

# Solutions for the growing problem of wild dogs in residential areas

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## ABSTRACT

In recent times, concerns have increased regarding wild dogs and the impact they have on domestic pets/livestock and the potential threat they may cause to humans. Unfortunately most human intervention to manage wild dogs is reactive to public pressure, combined with a lack of knowledge of the species. A failed eradication program is often the result, which in most cases leads to an increase in pest numbers not a decrease. Before the implementation of a wild dog management program, one needs to understand the ecology and behaviour of the wild dog. Having a good knowledge of wild dog ecology and behaviour, will only aid in how to effectively manage them, and assist in forecasting future management and awareness programs.

## INTRODUCTION

A number of suburbs or cities through out Southeast Queensland have or may be experiencing problems with dingoes or hybrid dingoes coming into residential areas and creating a general nuisance. Hybrid dingoes are well established in most areas of the Southeast with few patches of purebred dingoes. Unfortunately, the pure dingo is slowly becoming non-existent due to hybridisation with domestic breeds. Hybrid dingoes or wild dogs are an extremely adaptable species that survives well in a residential area, because city environments support them. Incidents involving wild dog attacks on domestic pets in residential areas have increased the level of public concern and raised expectations for a response by local governments. It is not uncommon to hear wild dogs becoming increasingly bold in the presence of humans. In residential areas, wild dogs are increasingly losing their fear and distrust for humans. Dogs are becoming habituated because of human feeding both intentional and unintentional.

Unfortunately, after a pet has been killed, there are suggestions that all wild dogs and dingoes should be destroyed, believing that destroying all the dogs will fix the problem. The management of dingoes in residential areas is more complex than simply reducing numbers.

## UNDERSTANDING DINGOES & HYBRIDS

Dingoes and their hybrids are very adaptable and live in a variety of habitats ranging from remote rural lands to inner city suburbs. Dingoes and hybrids are most active at night, in early morning, and in late evening. They rely on their acute sense of smell, hearing and eyesight for hunting prey and avoiding possible danger. Dingoes/hybrids establish a home range and territories, which a pack of dogs will defend by marking boundary areas with faeces and urine on objects at particular sites as a part of their communication. Most pack structures are made up of a mated pair of adult dogs, nonbreeding offspring from the previous year and pups from the current year.

Dingoes and hybrid dingoes have a social ranking starting with the dominant dog (alpha dogs) through to the dogs with less hierarchy (gamma dogs). Dominant dogs are responsible for teaching younger dogs in the pack how to hunt prey, how to behave and their social ranking within the pack. Dominant dogs will quickly correct any disrespectful behaviour from a subordinate dog. Dingoes and hybrids optimise their time and energy when hunting rather than waste it, therefore most situations of predation are planned. They are also foragers, which allows them to survive on a variety of food including compost scraps, household garbage, road kill and domestic pets.

Stable dingoes and hybrid packs don't continue to increase in pack numbers in one territory. Around December to February younger dogs are kicked out of the pack structure and have to locate a new territory to occupy or be accepted into another less stable pack. Territories in residential areas tend to be smaller in size and tend not to sustain large numbers of dogs.

Usually only the dominant adult dogs breed, once a year. Subordinate females come into season but the dominant female usually blocks any sexual activity with aggressive threats and keeps subordinate females away from the male. Likewise the dominant male usually keeps other subordinate males from mating with the alpha female. Subordinate females do become pregnant from subordinate males, but in most cases the alpha female will kill the pups in their early stage of life.

## THE PROBLEM

A common occurrence with dingoes or hybrids in residential areas, is dogs turning up at new housing development sites or housing estates adjoining large parcels of land. Often effected landholders complain to State and Local Government agencies, with concerns for the safety of their pets and children. A crucial point in achieving a good working relationship with the affected residents is to manage the problem effectively from the start. Attitudes to wild dogs and public understanding of pest management is generally poor, community attitudes can determine the success or failure of any program unless it is conducted in the right manner. Working with and involving the community will not only assist you, but also promote any awareness and management programs that you implement.

The first step is to define the problem and identify the cause.

- Is the problem wild dogs?
- What damage is being caused?
- Where is the problem?
- When is the problem occurring?
- Why is it happening?
- How is the problem occurring?
- Who has the problem?
- Any other factors also involved.

This is why it is paramount to have an understanding of wild dog ecology and behaviour before initiating a program. Each situation is unique and may call for a combination of management methods. Some practices may not be suitable in certain situations, while others may not be practical or economical. It is important to evaluate all information and options carefully before choosing the right management plan.

### IMPLEMENTING PROGRAM

Once identified, the problem has to be addressed. Who needs to be involved in developing a successful program?

- Local Council.
- Department of Natural Resources & Mines.
- Delegates from the community.
- QLD Parks & Wildlife (if the problem adjoins National park or State forest).
- Other key groups: wildlife groups etc.

Implementing a management program has to involve a short-term and long-term strategy. The short-term strategy is to implement an effective program to reduce any incidents to an acceptable level whilst working on a long-term strategy incorporating sustainable land management, education, monitoring and evaluating the progress of work carried out.

### ERADICATE OR REDUCE IMPACT

Although dingoes and hybrids are naturally curious, they are usually timid animals and normally run away if challenged. Whilst, some people see the dogs as pests, others see them as starving dogs in need of food. Dingoes and hybrid dingoes can be a risk to people and pets if they become habituated in residential areas, usually as a result of feeding. When this occurs, dingoes and hybrids lose their natural fear and learn to see humans, their yards, and their pets as a food source.

There are still attitudes that Governments should eradicate all the dingoes, looking for the quick fix. It should be noted that eradication rarely works. Because dogs have a social structure and dominance plays an important role in behaviour, often the wrong dogs are removed creating a break down in hierarchy. This can result in more attacks and increased problems created by unsupervised adolescent dogs. When packs of dogs have been removed totally, it is only a matter of time before more dingoes or hybrids, usually hybrid dogs, move into the unoccupied area. In most cases the hybrid dogs create more problems than the dingo.

When an incident occurs with dingoes or hybrids coming into residential areas, usually the dogs causing the problem are young adolescent dogs. These dogs tend to have no fear of humans because they have not associated humans with danger. They associate them simply with a food source.

### INTERNATIONAL FEEDING

In the majority of problems associated with wild dogs in residential areas, intentional feeding is a problem that often occurs. Some people see wild dogs as thin

starving dogs in need of food. Wild dogs have adequate food supplies and are capable of surviving without our help. By feeding wild dogs people put themselves, their pets and the wild dog at risk. Wild dogs that become dependant on humans for food may become too bold, bite someone and have to be destroyed. Wild dogs that show signs of aggression need to be removed. Although the aggressive dog has been removed, human behaviour that led to the wild dog's actions remain. While people continue to feed and allow wild dogs to be comfortable around their homes, people and pets, the problem will occur again and again.

### EDUCATION

To help reduce incidents with dingoes and hybrids, education is the greatest long-term goal aimed at reducing conflict between people, pets, and wild dogs by providing accessible information. This can be achieved by

- holding community awareness programs,
- media releases,
- information brochures,
- shopping centre displays,
- show displays,
- school awareness education,
- Web site awareness.

Discouraging wild dogs from entering properties also plays a major role in wild dog management. Wild dogs should not feel comfortable around people and their homes. People can discourage wild dogs from hanging around homes by removing attractants such as:

- accessible garbage or compost
- outdoor pet food and water,
- wildlife feeders on the ground,
- rodent habitat such as neglected, overgrown yards,
- keeping pets restrained within suitable enclosures.

### SOLUTIONS TO A PROBLEM

Dealing with dingoes and hybrid dingoes in residential areas can be complex, as control options are limited to the surrounding environment. In the initial stages of a management program you need to establish what is the best course of action to take, remembering every situation can be different from the last. The following case study shows that reducing the impact wild dogs cause is far better than eradication.

### CASE STUDY

Ferny Hills and Bunya are residential suburbs situated in Pine Rivers Shire. In August 2000 Council adopted the need for a management program to reduce the impact that wild dogs were causing to landholders throughout the Shire. The need arose from a number of concerns local residents voiced regarding wild dogs attacking domestic pets and causing a nuisance. Before a management plan could be implemented, Council needed to determine the number of wild dogs located in that particular area; where they were running and why the wild dogs were coming into the residential areas. Through a series of public consultations and media releases, local residents were involved in assisting Council to collate this information. The behaviour patterns of the dogs were established and a successful management plan was the by-product.

The collation of information allowed Council to better understand the ecology and behaviour of the wild dogs. By pooling this new found knowledge the wild dog's movements were then tracked and territory boundaries were established.

### INSIGHT

A control program and location needed to be established to ensure the primary objective of the management plan – to reduce the impact the wild dogs were causing, would be achieved. The James Drysdale Landfill at Bunya was quickly identified as the location to establish the program as this was becoming the main food source for the wild dogs. This allowed Council to take control on their own land.

The control methods needed to remove the dogs became a serious problem as conventional methods (ie. baiting and shooting) were not acceptable practices in residential areas.

Council was faced with the decision of sedating the wild dogs via the use of a tranquilliser gun and determining which suitable chemical restraint would be used.

The wild dogs were proving difficult to tranquilise, as they fed at the base of the landfill and when approached by Council would run off. When the general public were unloading rubbish at the landfill, the dogs would remain and not run away. It was established that the dogs had familiarised themselves with the sight of vehicles backing into the tip area and not driving front in. Council then adopted the approach of reversing into the tip face as if dumping rubbish, this proved successful. Five of the six dogs were then tranquilised using this method.

Before the sixth dog could be removed another pack of four wild dogs had moved into the territory and now inhabited the area. These wild dogs proved to be difficult to remove, as they would run off at the sight of person/s approaching the tip face. Other methods of control were needed and Council looked at alternatives, particularly a device called the Collarum was used to capture coyotes in urban areas in the United States of America. They were 100% canine specific and would hold the animal around the neck via a cable, similar to a dog which was tied up and incapable of causing harm to other animals or the wild dogs.

These devices were purchased and used to capture the remaining wild dogs. Each time a pack of wild dogs was removed from the territory other wild dogs would then inhabit the area. A total of 47 adult dogs and pups were taken from the Bunya area.

It appeared that as wild dogs were removed from territory a new pack of wild dogs would occupy the territory. Council carried out more research and a decision was made to trial the removal of certain wild dogs, leaving the alpha dogs to occupy the territory. As wild dogs are territorial, leaving the alpha dogs to protect and defend their territory proved beneficial, as these wild dogs would not allow other wild dogs to enter their territory. Alpha dogs would show the same characteristics as the dingo and breed only once a year. When pups were born and old enough to be taken off the mother they were removed. This created a balance.

By having two alpha dogs occupy the territory and removing the pups each year, the public nuisance issue was no longer evident. It was also found that the wild dogs causing the nuisance were juvenile dogs.

Council continues to remove pups from the area each year. This program has proven to be successful for the last three years.

### LOOKING BACK

A large number of wild dogs were taken from the area, but removing dogs from the area, did not mean the problem was resolved, as more dogs move into the unoccupied area. In hindsight, by having knowledge of wild dog ecology and behaviour, and by selectively removing wild dogs to reduce the impact they cause, appears to create a balance for residents and the wild dogs. This process requires follow up work each year to control pups during whelping season and on going education to the area on coexisting with wild dogs. In the event that any of the wild dogs create a public safety risk, the offending dog would be removed.

### REFERENCES

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Darren Sheil has worked for pine Rivers Shire Council for seven years as a Community Response Officer; He has been dealing with dingoes and hybrids for the last 3 years and has taken a particular interest in developing new solutions for the growing problem of wild dogs. Darren has developed the successful management of wild dogs within Pine Rivers with the assistance of Council. Darren's role in Council is to develop management strategies for the shire for declared pest animals.