Australian Government
Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

THE FERAL GOAT *(CAPRA HIRCUS)*

The feral goat has established populations in a variety of habitats across Australia. It competes with native fauna and causes land degradation, threatening plant and animal species and ecological communities. The feral goat can be an agricultural pest but also has commercial value and is harvested for its meat. To protect the environment, feral goat control programs are best undertaken in areas of high conservation value.

History

Goats arrived in Australia with the First Fleet in 1788. As they were small and hardy, ate a range of plants and provided milk and meat, they were convenient livestock for early European settlers. During the 19th century, sailors released goats onto islands and some areas of the mainland for emergency food. Certain breeds were imported for their hair. More recently, goats have been used to keep plantation forests and inland pastoral land free of weeds. Feral herds developed as these domestic goats escaped, were abandoned or were deliberately released.

Feral goats now occur across 28 per cent of Australia. They can be found in all states and territories and on some offshore islands, but are most common in the rocky or hilly semi-arid areas of western New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland. There are at least 2.6 million feral goats in Australia but numbers fluctuate enormously with drought, management programs and high fertility so it is very difficult to accurately assess numbers.

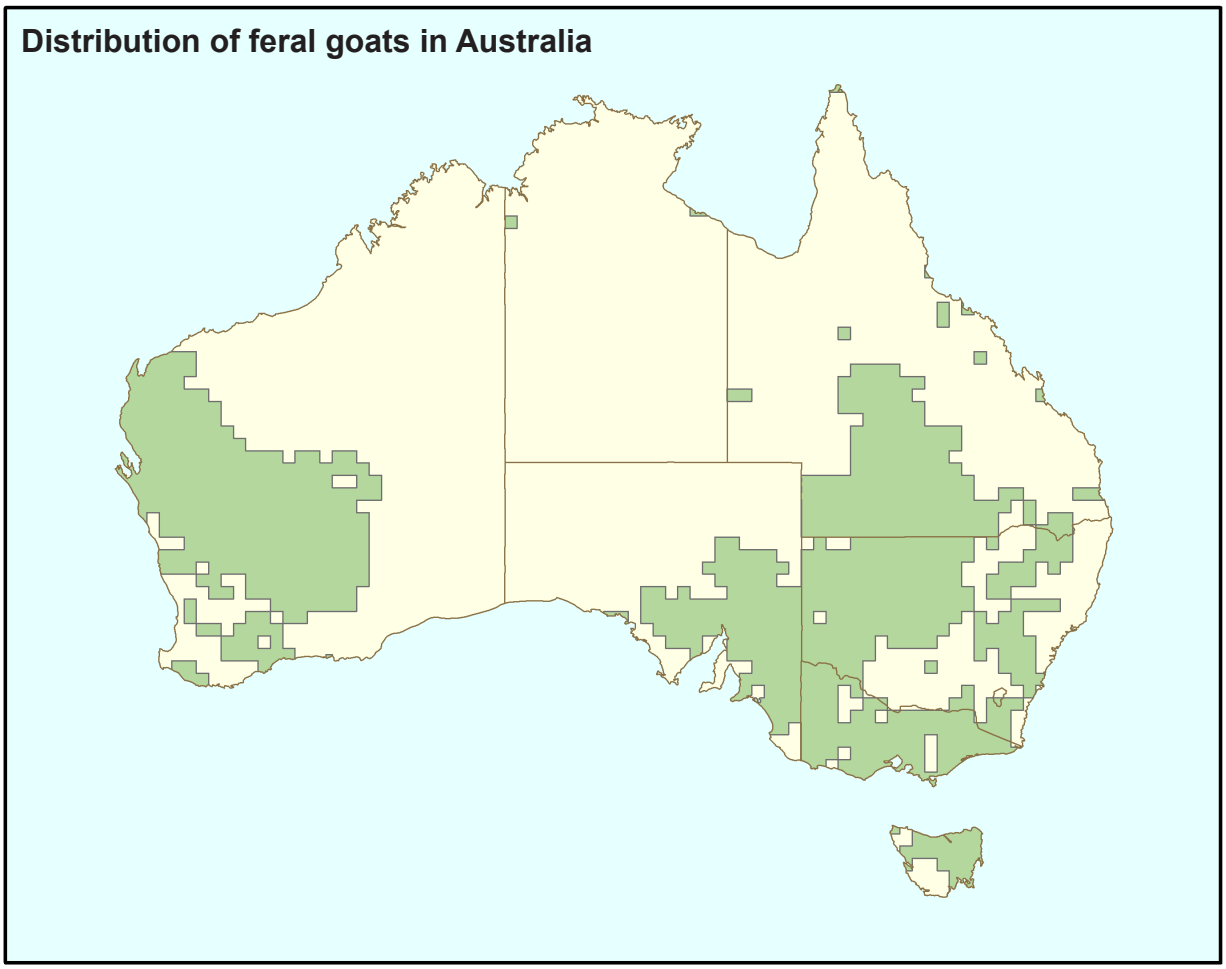
Ecology

Where dingos and wild dogs are present, feral goats generally do poorly. However, they are often found in sheep-grazing areas, where dingos and wild dogs have been removed or heavily controlled by pastoralists.

Feral goats live in herds and, although males and females live separately for much of the year, they share about one kilometre square under good conditions, but a larger area when food or water is scarce. The two groups only mix together during the breeding season in autumn and winter, with females becoming sexually mature in their first year. Feral goats can breed twice a year, with twins and triplets being common.

Feral goats have a varied diet — leaves, twigs, bark, flowers, fruit and roots. They will eat most plant types in pastoral regions and often consume vegetation that is avoided by sheep or cattle.

Distribution of feral goats in Australia



Sources: National Land & Water Resources Audit (2008) Assessing invasive animals in Australia 2008, NLWRA, Canberra./SEWPaC (2010) Feral animals on offshore islands database located at http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/invasive/ferals/islands/

Impact

Feral goats have a major effect on native vegetation through soil damage and overgrazing of native herbs, grasses, shrubs and trees. This grazing can cause erosion and prevent regeneration. They foul waterholes and can introduce weeds through seeds carried in their dung.

Particularly during droughts, feral goats can compete with native animals and domestic stock for food, water and shelter. For example, they may threaten some yellow-footed rock wallaby populations by competing for rock shelters and food, leaving the wallabies exposed to a greater risk of predation by foxes and wedge-tailed eagles.

Feral goats carry footrot, and can infect or reinfect sheep through their contact with sheep. They could also carry exotic diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease, should there be an outbreak in Australia.

Control

Control of feral goats is a complex issue. While they are a major environmental and agricultural pest, they also have some commercial value and are used as a game species by recreational hunters. Feral goat populations tend to recover well from culling and, except on islands, eradication is usually not possible. To protect the environment, control is best focused on areas that contain threatened native plants, animals and ecological communities.

In arid and semi-arid country, feral goats are sometimes mustered for slaughter and young females may be sold as breeding stock for mohair flocks. In inaccessible areas, shooting from helicopters is the most humane and efficient method of removing small numbers of feral goats.

When looking for food, feral goats centre their movements around the availability of permanent water. In times of drought, they need to drink more and stay closer to water. This makes the water source an ideal place to trap feral goats by surrounding it with goat-proof fencing and using one-way gates that allow the goats into the trap to drink but does not allow their movement out again.

A technique known as the 'Judas goat' method can be used to locate small herds. A feral goat is caught, fitted with a radio collar and released to join a herd. Signals from the radio reveal the location of the herd.

How the Australian Government is dealing with a national problem

'Competition and land degradation by feral goats' is listed as a key threatening process under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). Under the EPBC Act, the Australian Government, in consultation with the states and territories, has developed the *Threat abatement plan for competition and land degradation by unmanaged goats*.

The threat abatement plan aims to reduce the impacts of feral goats on native wildlife in an number of ways:

- Preventing unmanaged goats occupying new areas in Australia and eradicating them from high conservation-value areas.
- Promoting the maintenance and recovery of native species and ecological communities that are affected by competition and land degradation by unmanaged goats.
- Improving knowledge and understanding of the impacts of unmanaged goats and their interactions with other species and other ecological processes.
- Improving the effectiveness, target specificity and humaneness of control options for unmanaged goats.
- Increasing awareness of all stakeholders of the objectives and actions of the threat abatement plan, and of the need to control unmanaged goats.

Feral goat control programs need to be co-ordinated with other activities such as on-ground protection of threatened plants and animals and the control of other invasive species such as rabbits and feral pigs. The threat abatement plan provides a national framework that promotes the best use of the resources available for feral goat management.

The Australian Government will continue to work with the states and territories in dealing with this national problem.

More information about the threat abatement plan can be found at http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/invasive/publications/feral-goat.html

Further reading

Parkes J, Henzell R and Pickles G (1999). *Managing Vertebrate Pests: Feral Goats.* Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

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