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# FERAL GOAT



**T**HE GOAT (*Capra hircus*) was one of the first animals to be domesticated, eight to ten thousand years ago. Most archaeological work indicates that the earliest attempts at domestication were in dry hills surrounding the Mediterranean basin. The ability of goats to utilise the coarse browse of such dry mountainous areas recommended them for early domestication in preference to sheep. With large scale domestication of goats throughout the world, it was only a matter of time before domestic goats escaped and established feral goat herds in the wilds of most continents. Feral goats have a well deserved reputation for causing severe environmental damage throughout the world. Feral goats are declared animals under the Agriculture and

Related Resources Protection Act throughout W.A. The objective is to eradicate them from the State.

**Introduction and Spread.**

Goats arrived in Australia with the first fleet. They were introduced to many areas by early settlers and spread further by miners and railway construction gangs who used them as a source of milk and meat. Goats were introduced into Western Australia in the early colonial era, in the hope of establishing a mohair industry and to provide milk, butter and meat. In addition, they were used for light haulage and even goat racing. In 1870, a batch of 50 was sold to a man at Shark Bay. Some 4,500 goats were in W.A. by 1894, and by 1905, they were reported throughout all districts of the State. Large herds grazed on sheep and cattle stations;

these were dispersed when the mohair industry did not develop as had been hoped.

Breeding groups escaped and became semi-feral on many stations. Goats were declared vermin in the Upper Gascoyne district in 1928, at Marble Bar and Port Hedland the following year and Mullewa and Meekatharra in 1954. Feral goats are now declared animals for the whole State.

**Distribution:**

Today there are herds of feral goats in most pastoral parts of the State. The largest breeding populations are found in the Shires of Shark Bay, Carnarvon, Murchison, Yalgoo and Northampton. Herds of varying size are also found in other districts including the Upper Gascoyne, Meekatharra and Mt. Magnet;

*(continued overleaf)*

# FERAL GOAT *(continued)*

some properties carry very large numbers of goats. A few breeding herds are also found in the Pilbara and Ashburton regions and Coolgardie, Boulder and Norseman.

## **Biology:**

Goats have a gestation period of around 150 days and often bear twins. During prolonged periods of favourable climatic conditions and plentiful food, breeding may occur twice in one year. A female goat is capable of producing her first litter at the age of six to seven months. Goats can be quite selective in their grazing habits. They generally prefer shrubs rather than grasses and herbs. In Western Australia they browse on mulga which provides the drought reserve for sheep during the summer.

## **Significance:**

The goats' appetite and destructive grazing habits can have a serious effect on the vegetative cover and the balance of species in a plant community. The animals can strip the leaves and bark completely off shrubs. Valuable pasture species including saltbush and soft spinifex often fail to recover from such heavy grazing and are replaced by annuals and less valuable perennial species.

Overgrazing may also lead to

massive soil erosion, permanently reducing the carrying capacity. Disturbance by the sharp hooves of goats and the characteristic pawing of the ground by males leaves soil open to the erosive forces of wind and rain.

In addition to affecting the landscape, feral goats compete with native animals for limited shelter, water and food.

Feral goats are susceptible to several exotic livestock diseases including foot and mouth disease, rabies and rinderpest. They would undoubtedly act as a reservoir of infection if these diseases ever reached Australia.

## **Control:**

In 1972, the Agriculture Protection Board introduced a commercialisation policy for feral goats and since then over one million have been processed through abattoirs.

The aim of this policy is to allow landholders to take advantage of the commercial value of feral goats while they work towards completely eradicating them.

A permit from the APB is required to hold feral goats after mustering and to transport them to abattoirs. One condition of these permits is that any non-marketable goats are

destroyed. A \$2.00 bounty is currently (1981) paid on the ears of non-saleable goats in Zone 3 (Gascoyne-Murchison). Mustering and trapping are now the main means used to control goats. However, shooting is an alternative, especially where small numbers are involved.

The value of shooting can be seen in the east Pilbara where this technique has been used with great success, the feral goat population being virtually wiped out.

People wanting to keep feral goats for upgrading to Angora stock or for other purposes may obtain a permit to do so from the APB. These permits are strictly controlled and are subject to stringent fencing requirements. The goats must be earmarked so they may be easily identified.

It is essential to control and eventually eradicate feral goats in W.A.

*For advice on feral goat control, contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Jarrah Road, South Perth, telephone (09) 367 0111 or any district office of the Agriculture Protection Board or the Department of Agriculture.*