Dingo control in the Kimberley Region

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By J. J. FREETH, Supervising Vermin Control Officer

With all the recent dramatic developments in irrigated agriculture in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, one is apt to forget the main wealth of the district still lies in its pastoral industry.

Man, in his efforts to obtain a living from the pastoral industry, has to contend with many pests which compete with pastoral activities. Perhaps the most serious and certainly the most sagacious pest in this region is the dingo.

It is generally accepted that the Australian aboriginals brought dogs with them from South-East Asia and these have evolved into what we now know as the dingo or wild dog.

Research over the years has proved that genetically the dingo is not a separate species but is only another variety of the domestic dog (Canis familiaris).

What is more important from the pastoralists' viewpoint is that the dingo has adapted itself to living under the harsh conditions of the Australian continent. When Australia's pastoral industry started, the dingo quickly found that he had a readily available food supply. Gone were the days when to kill a kangaroo or emu could mean a five-mile chase. The sheep was no match for the cunning and wily dingo. Cattle, on the other hand, were a slightly tougher prey, but even so, many cattle stations in the Kimberleys report substantial losses from dingoes killing or mauling calves. However, a lot of cattle owners in the region apparently still do not view the dingoes seriously enough to warrant an all out effort at control. Sheep men, on the other hand, are generally more alive to the problem and prepared to undertake extensive control measures.
Because of these attitudes, most of the Agriculture Protection Board's dingo control activities in the Kimberleys are directed towards helping the sheep station owners along the Fitzroy River.

**BREEDING AREAS**

Dingoes have well defined breeding areas in most regions. These are usually areas where food, water and places to drop their young are plentiful. In the Kimberleys, the Leopold Ranges, Napier, Edgar and George Ranges, and their attendant watercourses, the Ord, Fitzroy, Lennard, Margaret and Meda Rivers, are ideal breeding places for dingoes. Most of these areas are open cattle country. "Open country" means areas where stock are not controlled, where fences are few and far between or do not exist, and where the stock live free from interference by man, except during the yearly muster. It is only natural that places with food, water and shelter for cattle, will also be ideal for dingoes.

In the West Kimberleys the favourable breeding areas run right up to the sheep stations, resulting in a constant source of potential danger to the stations. It is only by providing Agriculture Protection Board doggers to work around the holdings, with combined increased activities by the pastoralists, that the situation has been improved.

Not all cattle stations neglect this problem entirely. During the mustering season, many stockmen poison offal and bones left behind when camps are moved on. Dingoes are always inquisitive of campsites and many have been killed this way.

Most sheep station owners and managers follow a more active programme of wild dog control. Some employ men whose duties are shared equally between stock work and dingo control, whilst in the past, doggers have been employed full-time to protect the flocks. Since the appointment of a Group Vermin Control Officer by the Agriculture Protection Board, in collaboration with the local Shire Council, interest by the sheep station owners has been intensified.

**SHIRE COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

In the whole of the Kimberley region, only one man is employed by the shire councils to carry out their obligations under the Vermin Act. This man, Mr. R. C. Golightly, is employed by the A.P.B. in conjunction with West Kimberley Shire Council. The A.P.B. subsidises costs by one third. His duties are the supervision and organisation of vermin control in the district and making sure that stations are actively co-operating. Mr. Golightly organises destructive drives and sees that the work of the doggers is co-ordinated with that of the stations. He also carries out some direct control work.

**AGRICULTURE PROTECTION BOARD ACTIVITIES**

The A.P.B. activities in the area are under the direct control of a Regional Vermin Control Officer (Mr. P. J. McDonald). His duties are not only of an executive nature, but also embrace supervision and extension. He travels extensively in the region, and is available at any time to give advice and, where needed, some practical assistance.

As well as the regional officer, there are also two doggers (Messrs. Rodericks and Stuart) who patrol and control dogs in the areas north, south and east of the sheep stations.

**CO-OPERATION**

Generally, the co-operation received from stations in the Kimberleys is not as good as it could be. However it is improving on some properties. If we exclude the sheep stations which are generally carrying out more than the average amount of work, the rest, except for a few, do little organised constructive work towards controlling dingoes.

Dingo control in the region is improving slightly every year because more stations are playing their parts. In East Kimberley for example, nearly every station now does some work and this in itself is an improvement. One or two cattle stations have recently renewed their efforts. However, on most stations the work done falls far short of that needed for effective control.
In the West Kimberleys, some real headway has been made. Killings on the sheep stations have been reduced and the situation is quite promising. A.P.B. doggers working north and south of these holdings have played a large part in controlling the influx of dogs into the closer settled areas. Scalps returned by A.P.B. doggers have shown an increase of over 50 per cent. in the past three years.

The Kimberley region is obviously still heavily populated with dingoes. This is shown by the fact that over the last five years, 32 per cent. of all wild dog scalps in W.A. have been sent in from this region.

FUTURE ACTION

Although wild dog control is not good in this area, there is no reason why it should not improve. Now that the A.P.B. and the West Kimberley Shire Council provide both advisory and some actual assistance by doggers, pastoralists are asked to co-operate still further in an effort to step up the overall level of control.

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