

HOW “PREDATOR FRIENDLY” IS ANATOLIAN GUARD DOGS?

In reaction to the announcement that Woolies will be selling predator friendly meat.

ANATOLIAN GUARD DOGS UNDER THE LOOKING GLASS

At various meetings that I attended, farmers that acquired Anatolian guard dogs had comments on the dogs chasing game animals. Some indicated that wild animals were killed. While the farmers paid a couple of thousands for the dog some were shot by the farmer in the end, because of problems caused by the dogs.

In 2002 Dr Laurie Marker of the Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia completed her PhD thesis (on the biology, ecology and conservation of the cheetah on Namibian farms). The thesis included an investigation of alternative control methods for livestock predation. In the discussion on the 157 guard dogs some interesting statistics abound. Behavioural problems occurred with 94,4% of the dogs and correctional training enabled only 61% of the dogs to be deployed. The three biggest problems was: 44% chased game (no statistics on how many animals were killed), 37% stayed at the kraal and did not accompany the sheep to the field and 25% harassed or killed sheep. Some dogs were guilty of two or three of the misbehaviours. In the end 43% of the dogs was removed from the project because the behaviour could not be corrected or the dogs died – 21% of the dogs that died were shot by the owner. A further 6% were shot by a neighbour or other farmer. Most, however died because of accidents, disease or poison. Marker also mentions that studies from the USA found that about a third of guard dogs were shot by their owners.

And on top of this, the average working life of the dogs were not even four and a half years!

Well – where there is smoke there must be a fire.

The light went up with the completion in 2011 of Gail Potgieter’s MSc thesis: *The effectiveness of livestock guarding dogs for livestock production and conservation in Namibia*. Dr Marker was one of her supervisors.

About two thirds of the guard dogs in the study was accompanied by a shepherd that spends the day in the field and can keep an eye on the activities of the dogs. The dogs were placed with commercial as well as with communal farmers. Although 30% of commercial farmers experienced no difference in predator damage, 76 % of all the farmers in the study were satisfied that there was a significant decline in livestock losses.

The question, however, is how predator friendly the dogs are.

Even in the introduction we read that 37 of the dogs killed jackal, nine killed baboons, three killed caracal one even killed a cheetah. Various other dogs killed bat-eared fox and African wild cat. At least 83 animals were caught by Anatolian dogs, and this is an under estimate as a couple of farmers reported that the dogs killed animals, but could not give numbers. About 63% of the Anatolians killed animals.

After the dogs were deployed the farmers killed significantly less jackal and caracal. However combining this number with the dog kills, brought the number of jackal and caracal kills to about double the number killed before the deployment! At least the number of cheetahs killed declined sharply.

For the farmers this is not a problem because the predators and even the baboon is legitimate targets as they cause stock losses. A number of international conservation specialist recommend a combination of lethal and non-lethal where damage-causing animals are plentiful.

HOW DOES THIS SITUATION COMPARE WITH OVERSEAS COUNTRIES?

Contrary to the South African situation where human-animal conflict resides under Nature Conservation, The National Wildlife Services and the National Wildlife Research Centre (NWRC) of the USA resides under Agriculture.

Here in SA the nature conservation departments are suffering heavily under chronic funding shortages and human-wildlife conflict cannot be solved in this way. The first noticeable aspect of the USA system is the budget for Wildlife Services. In 2012 it was nearly \$150mill and the NWRC got about \$15mill. Annually up to 150 publications are added to the database on human wildlife conflict. This organization also boasts to be the world leader in the field of non-lethal damage control. Publications from the 1980s exists on the use of guard dogs to limit damage to livestock.

The NWRC publish an annual report on their accomplishments. Shortly before the turn of the century non-lethal control of coyote was the aspect receiving lots of attention. In just under a decade this aspect has disappeared from the publication and in the 2011 issue one aspect on coyotes was the development of a new poison from natural substances that would not cause any secondary poisoning and no pollution of the environment. In the 2014 issue one of the aspects is to increase the selectivity of the M44 (an apparatus that shoots poison in the mouth of the coyote when it is activated).

So – let me summarise: An organization with more than 50 highly qualified researchers and more than adequate budget could not, over a period of 30years, come up with non-lethal methods that could fully replace all lethal methods! (And they seems to be out of ideas)

Another example from Australia: The 1080 poison has been in use in Australia for over 50 years to rid them of all kinds of “problem animals”. The government is limiting the use of this substance and is looking at replacements. (This example is not on predators). The government supplied 5mill Aus \$ (about R20mill at the exchange rate of the time) to find alternative solutions. Various researchers from a variety of disciplines, worked with environmental activists on the “Alternatives to 1080” program.

The outcome in 2011 found that shooting (by professional hunters) was the only solution that could achieve relief of the problem and compare to the effect of 1080. The only other potential solution that is still being refined is the use of another poison that does not have the negative environmental effects of 1080.

To get back to the guard dogs – Quite a number of published guidelines on best deployment of guard dogs stipulate that a dog, depending on the terrain and density of vegetation, can guard 200-300 head of sheep in an area of about 200-300ha. Even though dog senses are much more acute than human senses, it still is limited and it is logic that a dog cannot guard unlimited numbers livestock on unlimited large areas.

This is why I have a question mark behind at least one of the instances in the article by McManus *et al* where 1 dog drastically reduced damage on a 6 500 ha farm with a flock of over 3 000 sheep.

Or wait – could this just possibly be an example of how effective the killing of the damage-causing jackal or caracal individuals could be, when the dog kills the predators that attack the sheep?

There is nothing wrong with striving to achieve predator friendly damage control on livestock – this ideal must be pursued. However lots of water still has to run into the ocean and many millions still has to be spent before this ideal will be achieved.