

## Australia's feral camel problem

By: Philip Gee

Once again Australia's feral camel problem has reached global media as a consequence of recent aerial cull activity in the remote APY lands in the north west of South Australia, and once again Australians are being judged and perhaps judged poorly for this activity.

One point needs to be clear at the outset. There is now and always has been a large group of people from across our private and government sectors who seek to create a value chain for the dromedary camel running freely in our central deserts. There have been many initiatives over several decades but all have fallen over for a variety of reasons, none the least of which is fiscal viability.

Population estimates are often published, which supposedly reflect the free-ranging population size but in truth the number is between 350,000 – 400,000 right now. Forget the million plus figure that is often quoted, it is wrong.

From an economic point of view, pastoral landholders (ranchers) make a common sense decision to graze sheep and cattle. If camels were grazed these landholders would quickly become bankrupt with existing demand and markets.

A consequence of this fiscal reality is that Australia's free-ranging camel population exists largely unbothered and 'out-of-sight' for all but a small band of professional musters, and remote Aboriginal communities sparsely dotted throughout the central deserts. This status quo exists for most of the time. Camel meat markets do exist and approximately 7,000 camels are captured and processed annually for markets locally and around the world, a number which represents approximately 25% of the annual natural herd increase. The market is bigger than 7,000 head but problematic supply chain issues (unreliable supply due to drought, rain, remoteness etc.) place a cap on supply capabilities.

So, for most of the time the increasing camel population is under the radar and unnoticed, mustering work goes on while remote communities and the environmental sector hold their breath, waiting for the next drought.

Australian droughts can be severe and extremely consequential. Native wildlife populations will collapse across enormous areas with survivors congregating around diminishing refuge water points. Competition is fierce as rapidly diminishing food and water reserves become exhausted. It is a boom and bust life cycle, an ecological system that Australia's desert interiors are well adapted to. When the next rains come, birds and animals breed profusely and rapidly spread from those last remaining waters and so the cycle repeats itself. Generally, it all works.

Enter the dromedary camel, hundreds of thousands of them. They are also affected by the drought and they perish in their thousands. They too congregate around remaining refuge waters, typically 500 – 2,000 starving camels at each water, or more. The young are trampled to death trying to reach the water, the weak will sit down and slowly die, others perish on the crowded fringes, seemingly accepting of their inevitable fate. This same scenario occurs unseen at every accessible refuge water point where camels roam in the Australian central deserts.

Readers will see how Australia's free ranging camels greatly impact the survivability of our native species during droughts. Waters are churned into thick foul soups, toxic, undrinkable, filled with dead animals and a cause of death as much as the drought itself. All wildlife is affected including flora, aquatic species and invertebrates and local extinctions are inevitable. Over time it becomes more and more difficult for species to repopulate those drought ravaged areas and species' range extensions shrink dramatically making broader extinctions a real possibility.

Inevitably, the camels also push into remote communities and adjacent cattle and sheep farming country to compete with livestock for feed and water. They destroy hundreds, probably thousands, of kilometres of fencing, prevent livestock from drinking and congregate around remote communities, starving and perishing in their search for water. They tear up plumbing pipework, air conditioners are pulled off the sides of buildings and they crowd around stock troughs as they continue to perish across the landscape.

A drought's severity and extent determine the impact and isolated thunderstorms can dissipate a problem as quickly as it arose.

The recent aerial cull in the APY Lands (Jan 2020) occurred as a consequence of another dry period. It is extremely difficult to stand by and watch the suffering of the landscape; wildlife, stock and the remote communities being affected.

Everyone wants a solution to this recurring problem. Ecologists (including significant numbers of Aboriginal stakeholders) want camels removed from the Australia landscape altogether, while others would prefer a business solution which also creates employment and economic opportunity for remote Aboriginal communities.

Either solution will require a significant amount of funding. Aerial culling, particularly during drought periods, will protect native ecosystems and remote communities but it is a reactive solution that has limitations and public consequences. The logical approach is to identify camel meat markets (if they exist) that enable camel farming in managed environments (as for sheep and cattle). This will place substantial pressure on the free-roaming camel herd as investors seek to build their breeding stock numbers. If sufficiently lucrative, it is likely the free-roaming herd could be reduced to a small and scattered residual population. The opportunity to develop enormous high quality camel farming operations is real and possible for a number of investors across several Australian states. This is what needs to happen.

I hope this editorial helps readers appreciate the opportunities and also the difficulties Australian authorities must confront somewhere in Australia each year. Impacts are not only related to drought conditions either but they are exacerbated greatly by them. A commercial solution should exist which would benefit business and remote Aboriginal communities. In the past we have seen everything from portable "camel mincers" to landscape scale "castration programs" offered up as solutions (you know who you are), but inevitably and realistically the solution must lie in a recognition of the dromedary camel as a valuable food resource in a dry land. As I often say, you can't eat computers. Feel welcome to email me if you would like to discuss further.

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*(Philip Gee has worked in the Australian camel space for his entire working life, he understands the issues, the opportunities and also the environmental pressures)*