



Community Based Feral Pig Control – success through Patience, Persistence and Partnerships

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A bit about us

The Lake Muir Denbarker Community Feral Pig Eradication Group is an unincorporated group working across the Shires of Plantagenet, Manjimup, Denmark and Cranbrook to conduct a coordinated feral pig control program.

The small management committee is responsible for all operational aspects of the project. The committee consists of around ten local landholders from across the project area with representatives from DBCA and DPIRD participating in a non voting capacity providing advice, guidance and contributing to the priority setting for operational work. The Shire of Plantagenet acts as sponsor for the group providing financial administration and insurance support and holding all funds in trust. Volunteers who complete any field work are members of the Wilson Inlet Catchment Committee Inc which provides a level of volunteer insurance.

Feral pigs were uncommon along the south coast until the late 90's. There had been a small population in the Denbarker area, but the establishment of large areas of tree plantations on what had previously been grazing land provided shelter, cover from detection and a reliable source of food and water and facilitated the population increase and subsequent spread of feral pigs.

After an initial pilot trapping program in autumn 2001, driven by landholders who were determined to have a good shot at 'getting rid of feral pigs' the project was formalised with endorsement from the farming community at a public meeting in Mt Barker and support from the WA departments of agriculture and environment. Landholders pledged seed funding which kicked off the program at the public meeting in 2001.

In 2010 the Group began providing trapping services to the Northcliffe Declared Species Group, extending the area of operation and increasing the work available to the trapping team. In October 2016 the management committee endorsed the amalgamation of the Lake Muir Denbarker and Northcliffe project areas, and a joint management committee was formed.

The goal of the project is

"To facilitate the involvement of all landholders and managers in the Lake Muir, Denbarker and now Northcliffe, in contributing to the initial reduction of the feral pig population and the subsequent maintenance of low pig densities."

Since inception the Group has strived to maintain a cooperative and collaborative approach to feral pig control, recognising the need for a broadscale, nil tenure program to effectively combat feral pigs.

The group has maintained an open membership and a view that differing opinions and skills all add value, while keeping the focus firmly on eradication and embracing those genuinely interested in winning the battle over the feral pig. There have been some key people who have influenced the growth and development of the group at different times, helping to broaden the horizons and skills within the management committee and opening new doors to funding and growth opportunities.

Why bother about feral pigs ?

Feral pigs are a declared animal under the Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007 and are a menacing pest due to their omnivorous diet, transient nature and ability to breed quickly.

In **agriculture** feral pigs have a direct impact through

- feeding on pastures, crops and potentially young livestock
- digging, in vegetable crops pigs have dug through more than 5 hectares in a night, rendering the crop unsaleable

Secondary impacts include the

- introduction of soil and water borne pathogens and potentially the transfer of livestock diseases and
- attraction of recreational hunting activities

In **the natural environment** direct impacts are similar, but perhaps less obvious to the public and harder to value. They include

- predation on flora and fauna, particularly small mammals and plants such as orchids and sedges
- the spread of dieback and a degradation of the aesthetic qualities in the landscape.

The secondary impacts can be long term and significant, particularly to threatened species and environmentally sensitive wetlands, but are arguably not easily valued in terms of prioritisation of action in the early stages of feral pig incursion.

Our project area includes the RAMSAR listed Muir Byenup wetlands, a system of partially interconnected lakes and swamps of varied sizes, salinity, permanence and soil composition in an internally draining catchment. This area is used by the Australian Shelduck and endangered Australasian Bittern along with thousands of other water birds. Vegetation communities in the wet flats are among the few remaining in non coastal parts of SW Western Australia and includes natural sedgeland and rare orchids.

Our work also adjoins the Walpole Wilderness area, an internationally recognised biodiversity hotspot.

The heavy metal laden peat soils found in parts of the project area are particularly sensitive to feral pig incursion, with soil disturbance leading to irreversible acidification. Photographs do not always do justice to the impact of feral pigs but the contrast can be seen between a healthy colony of *reedia* and one suffering colony collapse in an area where feral pigs were detected and removed nine years ago.

What is it we actually do

We have 10 objectives all of which are focused on on ground work, and getting rid of feral pigs. On ground work is undertaken by trained, experienced field operators who provide surveillance and control across the project area. Field operators work in a team of two, employed 5 days a week for the period of the control program, covering private property and agreed areas of Parks and Wildlife managed estate. The cost of on ground work averages \$4500 per week covering wages, oncosts and a vehicle allowance – in most cases prefeed is donated by local orchardists and trapper accommodation provided as in kind support by local farmers.

There are a number of endorsed control methods for feral pigs including trapping, ground shooting, aerial shooting and the use of 1080 baits. The suitability of each method will depend on factors such as available

labour resources, land tenure and land use, number of pigs, landscape, control timeframe and objectives, and the scale of control program.

Trapping is our preferred control method, particularly in areas where there are high pig numbers. Our work practices adhere to the Code of Practice for Feral Pig Control V2.5 and the National Model Code of Practice for Humane Control of Vertebrate Pests and safety and ethical, humane practices are a key to our operations.

Our field operators are critical to the success of the project, they work without direct supervision in remote areas with large animals and firearms, and often camp out for the working week. It's not a job for everyone, and our most successful operators come from an agricultural background and are good stockmen and bushmen, they are hard working and committed to finding and eradicating pigs. Trapping feral pigs is a craft, it takes patience and determination and the ability to 'out smart' the target and can require days to capture wise, large animals.

There are many different trap designs, each with their own advantages and drawbacks. Advancements in camera and remote sensing technology and improved mobile service coverage has improved surveillance and intelligence gathering. We have not used it, but the rolls royce of trap design is the Matlock gate assembly which, while expensive, provides vision of activity in and around a trap to an operator who can then remotely activate the trap door.

What does the future hold

Our group is experiencing one of the highest periods of uncertainty for some time, driven by two core issues

- the reduction in State and Federal NRM funding for vertebrate pest control and
- the transition to Recognised Biosecurity Groups as the preferred model for managing and financing pest management at a community level.

2019 will be the first year since 2005 that our control program will not be supported by State or Federal NRM funding and this has seen us make a substantial reduction in the level of on ground work planned.

Despite this, the management committee is confident that we will find a way to continue our work, the feral pig battle is far from won and the group ethos has always been 'to find a way' to move, work around or work with those circumstances which might initially present a problem. We are hopeful that the WA Feral Pig Strategy, currently in development, will stimulate a boost in the focus on feral pigs across WA and lead to better resourcing of the battle on both private and publicly managed land.

RBG's offer the opportunity to generate community support for feral pig control but there are a number of potential hurdles, the pest management rate funds are going to be thinly spread and whether feral pigs can be seen as a high enough priority to attract funding remains to be seen. In our project area, our sustained effort now means that many landholders have never experienced feral pig incursions and likely won't rate pigs as a high threat and a priority for attention – there is a whole lot of value on staying on top of the feral pig issue, and waiting for the problem to escalate and become a priority makes subsequent control so much harder.

What we've learnt along the way

In our 18 years of operation we have removed 2700 pigs from the environment. Since 2007 the group has contributed almost 2500 man days of effort to feral pig control. We have contributed to research projects and initiatives such as

- the development of the voluntary code of practice for feral pig control used in SW WA,

- the development of an accredited training course for field operators
- the formation of the Southern Feral Pig Advisory Group

and built strong relationships with DBCA, DPIRD, local government, NRM organisations and local landholders. The Group has kept a low profile, preferring to let our results show the value in our approach – our field operators and management committee are always willing to share our wealth of knowledge and experiences however we also acknowledge that our model has some unique characteristics which have come from steady, incremental growth and development and are not always easy to replicate.

Here are a few key learnings

- Eradication of feral pigs is difficult, but possible in isolated areas of infestation, and it is possible to prevent expansion by working on the edges of populations and pushing the front line back
- Be wary of seeking the media limelight – well intended good news stories can have unforeseen consequences and we aim to leave press releases and interviews to those with professional media departments. Not everyone is on the same page when it comes to feral pig control and pig hunting as a sport has a strong, almost cult like following, which can pose real threats to genuine control efforts.
- Formal procedures, working agreements and risk management are necessary, but a demotivator for many in grass roots community groups. Initially many of our arrangements and agreements were thrashed out around the table, trialled, and implemented on a handshake, but as our program has grown, and more groups have become involved in feral pig control on public land these arrangements have been formalised. A good coordinator is important, and for us, that role is about keeping everything in order and allowing field operators to get on and dispatch pigs, and the general management committee to develop ideas and plans without ‘red tape’ unnecessarily stifling development and progress.
- And finally a couple of operational tips with a bit of irony, and mythbusting ...
 - Pigs will eat anything – not so – your prefeed needs to be better and more attractive than what is already on offer, our trappers use fruit – but not just any old mouldy waste, one particularly fussy pig was seen to pick all of the red apples out of his bucket of prefeed and leave the green ones behind!
 - if you need any more convincing that feral pig control needs to take a broad scale, cross tenure approach then lets look at the legend of ‘Iron Mike’.

Iron Mike was a 110kg boar, trapped as part of a thermal imaging trial led by Dr Peter Adams, and designed to explore whether aerial deployment of thermal imaging cameras could detect and differentiate feral pigs from other animals in the landscape. Iron Mike was trapped north east of Northcliffe in April 2015, fitted with a tracking collar and released. Over 68 days of the tracker operation he travelled around 300km, taking him north of the Muir Highway to the Mordallup / Tone River area, across to just east of Manjimup, and around below Lake Muir where his collar stopped working. Iron Mike was recaptured by our field operators in November 2016, just 20km from his starting point. He was one well travelled, very fit pig. This may not be ‘normal’ but it is real.

Thankyou for the opportunity to share some information on our project – we would like to thank our funders and project partners and welcome requests for additional information - we are more than happy to share our experiences with others looking to undertake community based feral pig control.