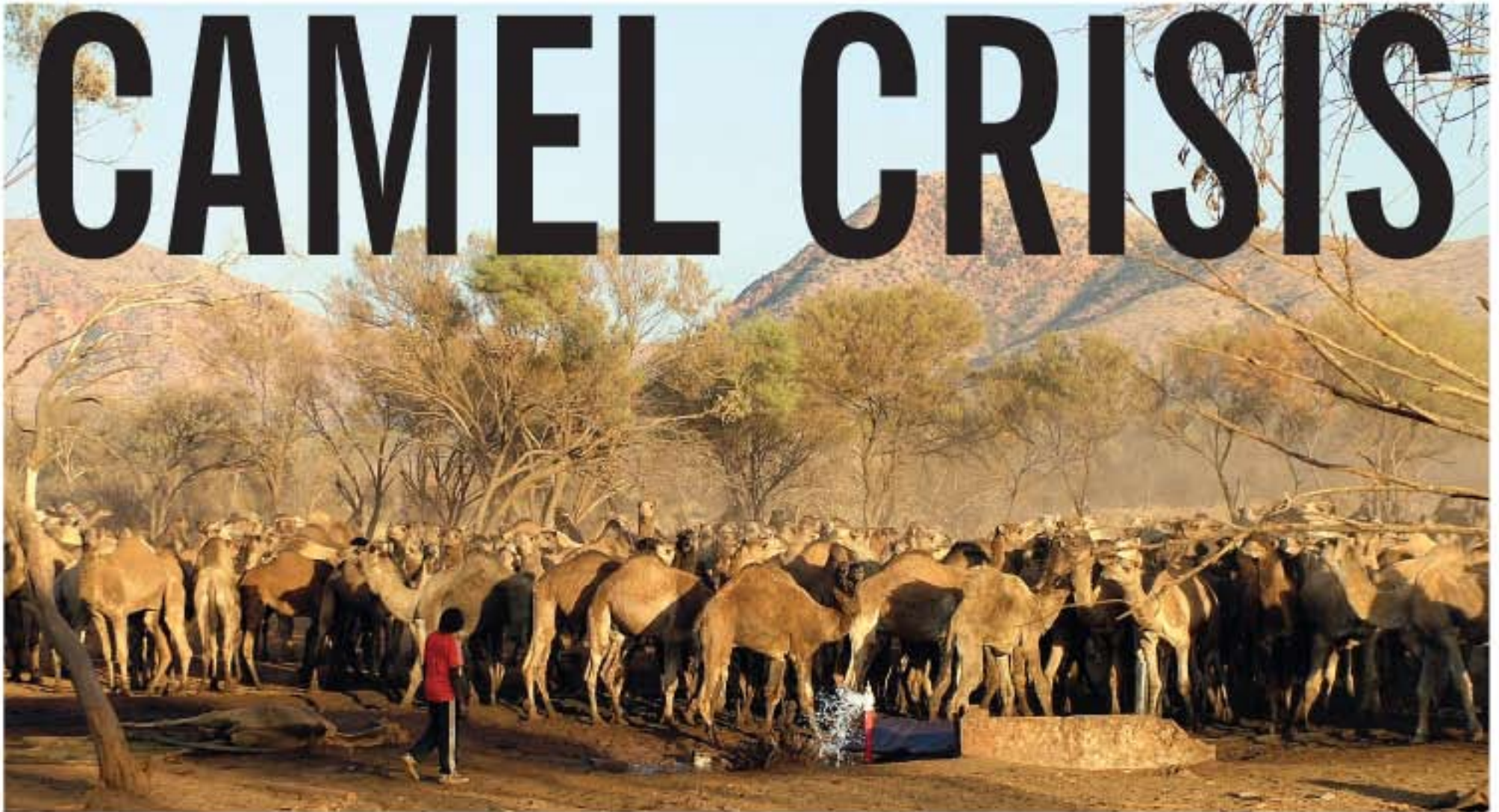


CAMEL CRISIS



Central Land Council staff are working around the clock as Land Rights News goes to press to deal with a camel invasion of unprecedented proportions at the small community of Docker River near the West Australian border.

The CLC is preparing for an emergency cull, which it hopes will reduce the numbers by 3000 during four days of aerial shooting and finally give the besieged residents of Docker River a temporary break over Christmas.

It says that the cull will take place within a 50 kilometre radius and be well away from the community.

The damage the camels and other thirsty feral animals like horses have done to sacred sites and waterholes is already considerable.

Waterholes are littered with the bodies of the drought victims and the community swimming waterhole Tjilpuka has been tested and has been found to be a serious health risk to due to camel pollution.

CLC Director David Ross said that while the CLC is collaborating on multiple strategies to reduce the numbers of camels in Central Australia, the cull is an emergency measure.

"Unfortunately camels respond very quickly to weather conditions so if the temperature drops or there is rainfall the camels disperse very quickly.

"One day there may be 600 camels in the community and then the next morning there may be 60.

"We do stress this is an emergency stop gap measure only and we are working with the Desert Knowledge Centre, the Northern Territory and Federal Governments

and numerous other stakeholders to provide a long-term solution.

The CLC has worked for some years with communities to make them aware of the disastrous environmental impacts made by the animals.

"It is essential that Aboriginal people are consulted before action is taken on their land.

"There used to be resistance to culling because the idea that camels would be shot and left to rot rather than used goes completely against Aboriginal people's core beliefs," Mr Ross said.

"However, now we have found that people are so desperate because of the damage and distress that they are saying 'just get rid of them'.

"Everybody wants to ensure that it is done in the most humane way possible."

As a longer-term strategy, CLC staff are also preparing accessible watering points on the Land Trust, which it hopes will lure camels away from Docker River and enable them to be commercially harvested.

The staff are currently equipping one known bore site and searching for other suitable water sources.

The bore sites will be in accessible locations that are suitable to trap

and remove camels for harvest.

"We need funding urgently and in our submission to the Federal Government's Caring for Our Country program we have asked for bore funding, a community camel worker and trap yards," Mr Ross said.

The CLC says that while it has applied for funding in the past it has been unsuccessful because government agencies have been reluctant to fund camel control programs until a Desert Knowledge Centre

report had been finished.

That report, the product of several years of research, is now

finished and a funding agreement is waiting to be signed.

The Federal Government has put \$19 million towards camel control with an expectation the states and the Territory will also make substantial contributions.

Commercial operators

Since the crisis, which has been covered extensively by both the Australian and international media, a number of commercial operators have come forward.

The CLC is very keen to have commercial harvesting of camels and has several commercial proposals before it which involve and benefit the community while decreasing camels through commercial harvesting.

It says that proposals need to be

'sound'.

"A year or so ago a pet meater operated down there without a contract and left carcasses in hunting grounds and close to the community. People were very worried about the health issues," Mr Ross said.

"It's our job to ensure that these are fair and sustainable commercial contracts. The community have lost out quite badly in the past where people have operated without regard to the law or the community.

"They can bring weeds into undisturbed areas, make new tracks and create erosion, inadvertently access and damage sacred sites and further alienate community members from making decisions about their own country," Mr Ross said.

The CLC currently has several commercial proposals before it which involve and benefit the community while decreasing camels through commercial harvesting.

"Of course everybody would prefer that the camels were used rather than wasted, but the scale of the problem is so big that commercial culling alone is not a solution.

"Whatever the solution, it is not an opportunity for anyone to start wildly shooting all over the Land Trust," Mr Ross said.

"It requires a coordinated response and it requires the consent of the community and traditional owners of the areas affected."

Waterholes are littered with the bodies of the drought victims and the community swimming waterhole