That feral cat bait

By Dave Algar

Predation by feral cats is recognised as a significant threat to fauna conservation in Australia. Not only do feral cats prey on native fauna and have the potential to spread diseases, but they have also proven to be an obstacle to fauna reintroduction programs. As a consequence of these impacts, DEC initiated a feral cat control research program within the umbrella program *Western Shield*.

Prior to commencement of this research, baiting programs for feral cats had been ineffective, principally because the baits used were for other introduced predators such as foxes and wild dogs and were unattractive to cats. DEC researchers conducted an extensive series of trials in an endeavour to develop a bait medium that was palatable to feral cats and capable of carrying a toxin. The baits had to be relatively easily and cheaply manufactured and stay intact when distributed from an aircraft over broad-scale areas. These trials have led to the development of the feral cat bait known as 'Eradicat®'. The bait, which is injected with a toxin, resembles a small sausage and contains kangaroo meat mince, chicken fat and flavour enhancers to attract feral cats.

Use in feral cat management

Baiting campaigns using Eradicat® have proven to be an effective method for reducing feral cat numbers and the bait is now used as a control tool for feral cat management at a number of mainland sites in arid and semi-arid regions. A recent project has gone a long way to demonstrating that the sustained control of introduced predators (both feral cats and foxes) in the southern rangelands can also be achieved using this bait. Eradicat® is most effective in late autumn and winter when cats are hungry because of a shortage of live prey. Under the right conditions, feral cat densities have been reduced by more than 80 per cent.

Baiting campaigns using Eradicat® have also been used effectively to eradicate feral cats from several islands, including Hermite Island in the Montebellos and Faure Island in Shark Bay. Following feral cat eradication, successful translocation of a number of native species to these islands has occurred. A feral cat eradication campaign is being planned for Dirk Hartog Island, the largest island off the Western Australian coast. The Dirk Hartog project would become, globally, the largest feral cat eradication campaign attempted on an island. The island could potentially support one of the most diverse native mammal assemblages in Australia, following successful eradication of feral cats, and contribute significantly to the long-term conservation of several threatened species.

Feral cats have recently been shown to predate threatened mammal species in the south-west and it would be desirable to implement cat baiting in this area.

*Feral cats (*Felis catus*) are formidable hunters of our native fauna. Photo – Babs and Bert Wells/DEC*

Managing pet cats to protect wildlife

A study carried out by Murdoch University assessed the efficacy of a collar-worn pounce protector CatBib™ for reducing the number of vertebrates caught by pet cats. Fifty-six pet cats identified as hunters were studied in Perth during November and December 2005. Cats spent three weeks wearing a device and three weeks without it. During this period the cats caught 65 birds (13 species), 67 herpetofauna (11 species) and 164 mammals (five species). The colour of the CatBib™ or the addition of bells gave no additional protection. Cats wearing CatBibs™ reduced the prey caught to 25 per cent of birds, 43 per cent of herpetofauna and 36 per cent of all mammals captured. Although consistent use of CatBib™ on pet cats reduces predation, confinement of pet cats eliminates attacks on wildlife and protects cats from hazards such as road traffic and fighting.

Reference: Calver, M., Thomas, S., Bradley, S., McCutcheon, H. (2007) Reducing the rate of predation on wildlife by pet cats: The efficacy and practicability of collar-mounted pounce predators. *Journal of Biological Conservation* 137: 341-348.

There are some concerns that non-target species such as chuditch, dibblers and bush rats may also be at risk from the palatable cat bait, and trials are currently under way to examine the uptake of baits by these species. Through the incorporation of encapsulated toxins and the appropriate bait spacing, it is believed that non-target risks can be minimised and the cat bait used in the south-west to secure native fauna in this biodiverse area.

If further fauna declines are to be averted and reintroductions are to succeed, integrated management programs which address threats must be implemented. Effective control strategies for feral cats must be an integral component of these management programs. DEC researchers are developing feral cat control techniques and strategies that address these concerns. For more information email dave.algar@dec.wa.gov.au.