

Impediments to rabbit control

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949

Each successive step in resolving the rabbit problem in Australia brings benefits yet, at the same time, there is a seemingly inevitable loss of impetus towards any complete solution. CSIRO had found it impossible to get farmers to eliminate the last rabbits on their properties after myxomatosis spread, and something similar happened after RHD first spread. Governments were enthusiastic enough at first, and eager not to repeat past mistakes, but over time interest waned and other projects clamoured for attention and money. The fact that research on RHD was well funded for 7 years after the virus spread to the mainland was unusual given normal political time-frames, where even a week can see major policy changes.

In addition, while rabbit numbers remained low, money previously spent on their control was quickly diverted to other problems by both private landholders and governments. Skills were lost because they were not used, and there was a further loss of impetus as older people with experience in battling rabbits left the workforce. This meant that when rabbits began to develop noticeable disease resistance, 10–15 years after biocontrols were introduced, there was a general inertia to overcome and it took some time for the community to come to grips with rabbit problems again. The resurgent problem not only had to be recognised and defined, but also skills needed to be updated and money found for new control programs.

Now that Australia has essentially gone through this process twice, after myxomatosis and again after the spread of RHD, the inevitability of history repeating itself seems clear. Such outcomes are part of the wider political process and one of the factors that need to be taken into account in any future biological control programs. Biological control assets are simply not seen in the same way as more tangible physical assets like roads, where money is found, not just for construction, but also for maintenance.

Behind the political pragmatism there are more subtle changes in community attitudes that result from the lessening of the rabbit problem. Anyone who can remember rabbits at their worst before 1950, or saw one of the inland rabbit plagues of the 1970s and 1980s, will have no doubt that rabbits are major pests. Today, however, few people have the immediate experience to comprehend what economic losses caused by rabbits might mean to farmers, and nobody below 20 years, or even 25 years of age, would have any memory of a rabbit plague. The ecological impact of rabbits is also poorly understood. This means that country people and conservationists who understand the impact that rabbits have are not always heeded when it comes to rabbit management.

Recently I organised a workshop to help decide what direction rabbit control research in Australia should take over the next 10 years or so. Enhancement of RHD and the search for