Managing cats without foxes: challenges and possibilities

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What do we know about cat distribution and abundance?

Kangaroo Island has:

- Town or “pet” cats (management rests with owners)
- Stray cats (not “owned”, cats in part rely on resources from humans)
- Feral cats (rely on resources acquired in natural environment)

But we have no definitive estimate of their distribution and abundance.

Perceived problems

Issues associated with Kangaroo Island’s cats include:

- The spread of disease
- Loss of biodiversity
- Loss of the Island’s clean green image

Interest groups

The groups with a vested interest in these problems include:

- Community
- Sheep industry
- Environmental groups
- Council
- Landcare groups
- Others …..

Where are we at with policy?

The Kangaroo Island Council is reviewing:

- Desexing
- Micro-chipping
- Curfew
- Restraint

Cat control methods

Cat control methods include:

- Trapping
    - Non specific
    - Dumping carcasses in the one spot, but there is plenty of carrion lying around on Kangaroo Island
- Baiting – undesirable because of off target damage/take (birds, goannas, roos, wallabies, possums, reptiles etc)
- Shooting
- Feline parvovirus – successful but survivors are immune
- Fertility control – not being pursued

- All have varying degrees of success, and differ from habitat to habitat, circumstance to circumstance

Understanding the extent and nature of the threat …

Consider the following:

- Evidence for cats impacting upon biodiversity on Kangaroo Island is scarce
- Over 100 years of occupation, no vertebrate extinctions in that time
- Native species are taken, but what is the capacity of these species to replace themselves?

Will the removal of feral cats result in a significant increase in the populations of particular native species?

- Cats are difficult to kill, count and manipulate, so answering this question is difficult
- This hampers the implementation of broad scale control programs
- However …. there is national and statewide concern, and so effective control measures are being sought ….

DEH's participation in the future ….

Issues

- there is currently no effective and acceptable commercially available bait
- the size of vegetation blocks - access for baiting/monitoring purposes
- trials are critical:
    - need to firstly demonstrate that cats have an impact on biodiversity
    - need an assessment of home range and density
- resourcing - a program must be linked to the NRM funding strategy

Some basic principles

- DEH are prepared to adopt 2 strategies:
    1. prevention – a last cat policy
    2. suppression – control if an effective method becomes available.

- A control program must involve the monitoring of:
    - The impacts of control - changes in cat distribution and abundance
    - The impacts of cat control on biodiversity

A Felid Specific Toxin (FST) ….

A Felid Specific Toxin (FST) embedded in a sausage bait has been developed by the Victorian Dept. Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) in conjunction with Conservation and Land Management (CALM) WA.

- FST is not 1080
- FST is humane, cat specific, cheap, safe, easy to deploy

Trials indicate:
- A 95% success take rate in WA
- A 50% success take rate on French Island
    - 17000 ha
    - no foxes
    - 2000 baits, no attractants, laid on fire trails, not buried

Kangaroo Island is a potential test site because we are fox free

Cats on Kangaroo Island display “arrogant behaviours” similar to those seen on French Island including:

- greater visibility during the day
- walking on tracks and beaches
- defecating on trails and paths
- feeding on abundant roadside carrion whilst showing little fear of approaching traffic

These similarities indicate that Kangaroo Island would be suitable and worthwhile for further trials.

Trialing FST on Kangaroo Island ….

DEH will assist with the development of a program for the trials:

Year 1 will involve:

- assessing bait uptake rates using sausage baits containing a marker (i.e., Rhodamine replacing FST)

Years 2 and beyond will involve:

- limited FST baiting program: FST baits will be laid in discrete areas and cat abundance subsequently monitored in control (no baits) and experimental (baited) areas, with concurrent monitoring of biodiversity to assess the success of the baiting program.

Restrictions in the use of FST will include:

- No urban settlements within 5 km of baiting site
- No companion animals (dogs, cats) present
- No produce for human consumption produced within catchment of control activities

Community involvement

Involving the community will be critical, and will involve:

- Education
- Participation
    - Data collection
    - Assistance with monitoring
    - Field Days

In the mean time ….

DEH will:

- support research programs and community efforts aimed at cat management
- work towards the development of a cat control program that involves the use of the Felid Specific Toxin.