

‘Feral’ donkeys in Western Australia: The Judas Collar program

Jill Bough [University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia]

Donkeys were brought to Australia by the British in the latter half of the nineteenth century as they colonised the land in their search for land and minerals. Great teams of donkeys hauled goods across the outback and were instrumental in the success of the vast pastoral stations in some of the harshest areas of the continent. However, with the advent of motorised transport in the 1930s, they were no longer economically viable and were set free to fend for themselves (Bough 2008). 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 descendants of those teams which were invaluable during the European 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. The language we use to describe animals move them from one human category to another: the donkey itself remains the same. Those that are deemed no longer useful by humans, who brought them to Australia in the first place, make it clear that they no longer ‘belong’. When those animals were set free or escaped and became wild, they were a nuisance to humans and so they became ‘feral’, the unwanted ‘other’. They ‘infested’ the land and ‘degraded’ it: they became ‘pests’ and ‘vermin’. Donkeys lost out to the newly acquired ‘nationalism’ that started to build around the time of Federation. Donkeys were not native to Australia, and indigeneity (at least for nonhuman animals) became an attribute that was belatedly viewed as one to be valued. Furthermore, as they ran wild, donkeys competed with domestic stock and this did not please the powerful pastoralists.

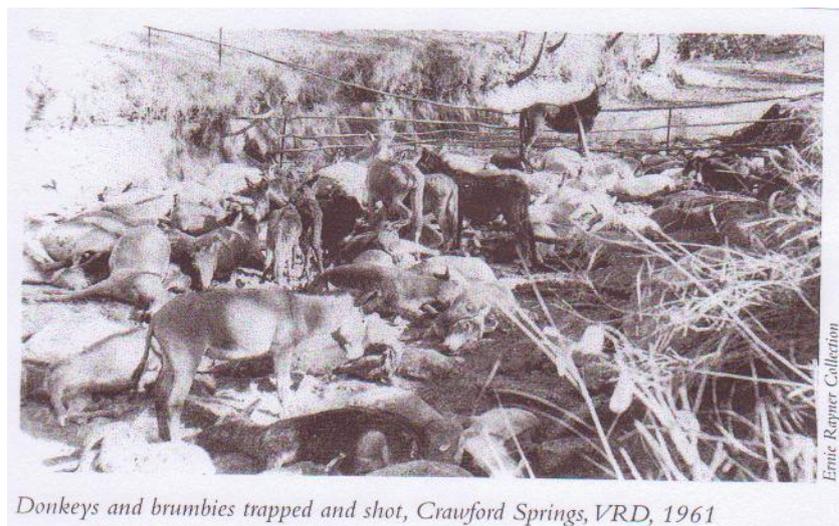
Donkeys first became ‘feral’ in the Kimberley in the 1930, with the arrival of motorized transport. Not wishing to kill their donkeys, the teamsters set them free to fend for themselves. The first indications that donkeys had increased to pest proportions were in the late 1930s when station owners realized 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’.

The conditions which had rendered the utilization 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 wild. 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, a favoured breed on the vast pastoral properties of the outback, donkeys can wander further from water and they can also feed on poorer scrub. Letts (1979) documented the characteristics which contribute to the destruction wild donkeys allegedly cause: 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.



Fig. 1: Rare white Australian teamster donkey

At the Australian Vermin Control Conference in Canberra in 1964, it was reported that wild donkeys were spread over all pastoral areas of WA where they had become a major problem, 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 reportedly 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.



Donkeys and brumbies trapped and shot, Crawford Springs, VRD, 1961

Fig. 2: Donkeys trapped and shot, 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 supposedly 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”. However, personal evidence would suggest that this is not the case. One shooter explained that firing from helicopters on a small moving target is not so easy and it will sometimes take 5 shots to bring down a donkey foal (Cohen 1989). Others tell of wounded donkeys wandering around for weeks before they die a slow and painful death. 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 (*Kimberley collars judas donkeys* 1999).

The Judas Collar Program

The idea behind the Judas Collar Program is simple and effective: it works on the natural instincts of the animals involved. The Program involves fitting tranquilized 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

Estimates of ‘feral’ donkey numbers continue to vary enormously. Figures for 2007 showing the numbers of donkeys shot on West Kimberley pastoral leases using the Judas Program were 25,520. Mick Everett, the Biosecurity Officer for the region, reported that the program had been completed for many of the properties, that is, there were no donkeys remaining, while the situation was still being ‘monitored’ on some stations, and ‘continuing’ on several more (Everett 2007). An article in a recent hunting magazine claimed that the shooters on one station alone shot several hundred donkeys.

It is interesting to note that from the list of ‘feral’ animals needing to be controlled in WA, the donkey has disappeared. There is call for a carefully managed plan for biodiversity conservation in the Rangelands, such as the need to question the impact ‘feral’ animals are actually having in the region and the scale of that impact. Many claim that the damage done by donkeys to the environment, thus affecting native wildlife, is relatively minor compared to foxes, rabbits and cats thus supporting the argument that it is not environmental degradation but economics that is all important. It is also interesting to note that attitudes to ‘feral’ animals from indigenous Australians can be 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. Meanwhile, the mass destruction of ‘feral’ donkeys on an enormous scale continues, largely unrecorded and unopposed. The fate of the ‘judas’ jenny seems particularly sad. Taking advantage of her social nature, the method turns her into a harbinger of death: wherever she goes, death follows. Even those whose task it is to kill the donkeys, speak of their sadness at the psychological damage done to the jenny who soon learns to keep away from other donkeys and will die a lonely death.

E-mail: [Jill.Bough \[@ \] newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Jill.Bough@[newcastle.edu.au])

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The Judas Collar program in Western Australia

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