

2013 Indian Myna Conference
CSIRO Discovery Centre, Canberra, 19th June 2013
Conference Summation of Speaker Presentations

The following summation is the Wrap-Up presentation provided at the end of the Conference by Ian Fraser, Canberra-based ecologist and naturalist, and Winner of the Natural History Medallion.

The Conference had three themes.

Theme 1: The Science on Mynas

The vital importance of understanding the biology of our target species.

Andrea Griffin (University of Newcastle)

“Myna Intelligence, Adaptability and Risk Aversion”

Andrea Griffin introduced us to mynas as a flexible and adaptable species capable of rapid expansion and of learning from other mynas’ experiences, positive and negative. It is a bird that scores highly with regard to problem-solving ability related to food sources, though individuals vary significantly in this capacity. Good problem-solving mynas tend not to be good explorers, and vice versa. Rural and urban birds appear to be better problem-solvers than suburban ones.

Marie Diquelou (University of Newcastle – PhD candidate) (continuing the presentation) told us that at least 87,000 mynas have already been removed from NSW and the ACT by trapping. As we might expect from the previous, myna populations can become trap-aware; under higher intensity trapping regimes, birds form smaller groups, stay closer together and stay out of sight more.

Message: Mynas have personalities and populations adapt to trapping, so we must also be adaptable. Complacency and a sense that we know all we need could be fatal to our efforts. We need new information on behaviour and we need to apprise ourselves of it.

Kate Garrock (Australian National University – PhD candidate)

“Myna impacts on Native Birds / Does trapping help?”

Kate Garrock proposed that knowledge of the invasion sequence may help develop management strategies. Her Canberra research has indicated a long-term negative impact of mynas on hollow-nesting native species and on small ones. She also emphasised a need to look at myna impacts in the context of overall habitat changes. She suggested that a figure of 25 mynas per square kilometre might be an appropriate target in an already colonised area. Trapping of mynas indicated a positive impact on breeding opportunities for some native birds although more research was needed on this.

Message: As per that of Andrea and Marie, but in relation to both myna ecology and impacts on relevant native species. The existing evidence suggests that our efforts are justified from an ecological perspective, but we don’t know enough yet.

Peter West (Invasive Animals Collaborative Research Centre)

“MynaScan: what it tells us and new developments”

Peter West introduced us to Feral Scan, and Myna Scan within that, a national interactive website resource for public recording of myna observations and activities, mapping and centralising data on myna populations, problems and control programs.

Message: Myna Scan appears to offer an important and powerful tool for centralising and coordinating at all levels of myna management in Australia.

Martin O'Brien (Victorian Scientific Advisory Committee)

“Does the impact of Indian (Common) Mynas on native fauna meet the criteria for being listed as a threatening process?”

Martin O'Brien led us through the story of the assessment of nomination of mynas as a Threatening Process under the Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. The nomination was not accepted, due to a lack of appropriately rigorous scientific support of a correlation between myna presence and extinction of any native species, and the fact that the criterion for acceptance is quite rigid, reflecting the fact that the Act is old and does not incorporate current approaches to ecological management.

Message: Reinforcing the previous ones, more data is required, which may also lead to successful renomination under the Victorian legislation, or at least an adequate consideration of the impacts and, more generally, for potentially successful nominations under other state acts and even the EPBC act.

Theme 2: Pest Management Principles

Peter Bird (Bio-Security SA)

“Pest management principles – why it makes sense to halt the spread of mynas”

Peter Bird gave us the perspective from a jurisdiction fortunate in still being myna-free. He stressed the importance of simple, objective, logical, any-scale, any-species, any-threatened value Pest Animal Risk Assessment. It essentially comes down to risk versus feasibility of eradication. Applications of the model to western Victoria (as a proxy for myna-free South Australia) suggests that control efforts are, or would be, justified.

Message: Pick your fights on the basis of science, so you can have the confidence they can be won.

Michael Linke (CEO RSPCA-ACT)

“Animal Welfare Issues: Treatment”

Michael Linke suggested the need to respect animals as sentient organisms is not incompatible with a control program, and is independent of the animal's perceived pest status, or its origins. This was effectively also his **Message**.

Greg Flowers (CIMAG, Pest Animal Ranger)

“Animal Welfare Issues: most humane disposal method”

Likewise, I think my summary of **Greg Flowers'** talk is also his **Message**. He pointed out that both carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide are acceptably quick and humane euthanasia methods, provided that appropriate guidelines are followed. They especially compare very favourably with alternatives involving transport and individual handling.

Susan Saavedra (Canary Islands, Spain: ecologist / pest animal manager)

“Indian Myna Elimination – it can be done!”

Susan Saavedra shared her experiences of myna species control on nine islands around the world, giving a fascinating and detailed account of how a program can be successfully built from scratch in a range of societies and island situations.

She stressed the importance of:

- delegating, involving local staff and local media in order to raise community awareness;
- animal welfare issues in trap and holding cage design;
- a suite of complementary control methods.

She reinforced Andrea's message that mynas learn from others' experiences, especially regarding traps. Her message was that people should avoid approaching traps during daylight hours so mynas do not associate people and traps, and thereby become trap shy.

Message: One size doesn't fit all; each situation is unique. Once the unique aspects of your situation have been identified, plan accordingly. Don't just apply someone else's strategy to your environment. A theme that is common, however, is the need to involve communities, initially via the media. And locally, meaningful control, if not eradication, is demonstrably possible, especially on an island (which need not be surrounded by water).

Theme 3: The Control Measures and Approaches for Indian Mynas

Bill Handke (President, Canberra Indian Myna Action Group; former General Manager, Natural Resource Management, Australian Government)

"Local Govt & Community Action Together – what can be achieved, what is needed"

Bill Handke reminded us why we're here, with a detailed summary of the social and environmental issues surrounding mynas. He emphasised that the task is facilitated by the fact that the community in general doesn't like them. He outlined a model of operation and the success story of the Canberra community-action program, and the elements for an integrated local government / community myna control program.

Message: Community participation is essential, both initially and in an ongoing sense to provide the large scale trapping coverage needed to have a substantial impact on myna numbers. A community-action control program can work, though again another situation – and thus strategy – will not be Canberra's.

Council perspective

Paul Formosa (Wollongong City Council) outlined the strategic policy processes required to be adopted by local government as a prerequisite to establishing an integrated local government and community myna control program.

Martin Gauci (Hawkesbury City Council) spoke of a situation where a council responded to community concern. The Hawkesbury model of Volunteer Area Coordinator seems a worthwhile one, from a Council perspective.

Community perspective

Julia Gibson (President, Yarra Indian Myna Action Group) described various solutions to trap-making needs, an experience different from other areas. She outlined their challenges, subtly different from others' as we'd expect.

Kevin Noble (Clarence Valley Conservation in Action Group) spoke of the importance of talking to the community *in situ*. He also spoke of the importance of helping people get involved in trapping, without the need to touch the birds if that was their preference.

Message (combined): Again, an informed community is essential, whether the initiative is community- or council-based.

Ian Fraser's talk

All of us are here today because we're biased. Everyone is, but the important trick is to recognise our own biases and own up to them. We're biased in favour of species and ecological balances that evolved uniquely in isolation in Australia and, today, against one of many identified threats to that uniqueness. We're no longer isolated in Australia – we've not really been for about 5 million years in fact – and Australia is inexorably changing, but I believe that there is still a viable and identifiable Australian nature that is an important part of what makes the land special. I feel very privileged indeed to have had the luck to be born where and when I was, but with that privilege comes a weight of responsibility. I firmly reject the notion that homogenisation of the world is inevitable, even though at least we rarely now hear the dogma of the 19th C Acclimatisation Societies, that it is desirable.

It is not enough to wait until damage is apparently irreversible; originally we did that in Canberra with mynas, until the line suddenly flipped from “we can't be sure it's actually a problem” to “whoops, it is, but it's now too late to do anything”. Fortunately for us all, you are all living proof that we don't have to accept that capitulation either. In such a situation I think the precautionary principle requires us to adopt the French or Mexican legal position and make no presumption of innocence. The precautionary principle is a very important one in this context; while it doesn't always seem to be obvious, it is in fact the formal position of government in Australia, since The Council of Australian Governments' 1992 *InterGovernmental Agreement on the Environment* stated, *inter alia*, that “lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation”. I don't believe that position has ever been rescinded; any move to do so should be most vigorously resisted.

Another frequently heard comment is “it's not their fault – humans are the real problem”. I would suggest firstly that that's a red herring – it's not about 'fault', which is an irrelevance as applied to animals. Secondly, while logically valid, it doesn't go anywhere with regard to resolving the problem; in fact it's usually an excuse for doing nothing, which is not an ethical option. I want coming generations of Australian kids – whether their parents were born here or not – to have the same opportunities for discovery and joy in living in a place that is special and different as I had.

I would also observe that I think a very important aspect of the job you're doing here is its educational role, along with what the Californians would probably call 'empowerment'; it matters a lot if people can be helped to better understand the importance of protecting our 'Australianess' and feel they can actually do something about it.

I thank all of you for what you're doing, and will do. It matters.