

CHAPTER XXXX

The Judas Collar program: feral donkeys in Western Australia

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It is a sad situation that destruction by shooting from helicopters is the only effective control method adopted for the wild donkeys in Australia today. The donkeys are descendants of the teams which were invaluable during the colonization and settlement of the harshest regions of Australia. They proved particularly valuable in the Kimberley in Western Australia (WA) where disease had virtually wiped out horses and bullocks. Once an animal who served so well, the donkey is now considered vermin and shot in vast numbers.

Donkeys first became feral in the Kimberley in the 1930, with the arrival of motorized transport. Not wishing to kill their donkeys, the teamsters set them free to fend for themselves. The first indications that donkeys had increased to pest proportions were in the late 1930s when station owners realized that donkeys were competing with stock for food. World War 11 disrupted station management and it was when life returned to normality that the large herds of donkeys were recognized as a serious problem. On some properties up to 100 jennies had been kept for breeding to provide replacements for the teams and they had also been turned loose to roam the country. They built up to such large numbers that it was estimated that there were over one million feral donkeys in the Kimberley area alone. They were declared vermin in 1949 at Nullagine and Hall's Creek. Other districts in the area later added donkeys to their lists of "vermin".



Fig. 1: Rare white Australian teamster donkey

The conditions which had made the use of donkeys so successful to the early pioneers and settlers in the remote, semi arid regions of the outback were the very conditions which suited them so well to survival in the feral state. In hot dry environments they are hardier than any introduced animal apart from the camel. As they are more tolerant of dehydration and heat than Brahmin cattle, donkeys can wander further from water and they can also feed on poorer scrub. With regard to the characteristics which contribute to the destruction feral donkeys cause, Letts (1979) documented the following: their small hooves which damage the soil surface; they gather in mobs which concentrates the degradation; their ability to move through rough and remote country. They can drink saltier water than cattle or horses and are adept at excavating

dry stream beds to reach water and can survive on any kind of herbage. They will keep cattle away from drinking holes and interfere with mustering.

At the Australian Vermin Control Conference in Canberra in 1964, it was reported that wild donkeys were spread over all pastoral areas of Western Australia where they had become a major pest, competing with sheep and cattle for water and food. Over 1,000 were seen at one water hole in 1957 and 7,000 shot over 12 months on another station. Annual shooting drives which commenced in 1959 had made a big difference but wild donkeys were still reported as numerous in rugged and remote parts of the Kimberley. All stations were expected to participate in the eradication program and were assisted with subsidized ammunition. High velocity rifles operating near water holes brought the best results and were most cost efficient: "Shooting teams employed by groups of stations in the East Kimberley area have destroyed over 20,000 donkeys during the past three years at a cost of 4s 6d a head" (*Journal of Agriculture* 1959). They were the costliest and most numerous of all pests to destroy and on many stations there were as many donkeys as cattle. The only practical method of wiping them out was to shoot them when they came down to drink at the waterholes at night or by running them into specially constructed yards and shooting them while trapped



Fig. 2: Donkeys and brumbies trapped and shot, Crawford Springs, VRD, 1961

Under State and Territory legislation, land managers are responsible for managing feral animals. According to a report of the Agriculture Protection Board, the objective was to eradicate donkeys from the State (1981). Total numbers were not easy to assess because they were found in remote, inaccessible country. Some stations estimated that they had more than 10,000 donkeys within their boundaries. Shooting from helicopters had proved to be "a humane and efficient technique in the remote country of the Kimberley. It permits the shooter to follow donkeys into inaccessible areas and to make sure no wounded animals escape". An observer who joined the helicopter shooting team at Hall's Creek witnessed one marksman killing 50 donkeys in 30 minutes. Although most captured horses and donkeys were killed and their carcasses used for pet meat production, the economics of "harvesting" equines for pet meat were tenuous due to the rugged country with limited access to freezer facilities and processing plants, and high transportation costs (McCool et al 1981). Those running free in remote areas are therefore left to rot where they fall.

Despite the slaughter, however, the numbers of donkeys obviously continued to be a problem. It seems that it wasn't until the introduction of the Judas Collar Program in 1994 in the southern Kimberley that the war against feral donkeys was deemed by government authorities to be successful. Over 270 radio collars were fitted and five years later it was reported by the Agricultural Protection Board they were over half way to achieving their aim of complete eradication.

The Judas Collar Program

The idea behind the Judas Collar Program is simple and effective: it works on the natural instinct of the animals involved, including donkeys. The Program involves fitting tranquilised animals with radio collars. These animals are then released to pinpoint others of their kind. Being social animals, donkeys will seek out any other donkeys in the area. The “judas” jenny can be relocated by means of directional radio receiving equipment set up in the helicopter and the feral donkeys found and shot. The judas jenny is then left to seek out the next group of donkeys and the process repeated until all the feral donkeys in an area have been located and shot.

Agriculture Western Australia decided to trial the radio transmitter techniques used to eradicate feral buffalo from inaccessible country in the Northern Territory as a method of eradication for the feral donkey population on Brooking Station on the Fitzroy River in the West Kimberley in 1994. This property was chosen for a variety of reasons but the main ones were that it was a discreet, well bounded feral donkey population and the numbers were small. They had been systematically reduced by helicopter shooting from 1978 to 1994. Only six of those years had been recorded, but they resulted in excess of 5,000 donkeys being shot. It was estimated in 1994 that there were only around one hundred left. In a period of 31 months, with ten radio tracking collars fitted, the remaining donkeys were wiped out.



Fig. 3: Fitting a “Judas” collar

This pattern was repeated and there were further accounts of the eradication of feral donkeys. The Judas Collar program would appear to have been successful in Western Australia and it has since been adopted in the Northern Territory. A recent report on Pest Animal control states that the donkey : “once a major pest in northern Australia...(is) now largely controlled at great cost, but still a major problem in parts of the Northern Territory, where it requires more attention” (Norris & Low, 2005). The report discusses the value and viability of eradicating pest animals and suggests that the shooting of these animals in an ad hoc manner is not the best way forward. It is also interesting to note that from the list of feral animals needing to be controlled in WA, the donkey has disappeared. There is the call for a carefully managed plan for biodiversity conservation in the Rangelands, such as the need to question the impact the feral animal is actually having in the region and the scale of that impact. There may be other reasons to take into account other and other methods, rather than wholesale slaughter. It is also interesting to note that attitudes to feral animals from indigenous Australians is entirely different to the European government policy of mass destruction. Indigenous respect for and acceptance of fellow creatures may indicate a point of departure in the management of the Australian ecosystem with regard to donkeys and perhaps other ‘feral’ animals. Aboriginal relationship with

country does not presuppose some sort of biological/environmental 'purity' of the land, as is fashionable amongst many European environmentalists but acknowledge that all environments are hybrid, that all animals belong.

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