HOW CAN WE BETTER ENGAGE HOMO SAPIENS TO MANAGE SUS SCROFA?

John Cuskelly
Animal Biosecurity and Welfare, Biosecurity Queensland, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries
Drayton Street, Dalby Queensland 4405

ABSTRACT

Feral pigs have been a declared pest in Queensland since the 1930s - and yet as feral pig management facilitators and practitioners, we still often struggle to engage landholders to actively control pigs.

Even last year, with great community concern about Foot and Mouth Disease in neighbouring countries, many of our graziers were still asking -
"What is the government going to do to control the feral pigs on my land?"

So how do we get these primary integral stakeholders to take ownership and to proactively manage pigs?

INTRODUCTION

More than a decade ago, the *Queensland Biosecurity Strategy: 2009–14* stated -

> *"An area of growing interest is the relevance and importance of social sciences in modern biosecurity systems. Solutions to biosecurity risks are inherently social. Understanding human behaviours, values and attitudes provides opportunities to better target biosecurity measures. Improving social science capacity will support better community engagement."*

This is a very simple concept but its' implementation in communities is not easy. We do know that when we engage well with people, feral pig management is very likely to be successful.

Under Queensland's *Biosecurity Act 2014* landholders have a general biosecurity obligation to manage feral pigs. Furthermore, the people who most commonly assist with this general biosecurity obligation are local government officers.

Queensland's local government and natural resource officers have an excellent practical knowledge and understanding of feral pig management in their areas.

Local Government officers are well known within their communities and work with landholders on a day-to-day basis, covering many aspects of rural land management.

To capitalise on this, over the next 12 months Biosecurity Queensland hopes to partner with these organisations to help better equip these officers with enhanced knowledge and skills in engaging landholders – developing the officers' skills in ***transferring*** their practical feral pig knowledge the people who most need it, landholders.

To do this, we need to look at our knowledge of feral pigs and consider how we can break it down into ‘bite size’ chunks of information that means something to landholders – and how to best communicate those ‘chunks.’

When we talk of our control tools, we need to be able to simply articulate how those tools exploit pig ecology and lead to success.

A major impediment in our communities to engaging land mangers (and others) is the acceptance of feral pig myths. This acceptance is often accidental, but also sometimes used by vested interests.

Examples of feral pig myths -

1. National parks are the primary source of all feral pigs
2. Firearm restrictions need to be rolled back to implement pest control
3. A state/local government bounty would fix the pig problem

Most myths externalise the problem - myths are a way for people to make sense of the world and manage threat in a safe environment. From the perspective of believers, myths act as proof and reinforce existing beliefs.

Feral pig myths demotivate people and cripple group enthusiasm. Worst of all, in group dynamics, myths make doing nothing to manage feral pigs a logical position to accept.

Part of the upskilling of feral pig management practitioners can including helping practitioners recognise and confidently refute myths in their communities and influence the broader community to achieve shared responsibility.

Engaging landholders in Queensland in feral pig management is easier when landholders can see direct economic losses to grain and horticulture crops or lamb/kid predation. Many of our most effective pig control programmes are based in districts that meet these definitions.

However, Queensland is a cattle state, running nearly half of Australia’s national cattle herd. It is in these areas that there is a much more laissez-faire attitude to pig management by landholders, even with the threat of emergency animal diseases.

Engaging cattle producers is difficult, and those of us working in community engagement struggle to demonstrate a positive cost benefit analysis of feral pig control in a beef cattle enterprise to attract their interest.

CONCLUSION

My discussion of this theme will not be about feral pig science, but about how we as facilitators and practitioners might transfer the ***application*** of science in simple terms to the grassroots landholder audience.

The feedback from this presentation and ongoing discussions will function as a guide to how we achieve this.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much of this paper has evolved from discussions with local government officers and natural resource officers across Queensland.

I would particularly like to thank participants and presenters involved the August 2023 pilot Feral Pig Workshop at Dalby, for their participation, discussion, and thoughtful feedback.