

THE NORTHERN TABLELANDS DUNG BEETLE EXPRESS



NEWSLETTER

WINTER, 2005

DUNG BEETLES FOR LANDCARE FARMING

While dung beetles may not be something you automatically associate with the Orica Foundation this is set to change.

Thanks to the efforts of Vic Johnston (Chairman - Northern Tablelands Dung Beetle Express) and Jenny Quealy (Landcare Australia) a project group dedicated to Australia wide re-distributions and possible further importations of dung beetle colonies has been formed. This new project is supported by the Orica Foundation - a Silver Level Partner with Landcare Australia.

Several dung beetle experts make up the Project Committee. These are: Dr. Penny Edwards (former CSIRO Research Scientist and Technical Co-ordinator for the QLD Dung Beetle Project), John Feehan OAM (former CSIRO Technician and now Director of Soilcam), Dr. Keith Wardhaugh (Honorary CSIRO Scientist) and Dr. Jane Wright (Novel Chemicals - CSIRO Entomology). Other Committee members are Vic Johnston (Chairman), Pam Wilson (Project Officer - Dung Beetle Express) and representatives from Landcare Australia.

While the initial focus will be on Northern New South Wales and Queensland it is hoped that continued support will allow the project to facilitate re-distributions throughout Australia.

The objectives of this project group, presently operating under the banner of "Dung beetles for Landcare Farming", is to map current dung beetle distributions, continue to re-distribute species already introduced to Australia and to facilitate the importation of other suitable species not yet available in Australia.

The Steering Committee of The Northern Tablelands Dung Beetle Express have been aware of the benefits of expanding on the current project for some time and, with the help of the Landcare Australia, the Orica Foundation and the Dung Beetles for Landcare Farming Committee, their plans are beginning to come to fruition. The Dung Beetle Express will play a key role in consultation and the administration of the new project.

Well done to all concerned! Anyone else want to hitch a ride on the Dung Beetle Express?

Inside this issue:

Don't let me be misunderstood	2
Site Monitor Award	2
A Fly in your eye	2
They're not Convinced	3
Some days are Diamonds	3
Swamp	3
Secret Sheep Business	4



PLEASE DON'T LET ME BE MISUNDERSTOOD ...

Until a recent weekend in May I had no idea just how useful dung beetles could be! I knew all the usual stuff trotted out by so called experts but had not begun to appreciate that dung beetles had a higher purpose. I am pleased to share this enlightening excerpt from the article with you. Perhaps you can explain exactly how this benefit occurs. I look forward to your suggestions.

“About 56 species were introduced to Australia for bushfire control, water quality and soil health, and 29 got established”.

This little gem came from an interview I gave to the Weekend Australian Magazine in February. The article was subsequently printed in the 7th May issue in a column entitled “Someone’s Got To Do It”. I must say that had this not been attributed as a direct quote I would have been highly amused.

The newspaper is obviously widely read, however, and the article has triggered responses from as far away as Adelaide (ABC Radio interview), Sunshine Coast (undisguised mirth), Canberra (diatribe on journalistic skills or lack thereof), ASIO (wishing to employ beetles- alright that was a lie) and a retired Fire Control Officer who wanted to know what I want to know - How? Over to you readers.

MOST CONSIDERATE TRAPPER OF THE MONTH (YEAR) AWARD

This is an inaugural award and should perhaps become a permanent fixture. The awarding of this well, award has been triggered by an act of extreme kindness which showed some insight into irrational fears that might plague a Project Officer.

Enclosed in a trap catch was a note which read “also caught one small snake - not included”. So thank you for that Cam Banks - I am aware that several Site Co-operators would have duly sent the snake (some might even have sent it still alive!) No malice intended of course!

A big thanks to all our Trappers for not sending snakes. No, seriously your catches continue to be interesting and we have recovered several species which have been released over the past 3 years. This is a great achievement and appears to demonstrate that the extra care taken with releases pays dividends in the end.



PIE IN THE SKY - OR A FLY IN YOUR EYE?

While it is tempting to blame everything that is wrong with the Australian environment on foreign imports and the ignorance of early settlers it appears that this is not always true and anecdotal evidence has been found to demonstrate that at least one “pest” species in Australia was a “pest” even before our intervention.

Alan Marsh sent in this excerpt which is referenced as “From Maui to Cook” by David Lewis, Doubleday, Sydney.

“Then recall the frequent assertion that Australian bush flies have only proliferated into a plague because of cattle dung. Not so, we find from Dampier. The Aborigines of New Holland, he observed, had their eyes so encrusted with flies that “they do never open their eyes as other People: And they cannot see far” - and there were no cattle in the Kimberleys then.”

The Dampier referred to is William, best known as a great navigator but also a Jamaican Planter, Trading Skipper, Yucatan Logwood cutter, Buccaneer and Ship’s Captain. He was also obviously a skilled observationist.

THEY'RE NOT CONVINCED

Just when you thought it couldn't get any stranger, how about this gem from the Courier Mail on the 22nd February? It appears that the drovers taking part in the Great Australian Outback Cattle Drive along the Birdsville Track in May now have more to contend with than ever.

The usual tribulations that can plague drovers will take a back seat to more modern concerns and drovers will now be forced to collect all the manure deposited by their cattle before commencing the morning's trek. The manure is to be collected and buried in pits at the cattle camp.

The reason behind these additional duties? Protecting the integrity of organic beef herds on stations along the route as some of the cattle used have been treated with growth hormones. While this begs the question "Don't they have dung beetles out there?" it also has one potentially damaging flaw as a risk prevention method. Do cattle only drop one pad each morning and that's it for the rest of the day? Last estimates I heard were 10 – 12 pads per day.

Perhaps the cattle could be fitted with "poo bags" - similar to feed bags but attached to the other end. Alternatively, drovers could take turns as "Pooper Scoopers" and collect the dung as it falls to the track.

SOME DAYS ARE DIAMONDS - SOME DAYS ARE

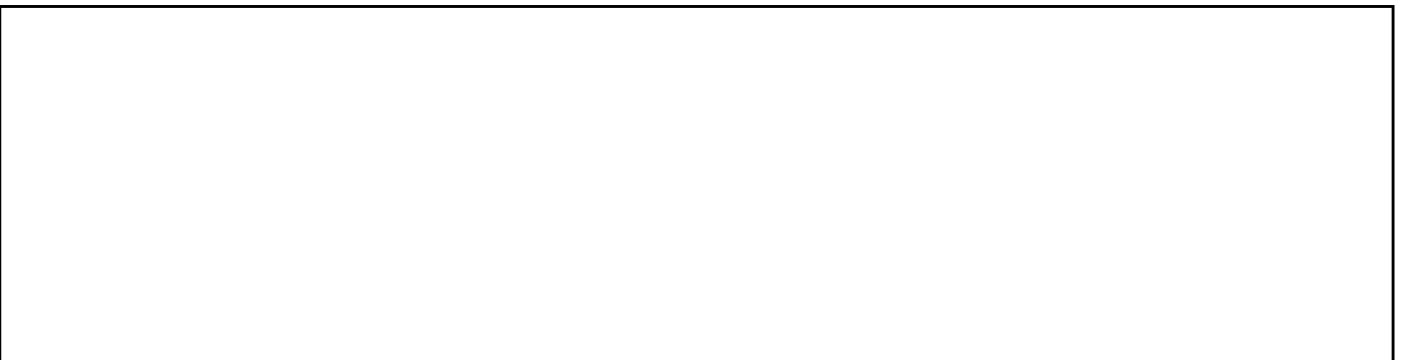
Just days really. You may remember last winter's newsletter where considerable space was devoted to some bragging about our talents when it came to harvesting the elusive *Onitis caffer*.

Well, some things just aren't meant to be I guess, and despite our best efforts, this year's harvest was not on par with last years. While we did manage to trap enough beetles for a few releases we didn't quite get to the "booming" stage. The reasons for this are not clear but we suspect the ongoing drought is the most likely cause for the drop in numbers.

So, for all of you who are still waiting on a winter active dung beetle species, we haven't forgotten you and we hope that next year's harvest will be better.

On the plus side, we have recovered *Onitis caffer* at one of our release sites and, while it will be some time before they are harvestable, it is a good sign.

HISTORICAL (HYSTERICAL) MOMENTS - SWAMP



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COMING EVENTS

**5th June - World Environment Day Expo
2005 - "The Roxy", Bingara - contact Brent
Wellham on 02 67242036 for details**

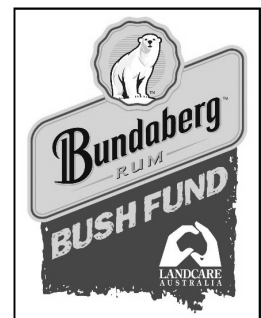
**11th June - WORLI Meeting and Dung
Beetle Information Day - Contact Anne
Gibbs for details 02 66651364**

**R U missing from this list? Call Pam now
on 02 67321200**

www.dungbeetles.com.au



Natural Heritage Trust
Helping Communities Help Australia



SECRET SHEEP BUSINESS

This is a fairly big secret so we hid it on the back page where no-one would see it. Andrew did point out that all sports fans would see it, but sports fans don't count. It is secret because we still haven't confirmed funding but need to make some preparations now.

Did you know that there are an estimated 3, 318,435 sheep on the Northern Tablelands?

The Northern Tablelands Dung Beetle Express has previously concentrated on the benefits of dung beetles to cattle producers. We would now like to undertake similar work to see if there are demonstrable benefits to sheep producers. Primarily we would like to look at dung beetle activity and worm burdens in sheep.

To undertake this study we will need the co-operation of several producers to conduct monitoring and faecal egg counts on a regular basis. The project will pay for the egg counts which can be quite a saving.

If you would like to know more about the proposed study please contact Pam Wilson (Project Officer) or Andrew Biddle (RLPB Veterinarian) on 0267321200.