

Increasing the effectiveness of wild dog trapping programs.

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ABSTRACT

The use of leghold traps to capture wild dogs is a well accepted control method across Australia. Furthermore, research into trap humaneness and remote trap monitoring systems, along with the provision of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's) for wild dog trapping programs, acknowledge the value of leghold traps as an effective wild dog management tool. In many cases trapping programs and trappers themselves are supervised by managers with limited experience relating to the use of leghold traps for wild dog control. Many trapping operations are implemented as reactive programs in response to ongoing wild dog attacks upon domestic stock. Such programs are often challenging for trappers as they target wild dogs that have successfully evaded a number of control methods, which often include leghold traps set in good faith by affected parties but with limited expertise. In many cases the effectiveness of reactive trapping operations is compromised due to restricted funding availability which results in short-term trapping programs that provide limited opportunity for wild dog and trap interaction. Trapping will continue to be a valuable tool within many wild dog management areas providing those who supervise trappers and trap operations understand the conditions under which trappers and trapping programs operate most effectively.

Factors influencing the success of trapping programs are highlighted below.

What is required from the trapper – trapping, training, trap demonstration or monitoring.

Many trapping programs are limited in duration due to funding constraints. Ideally, such programs require many hours of field inspection looking for wild dog 'sign' (scats, scratchings, footprints, urine or scent posts) which determine where 'sets' (leghold trap sites) are located. Once established, these sets are checked daily, with additional sets being established in response to any new sign or change in behaviour of wild dogs in the area. As the program continues to evolve, within what is often a limited timeframe, trappers find it difficult and at times frustrating to be asked to take observers on the trap line with little explanation as to why their presence is required.

Managers supervising trapping operations need to determine if a trapper is being funded to trap, train, demonstrate trapping or monitor wild dog presence, whilst also providing sufficient time and resources to allow the nominated activity to be undertaken effectively. Attempting to do all four on the trap line, particularly during a reactive program, significantly limits the effectiveness of a wild dog trapping program. With that in mind it is important to recognise that during a reactive campaign there is little if any scope to 'value-add' to the work by addressing other (at the time lesser) needs.

Trapping with an audience.

Many trapping programs target wild dogs that have been exposed to a range of control methods. Each unsuccessful control method exposure can add to a wild dog's knowledge base and lead to what is commonly called an 'educated dog'. Terms such as 'bait-shy' and 'trap-shy' describe wild dogs that have survived exposure to control methods that they may now intentionally avoid. Although the level to which wild dogs become educated can be argued, trappers are reluctant to present a wary animal with any additional warning sign at each set. This becomes difficult when observers unintentionally leave additional scent at a set which can lead to a change in wild dog behaviour or outright avoidance of all control points further compromising the effectiveness of the trapping program.

Trappers prefer to work alone.

In addition to set contamination from scent left by observers, trappers prefer to work alone due to the level of concentration required to 'read' (observe) wild dog sign. The majority of trapping programs occur in bushland areas along fire trails. Driving long hours on remote and difficult trails requires a high degree of concentration. Trappers must constantly monitor the response of their trap dogs to wild dog sign whilst also looking for suitable set locations. This task is made more difficult when trappers are accompanied in the field by inquisitive, talkative and although well meaning, highly distractive observers. Trappers explain that trying to write an important report under a tight deadline with someone looking over your shoulder asking questions about each paragraph might provide a similar level of frustration for those who operate in an office environment. Trappers are more than happy to answer questions when giving *trap demonstrations* or give more detailed instruction when *training* future trappers. Accordingly, trapping, training and trap demonstration need to be undertaken separately.

Time frame for a wild dog trapping program.

Prior to setting traps significant effort is required to identify both sign of wild dog presence and suitable trap sites. Setting traps takes time and should not be rushed as in many cases traps are the final control method used to target wary wild dogs that have evaded all other forms of control. This initial 'set up' period can take from a few days to a week or more depending on the level of access, local knowledge held by the trapper and the presence of wild dog sign. Wild dog tracking research has identified average home ranges of approximately 10 000ha for S/E NSW and N/E Victoria (A. Claridge and D. Mills *pers comm*). Tracking studies and field experience has shown that wild dogs can take from 10 days to 3 weeks, or even longer in some cases, to return to a specific site within a home range.

Ultimately, the timeframe for most wild dog trapping programs is dependant upon the level of finance support available. In many cases trapping programs of such short duration are proposed that trappers have little opportunity for wild dogs to interact with traps. This is particularly frustrating for trappers when significant effort has been invested in sets which have been 'pulled up' (removed) prior to the return of wild dogs to the sign on which the original set was made. Many examples exist where wild dog prints have been identified at sets just days after traps have been pulled up. Although trappers understand that limited funding is a reality across all wild dog management areas it must be acknowledged from past experience that a two week trapping program is unlikely to be as effective as a three week program which in turn is unlikely to be as effective as a four week program.

A successful trapping program relies on interaction between wild dogs and traps. If the program is too short there is limited opportunity for this to occur. If a program is implemented to target a particularly difficult, educated or 'problem dog' a number of interactions at sets may be required over a much longer period of time. Many trappers have undertaken short term programs and trapped wild dogs still present within an area however, this is the exception rather than the rule. If pressed to nominate a timeframe most trappers would say that 4 weeks is sufficient to allow the establishment of a trap line with at least one wild dog interaction across a number of sets.

Training trappers.

A significant commitment is required from a number of parties to produce an experienced and competent trapper. A trainee must be made aware that many long and lonely hours will be spent attempting to control wild dogs possessing various levels of education leading, at least at the beginning of their career, to various levels of success. Potential trappers must be effective communicators, good listeners and at times possess a thick skin. Many landholders have been known to vent their frustration at the local trapper after continued attacks from a problem dog. A trainee trapper must also have the long term support of an employer to allow them to continue to hone their skills in the field. Many trainee trappers have been re-tasked after initial training due to a lack of support from an employer whose commitment to wild dog trapping was only short term. Experienced trappers are unlikely to commit to training new trappers unless a clear level of long term commitment is evident from both the trainee and the employer. In many instances it is better to send a trainee on a number of trap lines with a number of trappers rather than rely solely upon a single experienced operator. This way the trainee gains experience from a number of experienced trappers across a range of areas and situations.

Contract trappers and permanent trappers.

Many wild dog control areas utilise the services of contractors to add trapping as an additional control method to their wild dog plans. These 'reactive' or 'pulse' trap operations can be very successful where funding does not allow the employment of a permanent trapper. Some areas add a contract trapper to their programs to assist a permanent trapper during busy periods or allow them to concentrate on a problem dog. Whilst a mix of contract and permanent trappers allows some flexibility and cost savings across a large number of wild dog control plans, reliance on short-term contracts does little to encourage skill sharing or long term career security amongst trappers. In addition, long-term consistent trapping means that landholders get more exposure to individual trappers which should, in theory, allow for ongoing communication – the value of which can sometimes be underestimated.

Baiting and trapping.

Baiting is the most commonly used tool for wild dog control across Australia. An effective wild dog control program utilises a number of control methods which when used correctly maximise their impact on any wild dog present with a defined control or treatment area. Baiting and trapping are difficult to implement together for a number of reasons. Trappers use trap dogs to locate wild dog sign which determines the placement of trap sets. These trap dogs are extremely valuable to trappers and many trappers have lost dogs to baits or had near misses which resulted in sick dogs and lost trap time.

Ideally trapping should be undertaken prior to baiting so any wild dog sign observed in the field is current rather than being from a wild dog which has taken a bait and will never return to a set. In many cases a lack of overall control program coordination leads to baiting programs being run on top of trapping programs. This raises issues with bait placement and increases the risk to trappers trap dogs. If necessary, trappers can operate around baiting programs provided detailed information is available on bait placement, bait type and time since baiting. In areas where permanent trappers implement a number of control methods within a defined control zone the same person is doing the baiting and trapping. If trapping cannot be implemented prior to baiting a period of approximately 2 months (depending on bait type, soil moisture and presentation method) should be allowed to pass before trap dogs are widely used. When baiting is implemented at the conclusion of a trapping program trappers can provide advice on suitable bait locations and presentation methods.

Before the trapper arrives.

Although interactions between wild dogs and traps is the preferred outcome of any trapping program interactions between traps and graders, bulldozers, bushwalkers, horse riders, weed sprayers or any other non-target is not preferred. The timing of trapping programs should be discussed with trappers in advance to determine optimal wild dog trapping seasons (usually autumn and spring) and other periods where non-target risks are at their greatest (Easter, school holidays). In addition to this all efforts should be made to ensure that trails are open and clear prior to the commencement of any trapping program. Trapper time spent clearing trails after windstorms, snowfalls or bushfires is valuable trap time lost.

Trapping within a wild dog plan.

Ultimately, an effective wild dog control program requires access to a number of control methods used within a defined control area. A number of these control methods must be operational at all times so any wild dog present within the control area has the opportunity to interact with at least one form of lethal control. Details relating to the operation of wild dog control areas are normally outlined within a local wild dog plan. These plans provide the opportunity to program and cost trapping operations in advance. Plans that identify the likely requirement of a reactive trapping component within their plan can cost and program the services of a contract trapper to ensure their availability when required. This approach helps to provide long-term job security for trappers, which in turn provides landholders and wild dog management groups with long term access to experienced and professional trappers.

Trappers and Wild Dog Research Projects.

Any research project on wild dogs should ideally utilise the skills of a local professional trapper. This is important for several reasons. First and foremost, in situations where wild dogs are planned to be live-captured, collared and subsequently released (ie. radio-tracking studies), it is in the best interests of the local trapper to know how the work is being conducted and where it is being done – particularly in situations where collared animals may move into control areas and/or the surrounding agricultural landscape.

Ideally, local trappers should be involved in the initial stages of any research study to ensure that issues relating to catch and release trapping, local community support for such projects, animal ethics approval

conditions and suitability of trap type and their use can be clearly identified and understood by all parties prior to any field work being undertaken. As researchers move on from one study site to another it must be acknowledged that trappers remain as part of the local community and are likely to bare the brunt of any community resentment resulting from poorly consulted or implemented research projects.

Communicating with trappers.

During times of little or no stock loss and minimal wild dog sign in bushland areas adjoining grazing paddocks, trappers can still experience a level of pressure from landholders and managers that is perhaps not justified. Rather than judging the performance of a local trapper in terms of wild dogs trapped, landholders and managers should be monitoring stock loss and wild dog activity. Permanent trappers have the opportunity to continually monitor the movement of wild dogs within their control area and respond using a range of control techniques. Wild dogs are unable to interact with baits and traps if they are not currently present within a control area. Rather than ask the local trapper how many wild dogs they have trapped today we should be asking about the level of wild dog sign present and the number of local stock recently killed or just as importantly, not killed by wild dogs.

Conclusion.

Leghold trapping using softjaw traps is an effective wild dog management tool when used by trained and experienced trappers. Part-time trapping by well meaning but less experienced field operators ultimately leads to trap-shy wild dogs which may then avoid traps in addition to other control methods which have also been evaded successfully.

The time and effort required to establish a trapping program is more likely to be rewarded when sufficient opportunity for interaction between wild dogs and traps takes place. This can only occur when trapping programs are implemented over a number of weeks allowing wild dogs to interact with multiple trap sites within a defined control area which lies within part of their home range.

The ability to utilise both permanent and contract trappers provides the flexibility necessary to effectively deal with wild dogs, using a range of control methods, under cooperative wild dog management plans. It should be noted however, that an over reliance on short term contracts will ultimately lead to the loss of career security required to retain wild dog trapping as a valuable tool for wild dog management in the future.

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