



United effort on cane toad front

The movement of cane toads into Western Australia is bringing together a range of community, government and business groups aimed at curbing cane toad spread.

by Corrin Everitt, Lee Scott-Virtue and Kim Hands

With cane toads now crossing the Western Australian border, it has become more important than ever for the growing army of 'toad busters' to unite forces and fight the cane toad threat. While cane toads are still in low numbers in Western Australia, they have already reached the far north-eastern corner of Lake Argyle, which is listed as a Wetland of International Importance.

As a result, the community and government offensive against the toads is now intensifying. For, while cane toads have been in Australia for more than 70 years, it is only in the past few years that community efforts to halt their spread have increased. And perhaps no place is this more evident than WA. Since 2005, community involvement has been so great that it has been

labelled the largest community effort towards an invasive species in Australia and perhaps the world.

Leading the community efforts are the Western Australian organisations Kimberley Toad Busters and Stop the Toad Foundation, as well as the Northern Territory-based Frog Watch. Now these community groups and other interested groups have combined forces under the Cane Toad Stakeholder Reference Group.

A united front

The Cane Toad Stakeholder Reference Group brings together a host of key organisations involved in cane toad management. The groups include the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), which chairs

the group and provides executive assistance, Department of Agriculture and Food WA, Kimberley Toad Busters, Kimberley Wildlife Rescue, Kununurra Visitor Centre, Ord Guard Bio-security Group, Ord Land and Water, Rangelands Natural Resource Management WA, Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley, Stop the Toad Foundation, Tourism WA and Zone Control Authority Kununurra District.

Under the stakeholder group umbrella, these groups together provide a forum for collaboration and coordination of on-ground activities to fight the toads' spread. The stakeholder group also promotes information exchange between community groups and government and will place a heavy focus on the State Government's State cane toad strategy. The Minister for



Environment released a draft strategy in May for public comment.

DEC

DEC is leading the way to help the community prepare for the arrival of cane toads and be involved in their control and management. It has helped distribute \$13 million in State Government funding for the fight against the cane toads since 2004. Most recently, DEC has released information packs, containing brochures and other products, that address issues ranging from the safe handling of cane toads to where to drop off live cane toads in Kununurra. It has also launched a website (www.dec.wa.gov.au/canetoads).

One of the department's primary initiatives is to protect six Western Australian frog species that are most

commonly confused with the cane toad. It is also urging the Western Australian community to be vigilant in reporting cane toad sightings, by phoning 1800 084 881.

Committed community

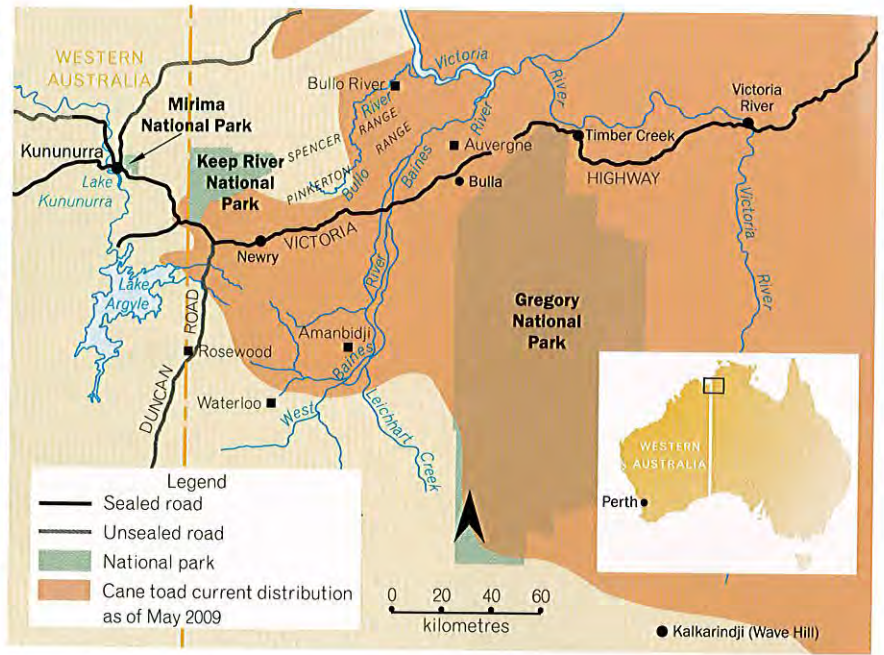
Two key community action groups, Kimberley Toad Busters, a Kununurra-based volunteer organisation, and Stop the Toad Foundation, based in Perth, have worked tirelessly for more than three years, conducting regular toad busting expeditions to the front line, facilitating the involvement of thousands of volunteers and raising community awareness of the cane toad issue.

Kimberley Toad Busters has organised weekly volunteer toad busting expeditions since September 2005. The Kimberley Toad Busters' field objective

Above Cane toads have reached Lake Argyle near Kununurra.
Photos - David Bettini

Insets from top Stop the Toad Foundation volunteers at the 2008 Great Toad Muster.
Photo - Kim Hands
Adult cane toad.
Photo - Russell Gueho

has been to try to slow the toads' advance towards WA, mitigate their impact by thinning the numbers at the cane toad front and reduce the impact of new breeding by destroying eggs, tadpole and metamorph incursions. Kimberley Toad Busters has conducted reconnaissance surveys ahead of the advancing cane toad corridors to identify areas most at risk of invasion, helped to determine the best field methodology, facilitated cane toad education and



worked to prepare people ahead of the cane toad advance.

By 31 March 2009, Kimberley Toad Busters had caught, measured, recorded and dispatched 354,916 mature cane toads and millions of eggs, tadpoles and metamorphs from the front line corridors making their way towards the Western Australian border. They have also chalked up 505,467 volunteer field hours and accumulated tens of thousands of volunteer administration hours.

In addition to its field work, Kimberley Toad Busters has been working closely with Indigenous communities throughout the Northern Territory and WA to enlist them in the cane toad offensive. It has engaged Aboriginal ranger groups from Derby and Kalumburu, employed a full-time Indigenous coordinator and provided information and education to remote community groups throughout the Kimberley. It has also facilitated a Cane Toad Education Program, which has created a website that receives about 1,500 hits a day; delivered presentations about cane toads to more than 40 schools, Probus, Rotary and government institutions as well as other community groups; and launched the 'What's in your Backyard?' program that encourages community members to actively record native animal biodiversity before cane toads arrive.

The Perth-based Stop the Toad Foundation is also in on the action. It has focused its field-based operations on the trialling of barrier or deflection fencing to help with the manual collection

Above left Thousands of toads find refuge in a waterhole on a Northern Territory station.

Photo - Sandy Fleisher/DEC

Right Kununurra residents take part in toad busting activities to help slow the toads' spread.

Photo - Corrin Everitt/DEC

or trapping of toads. Much of the group's efforts focuses on an annual dry season 'Great Toad Muster'. The muster occurs for four to six weeks in the late dry season, when volunteers can take advantage of the toad's requirement for water to manually collect and dispose of them.

Last year's muster resulted in the removal of 69,123 toads over four weeks. About 70 volunteers attended the muster which used a combination of trapping, hand removal and fencing (five kilometres of fencing was placed around key remaining water points). This year's muster is looking to be bigger and better with Stop the Toad Foundation aiming to expand its target areas, extend the muster to six to eight weeks long and increase the amount of fencing around water points.

While they have been working hard on the ground, perhaps the most significant contribution the community groups have made to the cane toad issue has been to increase broader public awareness of northern Australia's cultural and biodiversity values.



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