

Dr 'Piggy' Pavlov



Cape Trib's Lone Ranger

As New Year's Eve dawned on the lowland rainforest of Queensland's deep north, Dr Peter Pavlov noticed a trademark plastic bag nailed to a tree. Inside was a freshly shot flying fox and a note: 'Pavlov, you're next'.

It was the third such package left for the scientist who calls himself Piggy.

After two decades of feral pig research, a dearth of funds tempted Pavlov to become the Douglas Shire Council's first cassowary conservation officer last July.

With his pay partly drawn from Daintree River ferry levies and his tasks including enforcement of dog by-laws between the river and Cape Tribulation, he is about as popular as a leech in some quarters.

Previously, dog control north of the Daintree was non-existent. Indeed, Pavlov's surveys reveal that of the area's estimated 250 dogs, just one third is registered. Most are unrestrained.

Administering the by-laws fits neatly with his remaining tasks of monitoring cassowaries and planning conservation measures. A cassowary can generally take care of itself, but dogs may attack chicks or harry adults out of existing territories.

According to a recent CSIRO study, the area's lowland rainforest houses about 50 cassowaries.

While Pavlov accepts that dog registration fees of up to \$50 represent hardship for some, he is not one to compromise. Consequently, hillbillies regularly brandish pig guns and blast him with expletives when he arrives, invoice in hand.

The Daintree Alliance, a vocal coalition of business owners and real estate agents lobbying for mains power and town services, accuses him of brazen trespass and has asked for his dismissal.

Looking for all the world like one of the Ned Kelly gang with his ginger beard, motley pallor and bald pink pate, Pavlov shrugs off the animosity. 'I'll take it on the chin if it helps the rainforest,' he says.

So far the 47-year-old has relished his first venture outside methodical research. Pigs, cassowaries and dogs are linked, "so it does no harm to lift your head out of the sand and look at the big picture".

Pavlov's Irish mother and Russian father died before a still teenage Piggy started work as a research assistant at CSIRO. Meanwhile he put himself through Monash University, completing animal

ecology with honours in parasitology. Following a stint as a CSIRO botanist in Alice Springs, in 1977 he left to study the agricultural impact of feral pigs.

A Masters degree later, Pakistan invited him to address a growing pig plague. He taught locals to poison the pests and returned to Australia to complete a PhD thesis on pigs in tropical rainforest, based in Cooktown.

He fell for the lushness of Cape Tribulation, where last year he killed and gutted about 250 pigs as part of an impact study. Vegetable matter was sent to CSIRO's Division of Wildlife and Ecology in Atherton for analysis. The study found that pigs compete with cassowaries for some rainforest fruits, but not all. Pavlov also found their stomachs to contain frogs, large quantities of earthworms, skinks, Boyd's forest dragons, birds, rats, nuts and about ten species of palm. 'They screw the nutrient cycle right up,' Pavlov says.

Australia's pigs were probably introduced by early explorers and Melanesian traders. But Pavlov's study of fur patterns and parasites confirm most pigs are derived from domesticated pigs which escaped during the pioneer era.

Pavlov found that pigs readily exploit one food source before moving to the next. In recent years they have increasingly taken to the cabbage hearts of young Alexandra palms, killing them in groves.

Diet aside, the porcine propensity to carry diseases such as brucellosis and leptospirosis is a major concern. While acknowledging that eradication is unfeasible, Pavlov stresses the need for pig control via trapping.

In mid-1994, Dr Hugh Spencer from the Cape Tribulation Tropical Research Centre made headlines with his proposal to kill pigs with gelignite-impregnated baits. The untested idea infuriated Pavlov and memories of the ensuing debate still provoke grumbles about the 'detonator doctor' and his 'dunny-hatched' concept of 'mining' the forest.

In return, Spencer accuses his neighbour of emotionalism and relations between the two remain frosty. Which begs the question: If potential colleagues can't get it together, what are the chances of the remaining combatants doing so?

Cape Tribulation's flying foxes are pondering that one.

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