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On the edge: Wild dogs research at Coffs Harbour

Over the past year North Coast Local Land Services and a range of partners have been studying wild dogs and other ground animals at the 'edge' of Coffs Harbour urban areas to better understand how to manage wild dogs in these areas.

The North Coast Local Land Services team has brought together research scientists from Department of Primary Industries, Gumbaynggirr Green Teams, Coffs Harbour City Council, National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW Forestry Corporation and interested landholders. The group has been conducting the research in 'peri-urban' areas which, as the name implies, are those areas at the perimeter of urban areas.

Most wild dog research has been undertaken on the tablelands, slopes and western plains and very little in coastal areas - including peri-urban areas - except at the Gold and Sunshine Coasts in Queensland. This is despite reports of wild dog impacts now occurring along the east coast of NSW from the Hunter Valley to Kingscliff on the Tweed Coast.

The boundary between urban and rural areas is now blurring due to urban expansion, larger house blocks, rural lifestyle blocks and hobby farms, working farms, production forests and conservation reserves. These changes in land use in peri-urban areas can result in an increased potential for conflict and negative impacts from wild dogs.

The Peri-urban Research Project is supported by North Coast Local Land Services, through funding from the National Landcare Programme. The project has four components, including the use of remotely placed cameras ('camera traps') to record ground animals, satellite or GPS tracking to record movements, diet analysis and DNA sampling to look at the level of hybridisation (the percentage of DNA attributable to either dingoes or domestic dogs).

Mark Robinson, Land Services Officer for North Coast Local Land Services highlighted the importance of working with a range of project partners, "The guidance of research scientists Paul Meek and Dr Guy Ballard from Department of Primary Industries has been invaluable and we have received excellent support from all of our project partners including public and private landholders who have allowed us to install the camera traps on their properties."

The remote wildlife cameras are installed across the peri-urban landscape to record animals at 'dog' level – both the targeted species (wild dogs, foxes, cat) and also native animals. Ground animals such as bandicoots, wallabies, Brush Turkeys and Wonga Pigeons have been identified as well as arboreal mammals such as possums and Koalas when they come to ground. The remote wildlife cameras are set periodically each year and will, over extended time, provide useful information on the population status of the targeted species in the study area.

Mark outlined some of the more unfortunate challenges of the project, “Unfortunately some cameras have already been stolen and posts on public land have been vandalised.

“Frustratingly, not only was the equipment stolen but the valuable data cards were lost, impacting on the valuable knowledge that assists in improved management of this complex issue.

“Subsequently all cameras are security code locked and therefore unusable to anyone that doesn’t know the code number,” Mark said.

The Gumbaynggirr Green Teams from Nambucca, Coffs, Yarrawarra and Grafton have provided a skilled workforce to install special posts for the remote cameras in the often challenging Coffs hinterland terrain. The Green Teams have also been collecting scats which are analysed for animal material such as hairs to distinguish different species. So far the recorded ‘dog’ diet includes Grey Kangaroos, Swamp and Red-necked Wallabies, Brush-tailed Possum, Northern Brown Bandicoots, insects and plants.

Mark continued, “One of the most exciting aspects of the project includes the trapping of wild dogs and fitting them with special collars that satellite track their movement across the landscape.

“We’re also fitting GPS collars to a small number of cats and foxes and ascertain their movements to determine any overlap or differences in landscape use between those species and wild dogs and Dingoes.

“Any wild dogs that are humanely trapped are checked for microchips to ascertain if the animal is privately owned and before any collars are fitted on any wild dogs, they have DNA samples taken to check their hybridisation.

The Peri-urban Research Project has many positive outcomes including insights into fox movements that will not only guide landholders efforts in fox control, it will also potentially help protect native species.

“The ultimate outcome, however, is to use the knowledge gathered in this project to inform the development of wild dog local management plan.

“To facilitate this, a community based approach is needed that allows all stakeholders to have input into the plan,” Mark concluded.

If you would like more information about this project, contact Mark Robinson at North Coast Local Land Services on 6659 9405 and if you want more information and resources on wild dog management visit the North Coast Local Land Services website www.northcoast.lls.nsw.gov.au.

Media contact:

Mark Robinson, Land Services Officer, Phone 6659 9405

Photo captions:

Wild dog with a tracking collar fitted

Wild dog image taken with a camera trap