

WIDE BAY

Ruralweekly

ISSUE: No. 34 September 19, 2014

PREDATORY PRACTICES

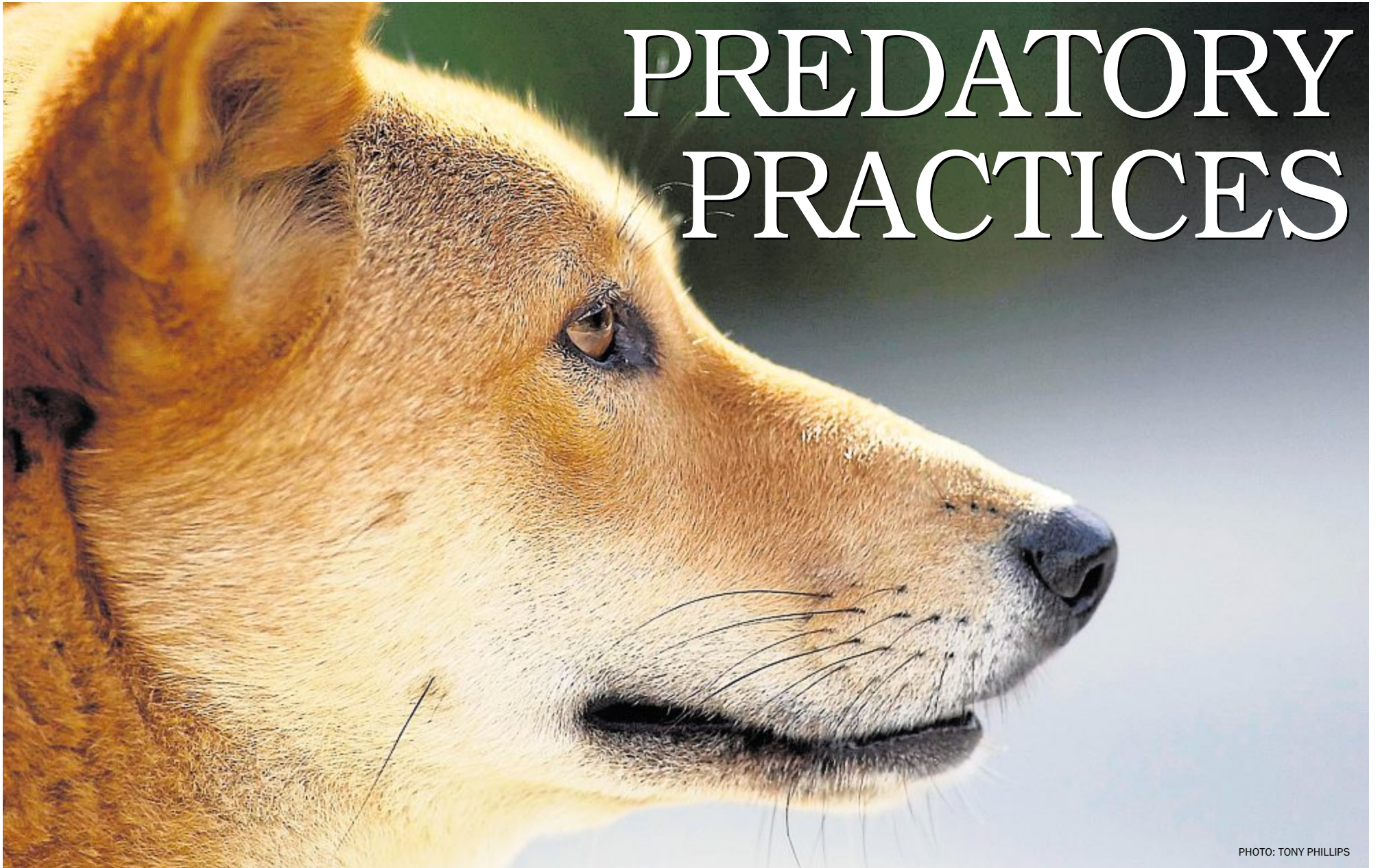


PHOTO: TONY PHILLIPS

TO KILL OR CONSERVE? The Rural Weekly speaks to a leading researcher whose work argues protecting top-order predators such as dingoes actually benefits livestock and our wider biodiversity. [FULL STORY: PAGE 5](#)

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THE DINGO DILEMMA

How protecting predators can promote biodiversity

Christina Ongley

WHEN ecologist Arian Wallach arrived in Australia from her native Israel in 2005, she had the re-introduction and growth of species in mind.

Instead the Mt Perry woman has become one of the country's leading researchers on an animal under threat from relentless culling and baiting – the dingo.

And she argues that it is protecting, and not killing, dingoes that enables their pack structure to remain intact, to limit their own reproduction for the sake of sustainability, and thus to reduce stock losses and protect wider biodiversity by providing a natural "balance of nature".

Dr Wallach, 36, whose background includes two degrees and one doctorate in the field of ecology, had been involved in species re-introduction in Israel and came to Australia with the same sort of work in mind, but was surprised at what she discovered.

"I very quickly found out that most re-introduction programs involved aggressive pest control," she said.

Dr Wallach became interested in the dingo, largely because she was intrigued by top-order predators and their impacts on the wider ecosystem, and she returned to Australia in 2006 to study her PhD on the subject through the University of Adelaide.

Dr Wallach, now a research fellow with Charles Darwin University, went about setting up sites across arid-zone regions of Australia, largely because this landscape featured large landholdings where consistent predator management practices could be implemented and studied, without being tainted by close neighbours engaging in

Dingo or wild dog?

WHILE the distinction is often made between "purebred dingoes" and "wild dogs", Ms Wallach believes the greater distinction should be drawn between dingoes and roaming, homeless or abandoned domesticated dogs. She argues dingoes have very particular genetic traits and physiologies that enable them to live in the wild, so that even when hybridisation occurs, if a dog is able to live in the wild it should be considered the same as a dingo in terms of its predation and pack structure. "What the term wild dog has done is made it easier to control dingoes while saying that we are conserving dingoes," she said.

control methods.

"I was interested in seeing what happened when dingoes were left alone," she said.

Along the way, she met her partner in life and now partner in work, Adam O'Neill. "We met out in the desert on one of my study sites and that was it," Ms Wallach said with a laugh.

The pair came from rather different backgrounds but have arrived at the same conclusion – that killing dingoes is not the answer.

Mr O'Neill, 53, was a feral animal eradicator who formed his theories on protecting predators in the absence of any formal scientific training, and published a book in 2002 called *Living with the Dingo*.

"He came to the realisation that his profession was not needed," Ms Wallach said.

The couple formed the Dingo for Biodiversity Project,

which aims to find a new way of recovering biodiversity through studying areas that were predator friendly.

One of the researcher's 14 study sites across Australia was a property called Evelyn Downs, a 2300sq km cattle station in northern South Australia, which became part of the predator-friendly project in 2011.

When its manager left in 2012, Mr O'Neill took on the role, and he and Ms Wallach lived there full-time for two years while he ran the property and they jointly studied the effects of protecting dingoes.

They banned commercial kangaroo hunting, allowing dingoes greater access to that natural food source, alongside other prey such as rabbits, reptiles and insects.

During the first six months of their time at Evelyn Downs, they recorded six calf losses to dingoes, whose population was still recovering. For the next 18 months, they lost just two calves to dingoes.

"Overall, for the two years we were there, dingoes accounted for 14% of deaths of cows. But relative to the stocking rate, our total deaths were running at less than 1%," Dr Wallach said.

She said most cattle deaths were from husbandry issues, weather events or animals getting stuck in mud while in search of water.

There is growing support for Dr Wallach's work, which has been published in highly regarded journals including *Nature and Science*, and won her and her colleagues a Eureka Prize in 2013.

"In Australia, there is still very much a mentality of killing dingoes – and a lot of other species besides – but most Australian scientists and ecologists are in agreement that we need to rethink the way we deal with dingoes," she said.

Ms Wallach knows there is



CALL OF THE WILD: Dr Arian Wallach has recently been awarded a Churchill Fellowship to further her research into the impacts of conserving top-order predators such as dingoes. PHOTO: SHIRLEY WAY

much work to be done to change the general attitude to the dingo – especially among landowners suffering large stock losses – but she's chipping away at it, one project at a time.

She has just won a Churchill Fellowship allowing her to travel overseas for three months to visit places

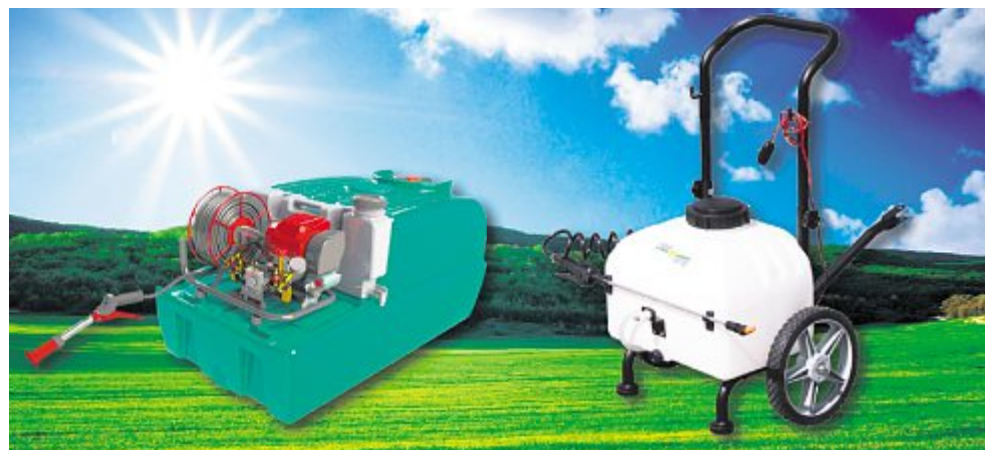
where top-order predators are protected and doing well.

Ms Wallach also has plans to create a predator-friendly network for scientists and pastoralists, which she hopes will one day lead to an accreditation system similar to that now in place for the likes of farmers changing over to organic operations.

And she remains hopeful the dingo will earn the respect she believes it deserves.

"Scientists have to communicate what they do and what they find," she said.

"To what extent society is able to make changes, and how long that takes ... I'm very optimistic."



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