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New tactics for the camel plague

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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, 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: