The invasion of cane toads across the top end of the Northern Territory and into WA has clearly shown the current system of protection is woefully inadequate.

There has been an appalling lack of co-ordinations and effective communication in relation to this problem and a clear lack of capability for the system to cope or even appear to make a coherent attempt.

One of the core elements of my concern is that the Cane Toad is now listed as a key threatening process but it took until 2005 for this to happen. One really has to wonder how this can take so long and the only feasible explanation is because the threat is a biodiversity threat only and has no agricultural or industry based lobby groups behind it to push for action.

It begs the question of who is responsible for the stewardship of our biodiversity no-one, with the possible exception of some underfunded community organisations appeared to be concerned.

Once the listing was in place another flaw appeared. Legislation requires if you have a key threatening process you then have a Threat Abatement Plan, but in the case of cane toads this did not happen for several years.

Once the threat abatement plan development process was implemented it showed some further flaws and some activity that is bordering on corruption/nepotism with the way processes were implemented .

Eg in relation to consultant contracts in areas I am familiar with a contractor would normally sign a statement that they will not be seeking funds arising from their consultancy work.

The threat abatement plan was highly contentious and the core researcher was then able to successfully hijack the majority of funding thereafter!

What is probably the biggest single treat to biodiversity in the tropical savannah and adjacent Semi Arid areas has been allowed to spread through the entire National Park estate without any attempt to implement controls, despite the key threatening process status and the legal obligations of Parks.

As a case in point Kakadu National Park, a flagship park and one of particular importance because of its high rate of endemic species, has not done any strategic work to try to manage the cane toad impact, despite clear evidence of significant population level impacts on a number of species. Quolls, varanids, especially varanus panoptes, king brown snakes, death adders, Bluetongue lizards to name a few. What I find particularly extraordinary is that some of the research comes from the park itself, Meri Oakwoods' Quoll research, yet nothing other than trying to stop funding the research was done. Same story with Dan Hollands' varanid research, except the funding was "not renewed".

To put this in context, millions of dollars are spent on weed control, feral pig control, and a range of other pest species, none of which have clear evidence of

species level impacts, and yet nothing has been spent on the cane toad issue which has very clear evidence of significant populations level impacts.

Concerns about endemic species like the Northern Crevice Skink have not even been followed through? It seems not knowing is a legitimate rationale for doing nothing!

Of even more concern is that the poor quality work done on the Threat Abatement plan and some of the other mythology about toads that lead to programmes like CFOC removing cane toads from its funding criteria. This led to a situation where the Draft Threat Abatement plan was finally " released" with funding to come from "existing programmes" which had specifically excluded cane toads from its funding criteria.

Other problems uncovered through this mechanism include our most promising control options not being investigated, eg exclusion fencing.

The inability of our programmes to recognise the ecological function of a species as a way to attract attention to its plight under threatened species legislation is a major concern. Eg Vanaus panoptes and Pseudechis australis have been effectively removed from the tropical savanna by cane toads with documented declines in excess of 90% in 2 years, shown by several research projects, and observations showing local extinctions across huge parts of their former range.

Because the species is widespread and lives in arid areas where cane toads may not get to, the state of their decline in the tropical savanna is irrelevant to funding programmes. This deficiency needs to be addressed as surely one of the most important things about a species is the ecological function they fulfil in relation to our ecosystems.

Cane toads more than any other species seem to have blind sided our scientist and our management systems and the history of them in this country points to some very clear problems that we need to find solutions to.

Yours truly,
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