

Extreme view on foxes defended

THE 13-year old hunt for the elusive Tasmanian fox began in earnest, when the government was informed three hunters had allegedly sneaked 19 cubs on to the island and released them. It was the start of what became more than 3000 reported sightings.

In 2002, the respected nature journal Nature quoted eminent Tasmanian biologist Nick Mooney as saying: "The information the authorities have received leaves no doubt that foxes were deliberately brought into Tasmania."

Last week, Mr Mooney told *Stock & Land* he still maintained there had been live foxes in Tasmania.

"Eye witness stuff is what interests most people – but it is the most useless evidence," Mr Mooney said.

"I think there have been a few (foxes) – at least one was true – but there's a lot of dross in the middle."

"The key thing that attracted too much attention was about hunters bringing in a bunch of cubs – there is no evidence, apart from eyewitness accounts," he said.

He defended his role in alerting the public and government to the possibility of foxes becoming established in Tasmania.

"If I take an extreme point of view, it is simply because I know the risks are extreme."

Not one fox was ever shot by any of the teams in the government's Fox Eradication Program.

– ANDREW MILLER

Doubt surrounds research

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By ANDREW MILLER

SENIOR independent researchers from Europe, Victoria and Tasmania said they had investigated 17 possible incidents involving foxes in Tasmania.

The analysis was then passed to 12 independent scientists for review, and in turn by way of six papers to 20 editors and reviewers at six different scientific journals.

The findings are to be reported in the December issue of the *Wildlife Society Bulletin*.

They found 14 of 17 incidents described since 1998 were based on unreliable data or were not associated with adequately documented physical evidence.

"Anonymous and anecdotal information was fully or partially relied upon in 10 of 17 cases and of these five were widely acknowledged to be hoaxes," the authors found.

Fox scats found in Tasmania were handled improperly or gave false readings.

One of the researchers, the former Victorian head of vertebrate pest management, said the program raised serious questions about the management of invasive animal pest species.

Dr Clive Marks said the FEP was about the failure of innovation.

"The wrong people funded with the right amount of money are not the solution to the problem and never will be," he said.

"Just what has the central allocation of funds to 'research projects' delivered?"

"In my view we have a failed paradigm and a bad model for

innovating practical outcomes in wildlife management, because the public sector organisations and culture of wildlife research are very bad at delivering applied outcomes."

But as recently as 2012, scientists from Canberra's Institute of Applied Ecology – led by Dr Stephen Saare – claimed the fox was "widespread in northern and eastern Tasmania."

Using DNA evidence from what they said was an "enormous scale and breadth of the scats", they argued for fox eradication processes to be implemented on a very wide scale.

Richmond, Tas, wildlife biologist Nick Mooney was one of several people to first raise concerns about the supposed presence of foxes in 2002.

"There is a long history of foxes in Tasmania, predating whatever discussion there has been lately," Mr Mooney said.

"For instance, one was caught in a rabbit trap at Riverside in 2001."

Asked last week how foxes entered Tasmania, he said the evidence was so strong something substantial had to be done.

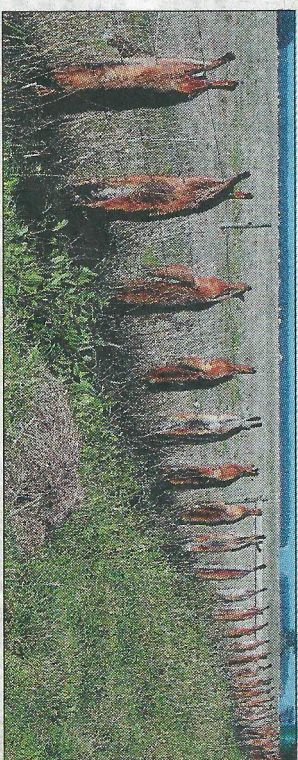
"There were a number of carcasses, including one fox with an endemic species in its gut (a long-tailed mouse), and scats with DNA," Mr Mooney said.

"It hasn't been shown to be a hoax whatsoever."

But he did not know how foxes came to be in Tasmania.

"We are pretty damned certain one came off a boat in 1998," he said.

■ Victorian foxes – did they ever reach Tasmania?



– there is enough evidence to make you want to do something.

"If you sit back and wait until everyone is sure nothing might happen, you might have a total catastrophe on your hands."

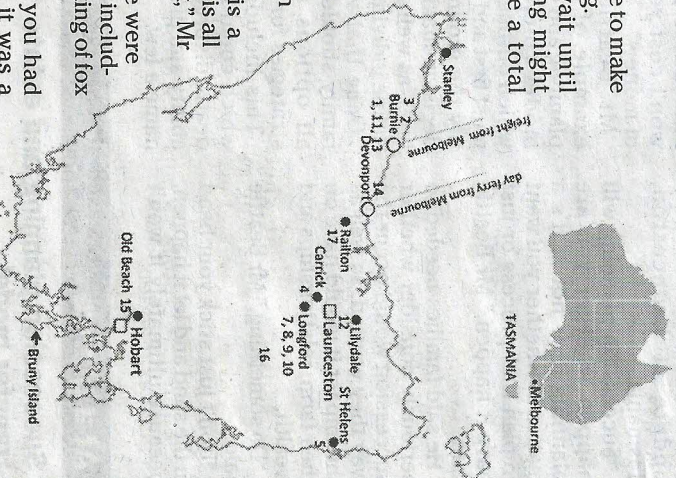
The former Pest Animal Control Co-operative Research Centre head, Tony Peacock, said it was a good sign that no foxes had been found in Tasmania.

"If there are foxes, it is a very small number, but it is all about your attitude to risk," Mr Peacock said.

He acknowledged there were issues with the program, including the collecting and testing of fox scats.

"No-one ever thought you had to collect samples as if it was a murder scene – to criticise them (the officers collecting the scats) is a bit rough," Mr Peacock said.

"But I think if it was a hoax, it was a bloody good one and it took us in."



■ The 17 fox-associated incidents from 1998-2009 as recorded in the Wildlife Society Bulletin.

Credible evidence debatable

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR Otley's report to the former Northern District Commander stated "the police inquiry has not uncovered any 'real' evidence whatsoever, that would tend to confirm the existence of a fox(es) in Tasmania."

Those supporting the eradication program argued the most credible evidence centred around the discovery of at least three dead foxes; at Longford in July 2001, Symmons Plains, September 2001 and Burnie in October 2003.

Initial research, by the Fox Task Force, seemed to indicate two of the foxes were from the same litter, indicating the animal had bred on the island.

Documents obtained in September 2005, from Victoria's Department of Primary Industries, found "the samples yielded very degraded DNA, which did not amplify well.

A letter, sent to the then head of the Fox Taskforce, Chris Parker, found "they produced no results or limited results which were hard to interpret."

It was also claimed a fox carcase, with a Tasmanian endemic long tailed mouse in its stomach, was allegedly shot at Symmons Plains, south of Launceston, in 2001.

The carcase was later discarded, or lost, but the stomach kept.

Later re-examination of the preserved fox's stomach was found only to contain hair from a common house mouse.

Fox facts

Claims of fox sightings or releases, since the eradication program began, include:

- ◆ A credible sighting of a fox, jumping off a container ships on May 1, 1998 at Burnie – accepted by both sides of the debate.
- ◆ Dr Tony Peacock said he was told fox cubs were being raised in a shed 2km from Longford, in 1999. He said he was told when the people involved discovered it was illegal, they released the foxes and burnt the shed to the ground.
- ◆ Another allegation centred around several hunters, who had been to Victoria chasing Sambar deer, who brought back cubs in. It was alleged the foxes were released at Longford, south of Oatlands, near Campania and St Helens. This theory was discredited in a police investigation, under Detective Inspector Mike Otley, who found some of the information was "highly suspect."

Tasmanian gamekeeper Ian Rist said the fox fight was first funded from the second tranche of the Telstra sale, under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC).

Critics of the program said commitments under the EPBC act mean the Commonwealth will to continue to pay for the program until 2018.

Last financial year, a further \$2 million was handed to the Tasmanian Government, under the Sustainable Environment Stream Target Area Grants.

Primary Industries Minister Jeremy Rockliff said Biosecurity Tasmania would continue to treat foxes like any other high risk species that threatened the State.

"We will continue to be vigilant when it comes to foxes,

but are doing so as part of the stronger integrated biosecurity framework that is designed to protect Tasmania from all invasive species and other biosecurity threats," Mr Rockliff said.

The State had kicked in \$954,000, which would be used to "deliver landscape monitoring and related activities, he said.

"Without jeopardising the Commonwealth funding, this program is now being broadened to develop a monitoring capacity for a range of invasive plants and animals, not just foxes," he said.

"This is now part of the new broader Vertebrate Pests program approach being undertaken by Biosecurity Tasmania's Invasive Species Branch."

– ANDREW MILLER