

Media release

Domestic animals: pets or pests?



Foxes, pigs, cane-toads and rabbits are notorious for the devastation they cause as some of Australia's most infamous feral animals.

But there is increasing concern over stopping the 'next wave' of invasive animals — pets that could become pests.

Professor Tony Peacock, Chief Executive Officer of the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre (IACRC) said some pets have real potential to negatively impact on biosecurity and threaten Australia's unique wildlife.

"Almost all feral fish populations established since World War II have come from home aquaria," Professor Peacock said.

"Tilapia, considered to be one of the world's worst 100 pests, were originally brought in as tropical aquarium fish, but have now invaded river and dam systems in Queensland and Western Australia, and are heading south."

"As tilapia spread they are expected to take a heavy toll on our native wildlife by eating the eggs and young of prawns, barramundi and several other native threatened species such as Murray cod."

The fish don't swim here themselves. Professor Peacock says this highlights that people are in the driver's seat of this problem.

"Don't release pet fish into the environment. Fish that are released into local waterways can upset the natural balance and impact on native fish species."

"Once pest animals have arrived and have established populations, we have to resort to control, providing it is feasible, viable and alleviates the negative impact."

Investigative work is constantly being undertaken to monitor any new threats, and to work with policy and decision-makers to avoid the threats posed by potentially invasive species.

"Prevention is always better than a cure," said Professor Peacock.

"A smart decision by the government was to ban Savannah cats from import to Australia."

"Savannah cats are derived from domestic cats and African servals. They would have passed serval genes onto our feral cat population, posing a high risk to our wildlife."

"The last thing we need is genes for better hunting efficiency and bigger cats getting into our feral cat population."

"The Savannah cat ban shows we are learning from previous mistakes, such as introducing rabbits and cane-toads. If in doubt, we should keep it out," he said.

And it seems as though other countries are following suit.



"The US is considering banning giant snakes, many of which have been imported as pets and then released, and are now over-running national park areas such as the Everglades," said Professor Peacock.

Recognising biosecurity is a global issue, IACRC are joining forces with the Australian Biosecurity CRC for Emerging Infectious Disease and CRC for National Plant Biosecurity to host the world's first international conference focusing on agricultural and environmental biosecurity. The conference will take place in Brisbane from February 28 to March 3 2010 and will discuss a myriad of biosecurity topics across these sectors.

The Global Biosecurity 2010 is sponsored by: Horticulture Australia Limited, Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) and the Australian Centre of Excellence for Risk Analysis (ACERA).

Registrations for the conference are now open. Visit www.globalbiosecurity2010.com

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