

The Feral Factor:

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Understanding the rabbit industry in South Africa can be challenging and intricate, given the clash between pet and farming animal sectors. The significance of rabbits both as pets and a food source is crucial in our community. Key stakeholders in farming, rescue, and pet industries have had to set aside their differences to collaborate on curbing and monitoring Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD).

Following numerous discussions, the primary factor contributing to the spread of RHD has been identified as feral rabbits. The threat posed by feral rabbit populations highlights the need for collaborative efforts to address the challenges associated with these populations. By uniting various sectors within the rabbit industry, there is a better chance of implementing effective measures to control and monitor the spread of diseases like RHD, while also ensuring the welfare of rabbits in different contexts, whether they are kept as pets or raised for food.

Feral rabbits, which are domestic rabbits that have become wild, can pose several disadvantages or challenges in different ecosystems.

Some of the main disadvantages of feral colonies include:

1. **Overpopulation:**
Feral rabbit populations can grow rapidly, leading to overpopulation. This can result in competition for resources such as food, water, and shelter, which may negatively impact native flora and fauna.
2. **Habitat Destruction:**
Rabbits are herbivores and can cause significant damage to vegetation by overgrazing. This can lead to habitat degradation and negatively affect the balance of local ecosystems.
3. **Competition with Native Species:**
Feral rabbits may outcompete native species for resources, particularly when it comes to food sources. This competition can disrupt the natural balance and may contribute to declines in native plant and animal populations.
4. **Soil Erosion:**
Overgrazing by feral rabbits can expose soil to erosion. The removal of vegetation can lead to soil destabilization, especially in areas where the vegetation plays a crucial role in preventing erosion.
5. **Impact on Agricultural Crops:**
Feral rabbits can damage crops, leading to economic losses for farmers. Their feeding habits can result in reduced crop yields and affect the livelihoods of those dependent on agriculture.
6. **Disease Transmission:**
Feral rabbits can carry diseases that may be transmitted to other animals, including domestic livestock. This can have implications for both wildlife and agricultural industries.
7. **Predation:**
While rabbits are prey animals, feral rabbit populations can still have impacts on local predator populations. If predators rely heavily on rabbits as a food source, the overpopulation or decline of rabbits can affect these predators.

Efforts are often made to control feral rabbit populations in various regions to mitigate these disadvantages. This may involve methods such as culling, habitat management, and the introduction of predators or diseases specifically targeting rabbits. However, such control measures must be carefully considered to avoid unintended consequences and impacts on non-target species.

Suffering of Feral Rabbits

Immense suffering is seen in feral colonies, herewith some reasons why feral rabbits may experience suffering include:

1. **Disease, Parasites & Wounding:**

Feral rabbits are susceptible to various diseases and parasites that can affect their health. These may include viral diseases, bacterial infections, and infestations by internal and external parasites. Suffering can result from the symptoms of these illnesses, including weakness, pain, and discomfort. In South Africa, many of the feral colonies carry EC (Encephalitozoon Cuniculi) as well as pasteurella. These rabbits have no way of being treated, suffer horribly before death and leave the infections in the ground. *The most important Disease right now, is RHD and the spread thereof.*

Also important to note is the harm that rabbits can inflict upon each other. Rabbits are highly territorial creatures and may engage in fights that can lead to fatal outcomes. When individuals encounter a feral colony and choose to release their rabbits into that environment, these new rabbits face aggression, as the introduction process needs to be gradual. Consequently, rescued feral rabbits often exhibit severe wounds.

Long-haired rabbits suffer the most in this scenario, as grooming is not maintained. They can become trapped and starve to death in bushes or experience severe skin tears when attempting to free themselves from tangled hair mats caught on vegetation.

2. **Predation:**

Feral rabbits are often prey animals for predators such as foxes, birds of prey, and other carnivores. The constant threat of predation can lead to stress and anxiety, impacting the overall well-being of the rabbit population. Feral Rabbits do not have the total Instinct needed to cope in an "wild" world. Being domesticated takes away a lot of their survival skills. Colonies that form is dysfunctional and not structured, like in wild, indigenous species. They do not have the needed coping and warning systems.

3. **Lack of Resources:**

In some areas, feral rabbits may face challenges in finding sufficient food, water, and suitable shelter. Competition with other rabbits and wildlife for these resources can lead to malnutrition, dehydration, and exposure to harsh weather conditions. Most feral rabbits caught in South Africa is totally emaciated, with harsh sun burnt coats.

4. **Overpopulation:** When feral rabbit populations become too large, there may be competition for limited resources. Overpopulation can lead to starvation, increased susceptibility to diseases, and negative impacts on the surrounding ecosystem. The main problem in our South African Feral Colonies, is that they started from just one or 2 pairs, and the offsprings breed. The inbreeding causes exceptional issues, as specifically seen by Monique Goosen in the Gourits Feral Colony, where more than 300 rabbits have been caught, from one single starting pair.

5. **Environmental Changes:** Feral rabbits may be negatively affected by changes in their natural environment, such as habitat destruction or alterations caused by human activities. Loss of suitable habitat can contribute to stress and a decline in their overall well-being. Again referral to the Gourits Colony, where critically endangered Fynbos Flora has been made nearly extinct before the colony catching started. Help from Cape Nature and regional government fell on deaf ears as critically endangered plants were consumed en mass.

6. **Human Interactions:** Feral rabbits in urban or suburban areas may face additional challenges due to interactions with humans. This can include vehicle collisions, intentional harm, or the consequences of inappropriate feeding by well-meaning individuals. Huge numbers of hurt animals have been picked up in streets, suffering cruelly while waiting to die after vehicle collisions. Humans have been snaring in colony areas, humans with hunting dogs have been sent in - all this while the meat they have been consuming was contaminated. Again referring to the Gourits Colony, where most rabbits found in a certain area had Taenia solium. This tapeworm is responsible for causing the condition known as cysticercosis in pigs. (Pig Tae Worm) infections, and since then many children had seizures and episodes from positive infections. In humans, the infection is referred to as taeniasis.

Efforts to manage feral rabbit populations and improve their well-being often focus on a combination of responsible pet ownership practices, humane control measures, and environmental conservation. It's essential to address the root causes of suffering and implement measures that promote the welfare of both domestic and feral rabbit populations.

How does feral colonies form?

The initial step involves domestic rabbits being introduced to a natural environment. This could happen intentionally, such as when people release unwanted pet rabbits into the wild, (dumping) or unintentionally when rabbits escape from enclosures (improper housing and care)

Once in the "wild" setting of suburbia, domestic rabbits may adapt to their new surroundings, learning to locate food, shelter, and mates within the environment. This adaptation often requires changes in behavior and diet to align with the available resources. Unfortunately, many of these rabbits do not survive for long, as they have been accustomed to being fed and provided shelter.

However, colonies keep growing due to the excessive dumping of rabbits. Only 10% of rabbits introduced into feral colonies is accidental. Many people specifically breed to release into the streets.

Why are rabbits dumped so excessively?

Most of the pet rabbits that are abandoned on a daily basis are purchased impulsively from pet shops. Tiny, cute bunnies are often chosen to keep children entertained, perceived as starter pets. However, rabbits are incredibly complex animals and are not suitable as starter pets, particularly for children under the age of 6 who lack the physical coordination and reflexes required to handle a rabbit properly without adult care.

As the rabbits grow, owners discover the substantial amount of work involved, including the production of up to 250 dung pellets per day. Additionally, the need for hay and grass arises, and many people are allergic to these necessities by choice. Taking care of rabbits becomes a labor-intensive task. When the rabbits reach maturity and hormones kick in, leading to a noticeable change in behavior—becoming hormonal and sometimes aggressive—they are often abandoned.

Impulse buyers, who initially bought a rabbit for a small amount at a pet store without adequate knowledge of care, are unlikely to invest significant amounts in sterilization and veterinary treatment. Consequently, these rabbits end up being abandoned. In many cases, a new baby rabbit is purchased within a day or two, only to face the same fate of being abandoned when it reaches maturity. Unfortunately, this cycle of irresponsibility continues, and efforts to address it must also focus on educating impulse buyers about the long-term commitment and responsibilities of caring for rabbits.

Conclusion:

Feral rabbits not only suffer extremely, but cause the suffering of humans and other animals as well. As long as there is cheap rabbits available for impulse buyers to obtain, we will have feral colonies. As long as we have feral colonies, we will have excessive spread of RHD.

Why do we say Feral Rabbits will be the issue in spreading RHD in the next Spring Surge?

It has been successfully documented in USA as well as European Countries that the main surge is Spring of each year, with a small surge at the end of Autumn.

Feral rabbits freely move between suburbs, houses, and even onto agricultural lands, sometimes venturing to visit rabbit farmers due to the scent of other rabbits. Similar to their indigenous counterparts, feral rabbits become notably hormonal at the onset of spring, seeking new territories and colonies, covering extensive areas (refer to Indigenous Demographics for pattern explanations).

As winter concludes, especially male feral rabbits embark on extensive journeys, contributing to the rapid spread of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD). This was evident in the spring of 2023, particularly in regions such as Gauteng and the Garden Route. A common factor among most affected individuals was the presence of feral rabbits. Unfortunately, hares and indigenous rabbits on the outskirts of suburbs also traverse these paths, picking up RHD spores shed by feral rabbits and becoming infected.

Given that feral rabbits often visit homes and gardens, they deposit the virus in human-populated areas. Shoes and car tires can then carry and spread the disease even more rapidly and extensively.

By eliminating feral rabbit colonies, we can significantly reduce the spread of RHD, as is being successfully implemented in the United States.

In certain areas of the USA, legislation has been implemented to halt the sale of rabbits in pet shops, aiming to curb the spread of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD) and reduce the prevalence of cheap rabbit sales to impulse buyers. Pet shops have been identified as contributors to the spread of the disease in both the USA and South Africa, with documented cases of contact. RHD was first detected in the USA in May 2020. New York, among other areas, was one of the last significant regions to enforce a ban on selling cats, dogs, and rabbits.

Approximately 99% of individuals purchasing from pet shops are impulse buyers. By eliminating impulse buying, those genuinely interested in rabbits are more likely to seek out registered breeders, facilitating easier tracking and tracing of rabbits and reducing the likelihood of abandonment. This shift in buying behavior could also alleviate the strain on rabbit rescue organizations. To protect indigenous species and ecosystems (as a lack of quality fertilizer could lead to nutrient-poor soil, affecting vegetation and ecosystem health), it is crucial to minimize the impact of RHD on the country in the coming months.

Control measures should include:

1. **Anti pet store legislation** - We need Pet Stores being banned from selling rabbits. It is widely known that pet stores will sell baby rabbits at an age far under legal, eg at 2,5 weeks to 3 weeks old, with zero chance of survival. It has also been proofed over and again in the last 3 months that a huge amount of spread has come from pet stores, who generally refuse to implement biosecurity and educational standards. Their clients need to see and touch the rabbits to be able to impulse buy. Cases of infected rabbits being sold and dying at home has been recorded all over during the surge, with *pet shops that has been educated by the RDH teams but laugh it off.*
2. **Regulation to curb backyard breeding** - This occurrence will fall in any case should pet stores not be allowed to sell the rabbits they breed anymore. These people may however start dumping their rabbits, as they will refuse to separate males and females, or to sterilize, which is extremely costly. Strict laws are needed, and registered organizations should all be given the right to legally clamp down on these people.
3. **Affordable vaccination programs** - currently vaccines is totally unaffordable except for the few high profile pet owners. Affordable vaccines should be permitted to ensure people not dumping from fear of RHD. Many rabbits have

been dumped over this last surge, as people "did not want to see them dying at their house". Rescues were unable to help in many cases, due to quarantine, and these rabbits ended in the veld.

Other factors to consider:

The other cause of spread will be feral cats, but with a much less overall percentage. Cats roam only in urban areas, and majority of our indigenous species is on farmland or reserves; however, feral rabbits have infiltrated everywhere.

Conclusion:

The moment Feral Rabbits is taken out of our environment, is the moment that our indigenous species has a much higher chance of survival, as well as ensuring that loved pet rabbits, have a 70% better chance of not contracting RHD. The formation of feral colonies can ONLY be stopped if Petshops and Backyard Mills supplying pet shops are stopped.