion of the conference is that there is no silver bullet – no one remedy for a country-wide problem. Delegates heard about helicopter-borne sharpshooters, immuno-contraception,



Mauled to camel height. The plague is significantly damaging native ecosystems.
Dylan Ferguson

poisons, biological control and improved fence design.

An overriding concern is that control mechanisms must be 'humane' and not cause any suffering to the target animals. 'Remedies' such as camel pox or cyanide are ruled out in Australia for animal welfare reasons. Camel pox, for example, which has decimated herds in other countries, can cause painful lesions on the face and mouth of the animals, preventing them from eating or drinking.

A key emphasis of the conference was on management to reduce impacts rather than attempts at eradication. This recognises that camels are in Australia to stay, that they are numerous and widespread, and – importantly – that reducing camel density has to be at a national scale. Meeting routine requirements like differing state and territory firearms regulation can become a nuisance for a coordinated control program. Programs have to be supported by coherent national legislation dealing with basic matters such as who actually *owns* the camels which roam so free.

The Canberra conference attracted media attention, and Professor McGregor and wildlife ecologist Glenn Edwards spent hours being interviewed and on talk-back radio. Their conclusion was that Australians are interested – not in dramatic stories of desert settlements ravaged by hordes of thirst-crazed camels, but in the potential for camel meat in the modern kitchen.

Even this has its legislative problems. Camel meat for human consumption has to be processed by a legally recognised abattoir (unlike buffalo meat, for example, which is classified as 'game' and can be sold as the product of hunting). There are only two abattoirs in Australia currently processing camels, so, however dietetically desirable, eating camel is hardly going to make a dent in the estimated 400 000 animals 'surplus to requirements'.

Collaboration, the report highlights, is the only approach to management of camel plague that will ultimately be successful – cross-jurisdictional, cross-tenure, cross-boundary and cross-sectoral, involving Aboriginal land managers, pastoralists and conservation land managers.

● **Nick Goldie**

More information:

Report and recommendations, www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au/news/media.html