

## **The culling of camels in Australia**

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The culling of feral camels has been resumed on Wed 8 Jan 2020, prompting a renewed debate about the management of feral animals in Australia. The target this time is to remove 10,000 camels from the NYP land of South Australia. This is considered to be part of the ongoing feral camels' management in Australia, which has been implemented to reduce the negative impacts of feral camels on the environment and the local communities in remote Australia. The NYP land is a vast harsh land in the Australian outback which covers about 350,000 square km with 6,000 inhabitants. The feral camels in Australia seem to face challenges additional to those challenges faced by other animals including prolonged drought, bushfires and floods.

There is a need to review available information and select relevant data that ecologists, animal biologists and decision makers require to develop and implement a management strategy. As a starting point, ecologists emphasise the need for a reliable estimate of the camel population, its distribution and its impact on the ecosystem. It is very unfortunate that the camel population was overestimated and somehow was exaggerated to over 1.1 million and projected to double every 8-9 years (Edwards et al. 2008). If this estimate was correct and the prediction for a population growth was accurate, the population would have had exceeded 2.5 million camels by now.

A more realistic estimate of the camel population and a sustainable harvest rate was reported by researchers from The University of Queensland (Al Jassim, 2011, Al Jassim and Lisle, 2016), which predicted a maximum camel population that may have reached about 460,000 camels and, after the removal of 160,000 camels between 2009 and 2013, the population dropped to about 300,000. The current population according to our model would be just over 400,000 camels and the sustainable harvest rate is about 4.6%. The current harvest rate of 1.25% (about 5000 camels per year) is much lower than the sustainable harvest rate predicted by our model. If the harvest of camels continues at the current rate of 1.25%, the population will continue to grow and reach 534,000 in 2025 (Al Jassim and Lisle, 2016).

The culling of 10,000 camels will not solve the problem and is not a permanent solution. The camel population will rebound when conditions improve, and the camels will be back searching for water when drought returns. Accordingly, there is a need to better manage our feral camel population and invest in establishing a viable camel farming for breeding and production of quality meat for export. This approach will restore the reputation of Australia internationally, and establish a profitable camel industry for the local communities.

There have been attempts to promote Australian camels overseas, which are known to be disease free and represent a valuable unexplored genetic pool that could be utilised to assist camel breeders in Africa and the Middle East and introduce new blood into their inbred camel herds. These attempts included workshops and seminars organised in the Middle East and North Africa and participation in international meetings especially those organised by the International Society of Camelids Research and Development (ISOCARD), which takes place every three years. These meetings have generated interest and enquiries but unfortunately, they did not develop into commercial deals that would benefit Australia. The main reason is the absence of an existing infrastructure of a commercial nature to breed and handle camels. The other discouraging reason is the cost associated with mustering, handling and transporting camels from central Australia to the nearest port and to their final destination. Because sea transportation of live camels is problematic from the animal welfare perspective, exporters are left with

the other very expensive option of using cargo planes. Each cargo shipment will take between 100 and 150 camels depending on the sizes of the camels and that would cost about AUD 600,000. If exporting 100 per shipment, the cost per camel will be AUD 6000 and after adding other costs, including the price of keeping camels in yard, veterinary care and handling, the price would rise to over \$8000 per head.

In order to make the export of live camels a viable option, and also to encourage the humane harvest of feral camels within the sustainable harvest rate, we need to invest in camel farming and reduce the cost of transportation. Farming camels in large paddocks behind fences will provide a regular supply of quality camel meat for export and for the local market. Also, it will create job opportunities for local communities and put an end to the unpopular camel culling approach and stop the wastage of such a valuable resource.

## **References**

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