

Feral-free cattle station eases grazing pressure

By Craig Malin

The ambitious goal of totally eradicating feral animals on their 7167 square kilometre pastoral lease, Todmorden, has had remarkable results for Gordon Lillecrapp and son Douglas.

Removing feral animals from the cattle property, along with a conservative stocking rate and careful management of Todmorden's native pastures, saw the Lillecrapp operation — 90 kilometres north-west of Oodnadatta — win this year's State Ibis Award for nature conservation in farming.

Culling feral pests started when boundary fences were built around Todmorden between 1962 and 1974.

Over the past seven years the Lillecrapps have shot 1000 donkeys, 200 brumbies and 50 camels. In 1995 Todmorden took part in a program to cull 2500 feral animals in the district.

With virtually all feral animals eradicated from the station, the Lillecrapps have noticed a "tremendous" regeneration in species such as bladder saltbush and Mitchell grass.

"It is important to look after your pasture species. With saltbush and bluebush if you completely destroy the plant it may never come back," Douglas said.

"Donkeys and brumbies have the ability to eat the whole plant, pull out the root system, seeds and all. Once that is lost it takes a long time for the plant to recover."

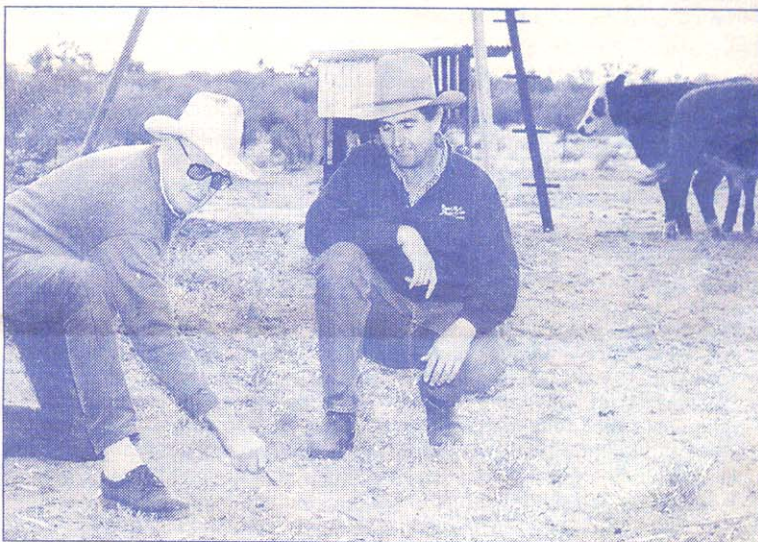
The Lillecrapp's campaign against feral animals is part of a broader objective to ease total grazing pressure on their Far North West property.

"Our property demonstrates how a commercially viable rural enterprise can co-exist with minimal impact on the surrounding natural environment," Mr Lillecrapp said.

Ibis Award judges were impressed by the "sensitive relationship between cattle management and the dynamic and fragile ecosystem".

They noted there were no signs of grazing pressure on the property and there was widespread mulga regeneration.

Environmental changes at Todmorden have been noticeable. The



Gordon and Doug Lillecrapp take a look at their regenerated native pastures.

property no longer experiences the rolling dust storms common in the 1960s.

The Lillecrapps also monitor vegetation levels using "Photo-point" comparisons and satellite images.

Todmorden is conservatively stocked, running a self-replacing herd of 3000-4000 Poll Hereford breeding cows and Grey Brahman, with an annual calf drop of about 2500.

"Under the terms of the pastoral lease Todmorden can stock up to 8400 cattle in good times but it is probably not prudent to do that year-in year-out because the land would suffer undue hardship," Mr Lillecrapp said.

Todmorden was first stocked with cattle in the 1890s. In 1962 Gordon Lillecrapp, from Yankaninna Station in

the Northern Flinders Ranges, bought the property with his father, Keith and brother Dean.

At the time it was overrun by feral animals, the pastures were in poor condition after 10 years of drought and, like many pastoral leases, its infrastructure was limited.

Mr Lillecrapp said tuberculosis and brucellosis control campaign encouraged leaseholders in the area to fence their properties and build yards for blood testing cattle.

The benchmark in developing the property over the past 35 years has been protecting and improving

scarce resources.

The station averages 175 millimetres of rain a year but rainfall is highly irregular — 200mm can fall in a day while some years there is virtually nothing.

Watering infrastructure has been designed to prevent excessive stock numbers concentrating on a few watering points.

The property had seven wells and bores and no dams 35 years ago — it now has 22 bores and eight dams.

The Lillecrapps have also created 35 storm banks, providing temporary water holes to move stock away from the main watering points.

An extended network of 17 pipeline tanks to outlying country allows cattle to graze over a wider area.

Permanent water points are spaced for a stocking rate of one beast a square kilometre. In 1962 total grazing pressure — including feral animals — around some of main watering points was three times as high.

Paddocks are destocked for up to a year at a time to allow for pasture regeneration and cattle are moved around the property on truck rather than traditional droving — again to ease pressure on the pastures.

"We have also strategically placed our yards so we are not holding stock for great amounts of time," Mr Lillecrapp said.

"Todmorden relies totally on the natural environment, which needs to be managed as an ongoing renewable resource with its yield sustained and improved over time."

