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CAMELS WREAK HAVOC IN THE RED CENTRE

More than a million camels, the largest wild herd on Earth, are ravaging a vast region of 3.3 million square kilometres in the heart of Australia.

The camel plague is inflicting major damage on fragile desert ecosystems, scarce water supplies, rare plants and animals, Aboriginal cultural resources, remote communities and pastoral enterprises across the inland, according to a report to the Federal and State Governments to be launched in Canberra tomorrow.

“The damage camels inflict has gone largely unnoticed by the bulk of Australia’s population,” warns Glenn Edwards of the Northern Territory Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts and Sport, the lead author of the study by researchers at the Desert Knowledge CRC (DKCRC).

The current camel herd – conservatively put at a million but possibly much larger – is doubling every nine years and has the capacity to wreak havoc across the deserts, he adds. “The longer we take to act, the more it will cost to manage and repair the negative impacts of feral camels.”

The world’s largest camel ‘kingdom’ is spread across three States and the Northern Territory, with major hotspots where the WA/SA/NT borders come together, and in the Simpson Desert.

“Because camels are cautious animals and beautifully camouflaged, and because these areas are sparsely settled, most people are simply unaware of the sheer numbers of these introduced pests – or of the extent of the damage they are causing,” Glenn says. “At the moment numbers are growing by around 80 000 animals a year.”

Camels are thought to inflict around \$15m in economic damage a year on an area covering one third of the continent. The pastoral industry is estimated to lose millions every year in wrecked water points, windmills and fences and lost effort.

“In the environment we are seeing massive damage to mulga communities in certain areas, while camels may drive desert quandongs to local if not regional extinction,” Glenn says. “Also they are emptying the precious waterholes and destroying wetlands on which native desert animals and birds depend for their very survival.

“They are having a major impact on Aboriginal cultural plants, bush foods and medicines. They often invade remote communities in search of feed and water. They have caused a number of motor accidents.”

As ruminants and desertifiers, camels add to global warming and are a risk for the spread of animal diseases.

“We are very concerned that as the climate changes and the continent dries out further, the camel impact will worsen as they throw more pressure on scarce water resources.”

Despite the damage they cause, camels have some positives, as a potential source of meat, tourism and weed control, he says – and it is necessary to balance these considerations with the need to control them.

The report advocates a risk-based approach to the camel plague, with the aim of managing their impacts rather than exterminating them – probably an impossible task.

“Our overall aim is to get the population density down to one camel for every ten square kilometres eventually. This keeps the damage they do within reasonable limits. We can muster them for the meat, pet meat and leather trades, or we can control them by aerial and ground shooting,” he says. “We can fence them out of small areas, though it is costly.”

Research in Aboriginal communities by Dr Petronella Vaarzon-Morel has found that Aboriginal people are increasingly perturbed at the extent of camel damage to their country and cultural resources, fearful of personal danger and wanting something to be done about the problem. There has been a marked increase in concern in recent years as camel numbers built up, she says. At the same time, Aboriginal people want to derive livelihood opportunities from camel control measures in areas such as capture for the meat trade, monitoring impact and changes in land condition after removal of animals.

The camel herd may be larger and its damage worse than indicated in the report owing to some of the survey data being up to eight years old and limited coordination between the different state jurisdictions in remote areas, he cautions. The report calls for a major aerial survey to update estimates of the camel herd size and its density in key regions.

The study calls for camel densities to be reduced to around 0.1–0.2 camels per square kilometre. This may involve removing an estimated 400 000 animals, he adds.

“Ultimately, effective management of feral camels and their impacts will involve the integration of all available control methods, both non-commercial and commercial, and the development of a strategic and integrated management framework that works across jurisdictions, tenures, boundaries and industry sectors and prescribes clear management targets,” the report concludes.

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MEDIA NOTE: For vision and images of camels and the full report go to:
<http://www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au/news/media.html>
Film footage of camels courtesy of Tourism NT