

Travelling toad show



On a mission to prevent more endangered northern quoll populations from being impacted by poisonous cane toads, a convoy of 14 people embarked on a toad busting road trip through the Kimberley. Dian Fogarty shares how the trip captivated the attention and enthusiasm of every community it passed through.

by Dian Fogarty



In the sticky heat of the Kimberley's wet season when the temperature doesn't drop below 35 degrees Celsius overnight, a dedicated team challenged themselves to collect 4000 cane toads, over four nights in four locations. The aim was to drive across the Kimberley and ask people in communities along the way to use their local knowledge to locate and collect as many cane toads as they could so the leg meat could be minced into sausage baits as part of the taste aversion program to deter northern quolls (*Dasyurus hallucatus*) from eating the toads.

ON A MISSION

The only thing holding us back from attempting to prevent more endangered northern quolls in the Kimberley being impacted by cane toads was how many toad legs we could get to make the sausages. It takes approximately three toads to make one sausage, which weighs about 14g, and we needed thousands of live toads.

The taste aversion program involves taking the cane toad leg meat, mincing it into sausages and lacing the sausages with a mild nausea-inducing chemical before dropping them into known habitats of northern quolls.

The quolls eat the sausage meat and feel slightly sick, creating a bad memory associated with anything that smells



or tastes like cane toads. The baits are dropped just before cane toads are predicted to arrive in the area to train the quolls to avoid eating them.

Smaller toad busting events have been held around Kununurra and in small communities like Frog Hollow and Muludja but since thousands of toads were needed to make the sausages in time for when the quolls were teaching their young how to forage, we needed to think bigger.

We stirred up some interest with posters on community noticeboards, on social media and participated in an ABC radio interview.

HITTING THE ROAD

In late January, the Parks and Wildlife Service team from Broome and Kununurra met with a group of Dambimangari Rangers from Derby, local Bunuba Rangers and Jardine MacDonald from Rangelands Natural Resource Management in Fitzroy Crossing.

The original plan was to travel via the Gibb River Road, but a decent amount of rain changed that plan and the team decided to stick to the bitumen and go to Fitzroy Crossing, Warmun, Wyndham and Kununurra.

The six-vehicle convoy was loaded with education materials, gloves, bags and everything they needed to set up an information stall in each town and create an area to process the meat. Behind them



they towed a portable cool room to keep the toad meat fresh from the wet season heat.

It was the first time we had attempted a travelling road show, and finding the toads was harder than we anticipated.

The plan was to catch the toads during the night when they are active and bring them back to 'toad base' for processing. The leg meat would then be packed into foam boxes and frozen, ready to be sent to the bait factory to be made into sausages.

THE MOMENTUM BUILDS

On the first night in Fitzroy Crossing, the stall was inundated with kids wanting to help and more than 70 people came to the stall to see what was happening and get involved.

The team set up an information stall at 'toad base' where we explained how to identify cane toads correctly, how to catch them and handle them and answered questions about the conditioned taste aversion project and sausage making.

It was a great start; the enthusiasm was infectious. We handed out gloves and bags and everyone went off looking for cane toads.

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Main A dedicated team challenge themselves to collect 4000 cane toads across four nights in the Kimberley.

Inset Cane toad (*Rhinella marina*)

Top right Information stalls at the four locations help educate locals in identifying and capturing cane toads correctly and provide further information about the baiting and taste aversion project.

Photos – Dian Fogarty/DBCA

Above right A closer look at the toxins released by poison glands on a cane toad.

Photo – Jiri Lochman



“The quolls eat the sausage meat and feel slightly sick, creating a bad memory associated with anything that smells or tastes like cane toads. The baits are then dropped just before cane toads are predicted to arrive in the area to train the quolls to avoid eating them.”

Fitzroy Crossing is at the front line of the spread of cane toads, so it was unknown whether the toads had reached large numbers as they had only started appearing in town the previous year.

Throughout the course of the night, only seven cane toads were found in Fitzroy Crossing, which is good news for the resident goannas that are one of the most significantly affected species of cane toad invasion, but bad news for filling the 4000-toad quota.

Despite the low numbers, the local Bunuba Rangers had so much fun they ended up joining the team for the rest of the week.

The second night led us to Warmun where we set up our ‘toad base’ and information stall next to the local basketball courts where a lively game was happening under the lights.

The team’s youth coordinator rounded up some kids to help and before long, it seemed like half the community was looking for cane toads.

The local police were very supportive, taking carloads of kids out to catch toads

and people who had never touched a cane toad before got involved filling up bags.

Despite the enthusiasm, the relatively cool weather and low rainfall leading up to the muster resulted in only 37 toads being found in and around Warmun.

RALLYING THE TROOPS

Starting to feel the pressure to get another 3956 cane toads, the team continued to Wyndham the following night, but when we arrived, there was a Blue Light Disco in town and all the kids were dancing up a storm! The team’s experienced toad busters set about looking for cane toads around town at sundown but without the kids’ local knowledge, we didn’t find any toads.

After an hour or so without any luck, we decided to pack up and head back to Kununurra, collecting toads on the way. This turned out to be a good idea as there were we found a couple of good spots on the side of the road and netted around 800 toads.

On the final night, the team set up ‘toad base’ in the middle of Kununurra



town centre and attracted the attention of passing motorists and plenty of locals stopped by and picked up a set of gloves and bags to catch cane toads around their properties and places they know.

It was great to see so many toads coming back to us in bags. All in all, we didn’t reach our target of 4000, it was more like 2000, but the community engagement was incredible, and I think there is a lot to be said for that.

The muster collected enough leg meat to produce around 500 sausages, which

Top left Northern quolls are now being trained to avoid eating cane toads through a taste aversion baiting program.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Top Leg meat is packed, frozen and sent to the bait factory to be made into sausages.

Above Collection of cane toads at night by an enthusiastic community.

Photos – Dian Fogarty/DBCA



Above Cane toad processing at 'toad base'

Below A cane toad collection box is located outside the Parks and Wildlife Service office in Kununurra.

Photos – Dian Fogarty/DBCA

will be sent to the Harvey bait factory and then dropped from helicopters into known quoll habitats just in front of the cane toad invasion front line near Silent Grove, Mount Hart and Prince Regent Nature Reserve.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Anyone can get involved in toad busting by contacting Dian for advice and guidance. Gloves and bags are available for toad busting in your own backyard and if you spot a toad, you can drop it off to the live toad collection box out the front of the Parks and Wildlife Service office on Ivanhoe Road. The team are also happy to take frozen toads, provided they have been killed humanely using the cooling and freezing method.

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