

FERAL DONKEY



DONKEYS (*Equinus asinus*) were first imported into Australia around 1870. They were used as pack and draught animals in the development of the Victoria River districts in the Northern Territory and in the Kimberleys. Late in the 19th century large donkey trains regularly carried goods from Carnarvon to the Kimberleys. The Western Australian Government imported donkeys in the early 1900's to boost the number of animals available to the transport industry. As the donkey was superseded by the motor vehicle, many were released to roam as they liked, quickly reverting to the wild or feral state. The population of feral donkeys in the Kimberleys rose substantially after the 1930's,

building up to such large herds in some areas that they were declared vermin in the Kimberleys, Pilbara, North West and Goldfields' districts of W.A.

Feral donkeys are declared animals under the Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act throughout W.A. The objective is to eradicate them from the State.

Distribution:

In the Kimberleys, donkeys range from the Northern Territory border to Derby but the greatest concentration appears to be in the east Kimberleys. Total numbers are not easy to assess because they are found in remote inaccessible country. Some stations have estimated they have more than 10,000 donkeys within their boundaries and others claim to have

more donkeys than cattle. Mobs of up to 500 animals have been reported.

Distribution in the Pilbara extends from the De Grey River, west almost to Onslow. Agriculture Protection Board staff estimate the population to be considerably lower than that found in the Kimberleys and herds are widely distributed throughout the Pilbara.

In the Goldfields, feral donkeys extend from Lake Willis in the north, to Norseman in the south and west to Bullfinch. Generally, total donkey numbers are lower in this region and the herds are more widely scattered.

Habits:

Feral donkeys are attracted to the extensive expanses of tussocky perennial grasses of the Kimberleys

(continued overleaf)

FERAL DONKEY

(continued)

and Pilbara, while mulga and associated herbage are major feed components for the eastern goldfields' donkey. During the dry season, feral donkeys concentrate in enormous numbers in areas with suitable food. They graze between dusk and sunrise roaming over large areas. In the wet season, donkeys are normally found in groups of 10-30 but they often roam in two's and three's or as solitary individuals. The mating season extends from August to October. Foals are dropped following a gestation period of 11 months. Multiple births are rare. Donkeys become sexually mature at about two years of age.

Significance:

Where herds become concentrated in confined areas, trampling and heavy grazing causes irreparable damage to much of the perennial

grasses and herbage.

Maintenance of perennial grasses is essential for range stability and to supply feed for domestic stock.

Rangeland that is over-grazed becomes degraded, so that annual species which supply short term feed predominate. Donkeys impose additional grazing pressures during the dry seasons, thus reducing grazing capacity. Feral donkeys are normally found concentrated around water points. They behave aggressively towards domestic stock, denying them access to water.

Donkeys can graze all grasses to the point of destruction around water points. The bare ground is exposed to both wind and water erosion.

Control:

Shooting is the most practical method of control. Shooting from helicopters has proved to be a

humane and efficient technique in the remote country of the Kimberleys. It permits the shooter to follow donkeys into inaccessible areas and to make sure no wounded animals escape.

Donkeys are shot under control programmes initiated by the APB and by pastoralists. Professional shooters also take donkeys for the pet meat trade.

Feral donkeys are a threat to the pastoral industry and to the fragile rangeland environment. The animals must be controlled and eventually eradicated.

For advice on feral donkey control, contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Jarrah Road, South Perth, telephone 367 0111 or any country office of the Agriculture Protection Board or the Department of Agriculture.