



Submission to Federal parliamentary inquiry into controlling the spread of cane toads

Background on this submission

This is a joint submission from the Nyangumarta Warrarn Aboriginal Corporation (NWAC), Karajarri Traditional Lands Association (KTLA), Nyangumarta Karajarri Aboriginal Corporation (NKAC) and Pew Charitable Trusts, to the Federal Parliamentary inquiry into controlling the spread of Cane Toads. In brief NWAC, KTLA and NKAC are the representative Prescribed Body Corporates located in adjacent lands along the 80 Mile Beach region and extending into the Great Sandy Desert, between the Kimberley and the Pilbara regions of Western Australia. Pew Charitable Trusts is a global advocacy and policy organisation, that works in Australia with local organisations seeking better on-ground protection and management of Outback environments. Further background on our organisations is provided in the attachment at the end of this submission.

Stopping the spread of Cane Toads further into Western Australia

As we presume the Parliamentary Committee will be well-aware, Cane Toads are a major threat to native wildlife in Australia. They directly poison a wide range of native animals such as Quolls and Goannas that attempt to eat them. Since they were introduced near Cairns they have spread west across most of northern Australia, and south down much of the east coast.

Current control methods cannot stop the continued spread of the Cane Toad *in well-watered country*. This has now been well documented by on-ground land managers and Australia's leading researchers on Cane Toads.

However, in the north-west of Australia there is an exceptional one-off opportunity to stop the invasion further into Western Australia- protecting the wildlife of the Pilbara region, an identified area of high conservation importance. This quarantine *Toad Line* would also block invasions further south into the Gascoyne and potentially Murchison regions and the south-west region around Perth, where Cane Toads could proceed if left unchecked.

Currently the Toads are about two-thirds of the way through their invasion of the Kimberley. The Kimberley is well-watered country with innumerable permanent waterholes. It cannot be protected from further invasion with any known current control methods. However, south of the Kimberley, along the 80 Mile Beach, the arid Great Sandy Desert reaches to the sea. This is seasonally very dry country. It

has large areas with no rivers or natural permanent waterholes. Toads will die there in the winter dry season unless they can find shelter around artificial water points, such as ground-level stock troughs.

Over a number of years Professor Ben Phillips and other leading Cane Toad researchers have carefully investigated the potential for establishing a quarantine Toad line in the 80 Mile Beach region. Our organisations have discussed this research at length with Dr. Phillips and assessed the findings of the work of him and his colleagues.

Nyangumarta and Karajarri Prescribed Body Corporates are grass-roots organisations representing the local Aboriginal people. Both organisations manage active and successful Indigenous Ranger programs and both groups manage their own Indigenous Protected Areas which include 80 Mile Beach and the Walyarta Conservation Reserve, environmentally unique and culturally significant areas protected under the international RAMSAR convention. We have deep and detailed understanding of this country, and good working relationships with the land owners and managers who live there, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. We have therefore obvious expertise and local knowledge to assess the viability of delivering the on-ground land management works that could make such a quarantine line successful. Pew Charitable Trusts- as a global, science- based conservation organisation- has also independently evaluated the science behind this proposal.

Our organisations' considered assessments is that the proposal for establishing a *Toad Line* in our region is viable. Professor Phillips has shared with us a copy of the submission by him and his colleagues to your inquiry. That submission outlines the proposal and background science in detail. We endorse and support that submission. For brevity we won't seek to repeat all of the detail here. But we would like to emphasise below the key points that we believe make this a vital and achievable project.

- Toads are very susceptible to death by dehydration. They can only survive, move and invade new areas during the rains of the northern summer wet season.
- The Pilbara is an area of exceptional conservation values- including its continuing high populations of Toad-sensitive species such as Northern Quolls and Goannas. Keeping Cane Toads out of the Pilbara and the areas south to Perth would be an extraordinary conservation outcome. Once Toads reach the Pilbara they will not be able to be stopped or controlled due to there being many permanent waterholes in the rivers and gorges of the region.
- The 80 Mile Beach choke point is the only ready-made piece of geography where it is possible to hold the line on further major invasion by Cane Toads on the coast of Western Australia. Toads will not be able to cross the Great Sandy Desert except along the coastal strip in this district, where a narrow line of cattle stations maintain artificial water points for stock. As presently constructed these water points would allow the Toads to progressively move across this arid gap- surviving at the artificial water points in the dry seasons during a multi-year crossing. Inland of the cattle stations on the coast is arid sand desert- the Great Sandy Desert. Cane Toads cannot cross that vast area of desert.
- These water points for cattle on the coastal strip could be modified to ensure there is no water on the ground- while still maintaining water for stock. As Toads cannot climb, these modifications are not complex. This would then make such areas a death-zone for Toads in the

dry season. The Toads could invade the arid barrier for 10s of kilometres every wet season, but would die out during the winter dry.

- A variation of such a quarantine line has been successfully maintained on the Nullarbor Plains for many decades. Western Australian Department of Agriculture workers eradicate introduced Starlings and House Sparrows moving westwards into Western Australia from South Australia along the coast and the Princess Highway. As the Nullarbor is very arid, like the Great Sandy Desert, so this work is feasible and has been successfully maintained for decades.
- Nyangumarta and Karajarri have available skilled teams of Indigenous Rangers to carry out monitoring and eradication work as needed to ensure such a barrier remains Toad-free at the end of each dry season. As noted above we have deep and detailed knowledge of the landscape, and strong, good relationships with local residents, with of course our own Indigenous clans, and with non-Indigenous residents.
- Pew Charitable Trusts have available extensive communication and public outreach resources which can assist in building public knowledge and support for establishing and maintaining the Toad Line.
- The Australian public have a deep dislike of Cane Toads and the damage they cause to native wildlife. Successfully establishing a Toad Line would be very popular conservation outcome, not only in Western Australia, but nationally.

Conclusion

This is a major opportunity for conservation in Australia. We urge the Committee to recommend support the delivery of a *Toad Line* in the 80 Mile Beach region. This would ideally be done by the Western Australian and Federal Government providing funding and working in collaboration with local organisations, land owners and the key researchers to deliver the on-ground work. Our organisations would strongly support such an outcome and are prepared to actively work to achieve what is needed: modification of water points and ongoing monitoring and eradication by Indigenous Rangers working with local residents.

We would greatly value being able to give a verbal submission to the inquiry and are available to come to Canberra.

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