

Feral goat

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The Goat (*Capra hircus*) was one of the first animals to be domesticated, eight to ten thousand years ago. Most archaeological work indicates that the earliest attempts at domestication were in dry hills surrounding the Mediterranean basin. The ability of goats to utilise the coarse browse of such mountainous areas made them suitable for domestication in preference to sheep. With large-scale domestication of goats throughout the world, it was only a matter of time before goats escaped and established feral goat herds in the wilds of most continents. Overgrazing by goats has caused severe environmental damage throughout the world. Feral goats are declared animals under the *Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976* throughout Western Australia.

Introduction and Spread

Goats arrived in Australia with the first fleet. They were introduced to many areas by early settlers and spread further by miners and railway gangs who used them as a source of milk and meat. Goats were introduced into Western Australia in the early colonial era. They were kept for a mohair industry and to provide milk, butter and meat. They were also used for light haulage and even goat racing.. In 1870, 50 goats were taken to Shark Bay. By 1894 there were 4,500 goats in Western Australia and by 1905 they were reported throughout all districts of the State. Large herds grazed on sheep and cattle stations; these were dispersed when the mohair industry did not develop as had been hoped. Breeding groups escaped and formed feral herds on many stations. Feral goats were declared vermin in the Upper Gascoyne district in 1928, at Marble Bar and Port Hedland the following year and Mullewa and Meekatharra in 1954. Feral goats are now declared animals over the whole State.

Distribution

Today there are herds of feral goats in most pastoral areas of the State. The largest populations are found in the Shires of Shark bay, Carnarvon, Murchison, Yalgoo and Northampton. Mobs are also found in other districts including the Upper Gascoyne, Meekatharra and Mt Magnet as well as the Pilbara and Ashburton regions and the Eastern Goldfields.

Isolated populations of feral goats also occur in the higher rainfall areas of the south-west of the State where patches of scrub and forest provide protection from human control and make management difficult.

Biology

Goats have a gestation period of around 150 days and often bear twins. In periods of favourable climatic conditions and plentiful food, breeding may occur twice in one year. A female goat is capable of breeding at the age of six to seven months. Goats can be quite selective in their grazing habits preferring shrubs to grasses and herbs.

Significance

Where goat numbers have become unmanageable their appetite and grazing habits have caused serious damage. They destroy vegetation and disturb the balance of plant species. The animals can completely strip the leaves and bark from shrubs. Valuable pasture species including saltbush from soft spinifex often fail to recover from such heavy grazing. These plants are then replaced by annuals and less valuable perennial species. In western Australia feral goats browse on mulga which provides a drought reserve for sheep during summer. Overgrazing may also lead to massive soil erosion permanently reducing the carrying capacity of the rangeland. Disturbance by the sharp hooves of goats and the characteristic pawing of the ground, by males, leaves the soil open to erosion by wind and rain. In addition to their impact on the landscape, feral goats compete with native animals and domestic stock for shelter, water and food. Feral goats are susceptible to several exotic livestock diseases including foot and mouth disease, rabies and rinderpest. They would act as a reservoir of infection if the diseases reached Australia.

Control Methods

A number of control methods have been used to reduce feral goat numbers. These include shooting from the ground or helicopters, using Judas goats to pinpoint herds, mustering and trapping. However mustering, trapping and helicopter shooting are the main methods used to remove feral goats at present. Helicopter shooting is particularly useful in removing goats in inaccessible areas.

Management in Pastoral Areas

Agriculture Protection Board (APB) policy is aimed at managing feral goat numbers such that they are reduced to, or maintained at a level which ensures minimal environmental impact on the rangelands. Agriculture Western Australia currently undertakes feral goat aerial surveys to monitor population numbers in the southern rangeland. Data results collected from these surveys and other sources are used to ensure landholders are aware of goat numbers. With this information pastoralists are encouraged to formulate management strategies to reduce and manage feral goats to minimise their impact.

Under the Board's management policy, commercialisation of the feral goat resource is permitted under strict conditions. Pastoralists are able to muster and remove feral goats to abattoirs or export. A waybill in accordance with *the Stock (Identification and Movement) Act 1970* must accompany all movements of goats. In addition, with the approval of the Pastoral Lands Board, and under specifications set out by the APB, feral goats may be domesticated and grazed as stock. Mustered goats that are not removed or domesticated must be destroyed.

The process of domesticating feral goats involves training the animals to respect electric fences. Feral goats are held in a compound of specified design where they will encounter a

plain wire electric fence. Once goats have learned to avoid the fence, they are released into a larger grazing paddock with electric fence barriers. As a condition of domestication, goats must be identified and marked in accordance with the *Stock (Identification and Movement Act 1970)*.

Management in Agricultural Areas

There is a growing interest in grazing goats in the agricultural areas. However, if feral goats from pastoral areas are relocated for this purpose, permits to introduce and keep the goats are required from the Agriculture Protection Board. These permits must be obtained before the goats arrive on the property and each consignment of feral goats must be held behind approved fencing for at least one month. These requirements are specified to prevent the animals escaping and becoming a problem in reserves and other areas. Unmarked goats must be marked within seven days of arrival at the property, to deter theft and provide a means to trace diseased animals.

No permits are required for the keeping of domestic goats or domesticated feral goats. However domesticated feral goats can only come from pastoral properties that have been approved by the Pastoral Lands Board as domestic goat grazing enterprises as detailed above. It is also clear that goats in general, whether domesticated or feral, behave very differently to sheep. They are very determined animals and will test fences. So farmers need to ensure that fencing is adequate to contain them.

Further information and advice on feral goat control can be obtained from Agriculture Western Australia, by telephoning the Publications Officer 9368 3729 or any local Agriculture Western Australia office.

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