



Sniffer dog 'Sophie' heads to Australia's outback to track feral cats with Indigenous rangers

Sophie, one of QMDC's Conservation Detector Dogs, has undertaken one of her most challenging and rewarding expeditions to date, travelling to the heart of Australia's desert country to help Indigenous rangers track feral cats.

The English springer spaniel and her handler Dr Dave Berman spent two days at a 'Cat Camp' at Newhaven Wildlife Sanctuary, a property managed by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC), a four-hour drive north-west of Alice Springs.

From their base in Toowoomba, Queensland, the pair went to the Sanctuary to demonstrate how effective a dog can be in locating feral cats, which in this case, are preying upon the area's threatened native animals such as the Great Desert Skink and the Mulgara, a carnivorous marsupial with close family ties to the Tasmanian Devil and quoll.

The Cat Camp was hosted by AWC and Desert Wildlife Services, and supported by Territory Natural Resource Management through the Australian Government's National Landcare Programme. It brought the agencies together with seven Indigenous rangers from the Nyirripi and Kiwirrkurra communities.

In what Dr Berman described as "the best experience of my 33-year career in pest work", he and Sophie tracked alongside an Indigenous Ranger from Kiwirrkurra called Nolia, one of the 'Pintupi Nine' who, in 1984, were Australia's last Aboriginal family to encounter the outside world.

"We were asked to demonstrate how to train sniffer dogs, and to see if it was possible to integrate sniffer dogs with traditional tracking techniques," Dr Berman said.

Sophie is one of two detector dogs QMDC has trained to locate feral cats, foxes and rabbits. Her role is solely to locate the pests and establish numbers, enabling her handler to apply the most appropriate control method.

"I was amazed at the skills of the Aboriginal people; it's like magic the way they can read tracks and tell you not only that they were cat tracks, but whether it was a male or female, or another individual," Dr Berman said.

Despite the heat, Dr Berman and Sophie tracked a cat over 12km with Nolia who, as a young girl growing up in Pintupi country, used dingoes with her family to hunt for kangaroo, emu and goanna.

Dr Berman said the inclusion of a sniffer dog may be able to help the rangers track across harder country and in cooler weather, in doing so extending their hunting time and size of the area they could cover.

"Feral cats tire out when it's hot, so at the moment the rangers track when it's 40 degrees. It's an extremely effective form of feral cat control. Generally speaking, there are very few effective methods, yet these rangers can clean an area out of feral cats.

"They know which cats are there and they can distinguish individual cats. If you want to get every cat out of an area you need to be able to this, to know how many are left.

Getting the last remaining individuals is the key to a successful control effort.”

“Having Sophie along gave them the outcome they wanted, which was to improve their methods, and Nolia is now considering training a young dingo pup to help her track.

“For me it was a highlight of my career, I knew they were clever at tracking but to witness it and be a part of it was a very special experience,” Dr Berman said.

Read more about the expedition with Territory NRM: <http://www.territorynrm.org.au/single-post/2017/03/22/BLOG-Sophie-the-dog-goes-to-%E2%80%98Cat-Camp%E2%80%99>

To learn more about AWC and Newhaven Wildlife Sanctuary visit: <http://www.australianwildlife.org/>

Visit www.QMDC.org.au.

See more of Sophie in action here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qArlPuV9fD8>

For more information: QMDC Regional Pest Technical Officer Dr Dave Berman on mobile: 0409 774 509

Media Contact: QMDC Regional Coordinator Community Engagement Lisa Yorkston on mobile: 0427 468 861 email: lisay@qmdc.org.au

Released by QMDC Regional Communications Officer Donna Hurley.