Maintaining the balance

Managing feral population
doggied by misconceptions

Tom Ryan

COMMEN'T

The environment is a delicate system ruled by balance. Nobody understands the importance of maintaining that balance better than those who rely on a healthy ecosystem to make a living.

The cattle industry has thrived in the Northern Territory for almost 150 years. Today, NT cattle producers and their families are the sole custodians of some 230,000km² of the NT land mass, and understand better than anyone that their livelihoods depend entirely on the health of the land under their care.

Achieving a balance between economic and environmental sustainability is critical in achieving long-term viability when managing an area of this size, including management and preservation of threats to the industry by native animals such as dingoes, and management of non-natives such as hybrids (any dog that is not a pure dingo, known as a wild dog).

The fact that both cattle and dingoes still coexist in the rangelands after 150 years is testament to the cattle industry’s ability to sustainably manage our delicate ecosystem.

In recent years, however, pastoralists have struggled to maintain that all-important balance between remaining profitable and managing these threats.

Dingo populations exploded in some pastoral regions on the back of several years of favourable breeding conditions and an excessively restrictive, and ultimately ineffective, wild dog management program.

Combine this explosion in numbers with several dry years, which forced the dog population to turn to cattle as their main source of food, and the impact on pastoral enterprises was devastating, with some reporting calf losses as high as 20 per cent.

Add to that the permanent injuries to animals maimed, but not killed, by dogs and the impact doubles again.

The fanciful notion that dingoes and hybrids “refrain from attacking cattle”, as claimed by urban-dwelling environmentalists, is dispelled by O’Brien in the foreword to Managing the Impacts of Dingoes and Other Wild Dogs (Fleming, Corbett et al., 2001), which was published by the Natural Heritage Trust, where he states “wild dogs, which include feral domestic dogs, dingoes and their hybrids, are a problem in Australia because their predation and harassment of stock causes millions of dollars worth of losses to sheep, cattle and goat producers each year”.

Of far greater concern to the pure dingo populations is the threat of hybridisation, or crossbreeding with other dogs. O’Brien continues (Fleming, Corbett et al., 2001) saying “dingoes are also valued as native species and their conservation is important to many people. The survival of pure dingoes on mainland Australia is threatened by hybridisation with feral domestic dogs”.

Therefore, community opposition to a demonstrably sustainable program as a result of misinterpretation by those who claim to hold the dingo in such high regard would be better used by focusing on the real issue facing the survival of the dingo in the NT: the spread of hybridisation.

Finding a solution to this issue will benefit the community and the dingo itself. It will be in line with a greater understanding of the commercial sensitivities of a cattle property.

Dingoes and cattle have coexisted successfully in the Northern Territory for close to 150 years, despite enduring a predator/prey relationship.

With a track record of sustainability managing the Northern Territory’s export cattle industry, and decades of careful observation, Northern Territory pastoralists and their families don’t achieve this by sitting inside spending countless hours tangling with bureaucratic red tape.

Tom Ryan is an executive officer at the Northern Territory Cattleman’s Association.