

COMMENTS ON FERAL PIG ERADICATION EXERCISE, SIR GRAHAM MOORE ISLAND, OCTOBER 1989

Background

Feral pigs are established on Sir Graham Moore Island near Kalumburu in the northern Kimberley region. Their eradication is considered desirable because of exotic disease risks and environmental damage. Since 1986, APB Protection Branch has attempted to eradicate the pigs by aerial shooting, aerial baiting, ground-based baiting and hunting on foot. APB Research staff were involved in the unsuccessful ground-based baiting exercise in October 1988, when the pigs refused to take free-feed. At that time, hunting with dogs appeared the best remaining option and a hunting exercise was subsequently organised by the District Agriculture Protection Officer, based in Kununurra. The exercise employed a contract hunter and one dog, and two aboriginal members of Norforce, based at Kalumburu. The exercise was attended by the Regional Manager of the Department of Agriculture at Kununurra, a veterinary officer from Kununurra, a representative from the Bureau of Rural Resources (Aboriginal Employment Programs and Vertebrate Pests Management Section) and an officer from APB Research. Funding for the exercise came from the Bureau of Rural Resources and the Aboriginal Lands Trust.

The Hunting Exercise

A camp was established on the island and on the nearby mainland, and staff were ferried between the island and the mainland by boat and helicopter.

Hunting began on 12/10/89 and ended on 16/10/89. All beaches on the island were examined from the boat or the helicopter daily. Any fresh pig tracks were followed up on foot. The central part of the island was searched from the air and areas of activity were examined in ground searches.

During most of the exercise the searchers worked in teams of 2 or 3, keeping in contact by two-way radio. They were armed with 12-G shotguns loaded with solid rifled slugs. Shooters operating from the helicopter used the same shotguns or a military SLR (.308). At one stage all available searchers worked together to intensively cover an area of thick vegetation, with nine men walking in line abreast.

Conditions on the island were less dry than during the October 1988 exercise, but no fresh water was found. Fires were burning on the island before the exercise, and continued to burn while the hunting took place. Much of the western half of the island was affected but the burn was relatively cool and much green vegetation remained. Fresh green regrowth was already beginning in some burnt areas, and was apparently attractive to pigs. Areas of vine thicket remained green and damp, and very difficult to penetrate on foot.

A total of 13 pigs was shot. Only three of these were discovered during ground searches, the rest being found and shot from the helicopter. The dog used for the exercise had not encountered pigs previously and failed to locate or catch any animals. The very thick cover found in some areas of pig activity would make it hard for a hunter to work closely with a dog, and in future only experienced dogs should be used.

Ten of the pigs killed were juveniles, with estimated weights of 10 kg or less. The other 3 pigs were well-grown. All were in at least fair condition. During the 1988 exercise no young pigs were seen, and 3 of the 11 pigs shot were in very weak condition. Evidently the late wet season in 1989 allowed good breeding and good survival of young pigs.

When the exercise ended fresh pig tracks were found in at least two areas, and one pig was seen from the helicopter but could not be shot. An unknown number of pigs survived.

Conclusions and recommendations

The exercise established that pigs were still active and widespread. In the opinion of the veterinary officer, the exotic disease risks justify further attempts to eradicate the pigs.

The dog used in the exercise was not experienced in hunting pigs. If suitable experienced dogs can be used, hunting in this way should still be more thorough than hunting by human searchers alone.

The aborigines from Norforce proved to be valuable trackers and would certainly be worth employing in future control work.

Fire has previously been considered as a possible aid to control work. The fire on the island during this exercise left large amounts of green cover untouched. Evidently fire would be of limited use as a control method.

All the previous control effort has taken place at the end of the dry period, when pigs are presumed to be confined to limited areas of favourable habitat. It may be worth carrying out control early in the dry season, when cool conditions and abundant feed may lead pigs to be more active and easier to locate.

Helicopters have proved essential for rapid searches, ferrying of hunters, and shooting. Any future exercise should budget for the use of a helicopter.

The District Agriculture Protection Officer has proposed another hunting exercise in 1990. This would use up to 6 Norforce men under the control of a local Norforce officer and the APB. The men would operate in teams of two,

searching assigned areas of the island over several days. Feral pigs would be followed up and shot, or shot from hides. A helicopter would be used for aerial searches and shooting. A hunter with experienced dogs might also be involved. The proposed exercise should have a good chance of success.

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