

Feral Peril

Study guide



Synopsis

Tasmania is one of the world's last great wildlife havens but its struggling native species are under threat from a feral fox invasion. Or are they?

There's some nasty business going down in Australia's island state. A feral intruder is on the loose. He's cunning, deadly and a master of stealth, so expert at flying under the radar that some believe he doesn't even exist.

He's *Vulpes vulpes*, the elusive and adaptable European red fox, and the hunt is on to destroy him before he destroys Tasmania's struggling native fauna.

Feral Peril follows the Fox Eradication Branch, a team employed under the Tasmanian Government's fox eradication program, as they chase down sightings, gather evidence and battle public scepticism in a bid to avert ecological disaster.

The squad draws on the latest technology including DNA sampling, satellite mapping and photography, but it's not enough to convince the 'super sceptics', who will be convinced only by the discovery of a fox, dead or alive.

But time is running out. While evidence suggests fox numbers are on the rise, Tasmania's top native predator, the Tasmanian Devil, is being decimated by a mysterious disease. And as Devil numbers decline, foxes are on the rise.

Feral Peril introduces the stakeholders – the 'fox squad', the sceptics, the hunters, the scientists, the zoo-keepers and the graziers – as each battles to solve a problem that threatens not only Tasmania's ecology, but its agriculture, its tourism and the strength of its economy.

Curriculum Links

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Drama, Media Studies, History, SOSE/HSIE, Science, Natural History, Environmentalism and Conservation Studies.

Introduction and background

The list of introduced species of animal (mammal, reptile etc), fish, bird, insect and plant life into the Australian environment and its ecosystems is huge. Introduced species, including those that are considered to be 'feral', have had a massive impact on the wellbeing and even the existence of indigenous or native species, especially since the time of first European settlement in 1788.

- In class discuss what is fully meant and understood by the term, 'feral', and make a written note of its definition.
- As a class draw up a list of animals, fish, birds, insects and plants that are introduced, or non-native species, in Australia. It is not necessary to limit this list only to feral, destructive or dangerous species. As a full listing will be very long, you may confine yourself to some prime examples.
- In pairs carry out some research on the destructive effects, or side-effects, wrought by one of the creatures or plants from the list you have compiled in the previous activity. Give a short talk to the class about how, why and when the species was introduced into Australia, and what its effect on native wildlife and the environment has been. Explain whether the species in question was introduced accidentally or deliberately, and whether it is appropriate or fair to attribute blame for its introduction, especially from our vantage point, looking back into the past from the 21st century. Does this species have a natural enemy or predator to control its spread, or does it require control or eradication through human intervention? If the latter, what measures have been taken, and are they successful or have they had unforeseen negative consequences? (For more on the role of human beings in altering or interfering with ecological systems, see the section titled *The 'true feral species'*.)
- Discuss then write a short commentary on the historical and long-term direct and indirect effects on the environment and native wildlife of introducing domesticated sheep and cattle into Australia for European-style farming and grazing purposes. (Note that aspects of this issue, relevant to sheep, are also raised in *Feral Peril*.)
- Discuss in class why the program refers to the thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*, popularly known as the Tasmanian Tiger). What connection is the program making between the suspected rise in fox populations in Tasmania during the early years of the 21st century, and the believed extinction of thylacines many decades earlier?
- Following from the previous discussion, plan and create a large illustrated poster display about how, when and why the thylacine is believed to have become extinct, first in mainland Australia then later in Tasmania.

You may wish to research endeavours carried out over the past few decades to find living thylacines in Tasmania. Note claims of sightings, examine the evidence of those claims, and include relevant details about this on your poster. Give the poster a suitable title, such as 'Death of the Tiger?'

- Plan and write a short fiction story about a thylacine. Consider the way you narrate the story, and whether it will be set in the past, present or the future. The story may even be presented from a thylacine's viewpoint, if appropriate. For example, it may be about the life of the last recorded thylacine, in the 1930s. One of the themes built into your story should be environmental and ecological issues.
- In pairs research the history of sodium fluoroacetate, also known as 1080 (pronounced 'ten-eighty'), then write a report about its purposes, usage and effectiveness in Australia as a means of killing animals regarded as 'pests'. Include an inquiry into its negative as well as positive effects (and side-effects), whether its use is restricted by law, the debate over its use, and possible alternatives to its use. Offer a conclusion as to whether 1080 should continue to be used as a means of controlling both feral and native Australian wildlife.

Grasping the twin essentials of *Feral Peril*

Carry out the following two activities as preparation for the remainder of this study guide.

- To place the details of *Feral Peril* into an introductory visual perspective, draw a large coloured map of Tasmania, indicating the principal cities and towns. Add and label geographical details such as rivers, mountains and lakes, and forested regions, including national parks and reserves. Show on the map where suspected feral fox populations might be, and where populations of the Tasmanian devil are generally to be found. Give your map and the details on it a suitable title.
- Basically *Feral Peril* tells two different, but intertwining stories. One is about feral foxes in Tasmania, the other is about the decline in population of Tasmanian devils. Discuss in class, then in 200-300 words write your own account of the connections between the two stories.

The 'players'

The program introduces us to a wide range of participants, each with a different role, agenda, purpose or opinion.

- Write a short description of each of the following 'players' who are featured in the program, noting their professional roles, where appropriate, their views about the existence of feral foxes in Tasmania, and their qualifications, knowledge or experience on this question. You may wish to separate them into groupings dependant on their roles or opinions. (Note that the following people's names are in order of when they first appear and speak in the film. The film provides on-screen name captions and descriptions for each, which you may utilise.)
 - o Nick Mooney
 - o Alan Johnston
 - o John McConnell
 - o Ian Rist
 - o David Obendorf
 - o Ivan Dean
 - o Andrew Brennan
 - o Adam Higgins
 - o Rex Meikle
 - o Peter Darke
 - o David and Tina Taylor
 - o Jacko Flood
- Write a short description of the work carried out by each of the following people who appear in the program, noting their roles in relation to the population numbers, welfare and survival of Tasmanian devils. (As with the previous activity, these people are listed in the order of appearance in the film.)
 - o Rodrigo Hamede
 - o Fiona Hume
 - o Chris Johnson
 - o Colette Harmsen
 - o Tim Faulkner
 - o Greg Woods
- Discuss in class and write a short commentary on the importance to us of giving the Tasmanian devil known as 'Lucy' a name. What is her role during the program, and why is she important to our understanding of the program?

Fox threat and eradication

The fox population on the Australian mainland is believed to be in the millions, causing destruction to native wildlife and farm animals, not to mention domestic backyard chickens in coops. The program looks at measures being taken to prevent this from happening in Tasmania, where the only native

animal possibly able to prevent foxes from gaining a foothold and breeding in the wild is the Tasmanian devil, an animal that does not exist on the mainland. But what happens to fox numbers if the devil itself is under threat of survival?

- Carry out research, then plan and create an illustrated magazine-style page or double-page spread about the history of the fox in Australia, with appropriate text, aimed at a young reading audience. Look at how, when, where and why foxes were introduced, and who was responsible for this event. Why did the fox prosper and increase in population? Does it find the Australian climate and environment suitable? Does it have any natural enemies in Australia that can control its numbers? What measures have been taken by humans since the 19th century to eradicate or at least control the spread of foxes, and have any of them proven successful? Have any of those measures had negative effects on the environment and on native wildlife? You may also wish to find statistics and to display them as graphical charts showing the rise in fox numbers in various parts of Australia from the 19th century to the present. Use desktop publishing software to format your presentation.
- From the program and through further research, work in pairs or small groups to plan, write, present, record and edit a 5-10 minute radio or sound podcast report on the development, history, funding and activities of the Fox Eradication Program in Tasmania. Concentrate mainly on the work of the Fox Eradication Branch (FEB). Include an examination of public criticism of the activities of the FEB and your assessment of the validity of critical comment. Also report on the branch's on-going research and its plans for the future. Offer conclusions as to the relative success or otherwise of the program and the FEB.
- During the film, John McConnell, investigator for the FEB, claims that the fox in Tasmania 'is like a four-legged terrorist'. Discuss in class whether the word 'terrorist' is appropriate or valid in the context in which he is speaking. Is it an over-used, but little understood word?
- In referring to the possibility of foxes being introduced into the Tasmanian wilderness, and the plans to eradicate them, environmental philosopher Andrew Brennan argues that the concept of a 'pristine state, the original Tasmania [is] a kind of myth...a golden age to which we can return Tasmania'. Discuss in class and write your own notes on what he means by 'pristine state', 'myth' and 'golden age'. Do you think he is giving up on solving the fox problem, or is he being realistic? What procedures, attitudes and solutions does he offer, and are they viable? (For more on the general subject of 'wilderness', see *Film Australia's Wilderness* in the website references. This site also contains a link to a study guide.)

- From what you have seen in the film, and from further research, write a letter to the editor of a newspaper in 250-300 words about the FEB from the viewpoint of either an experienced animal hunter or a farmer. Respond with a letter by an officer from the Branch. Alternatively, exchange your first letter for one by another student, and write a response to their letter.
- Discuss in class and write your own notes on why members of the Tasmanian 'fox squad' travel to Orange, in New South Wales, and what they learn there. Adapt this to a short newspaper report in either the local Orange newspaper or a Tasmanian newspaper. Write a headline. Use desktop publishing to format into columns. Include interview quotations of your own devising as appropriate.
- The squad members are shown how to set a metal trap. In relation to this, discuss in class what you think Peter Darke means when he then refers to himself on-camera as an 'ethical hunter'. What is his view about the kinds of animal traps demonstrated in this sequence of the film?
- Find out and write a short commentary on the regulations concerning the type and use of metal jaw traps in Australia.
- Plan and create a display poster, presenting any viewpoint you consider appropriate, about the 'ethical hunting' of wild and feral animals.
- In your view is the hunting of animals 'ethical', under any circumstances, with or without the use of traps? Should the hunting of animals as a recreational sporting activity be banned or not? Is there a place in modern-day Australia for hunting as a sport? Write your own, considered argument about these issues in about 500 words.
- Write an explanation for why the discovery of fox 'scats' is so important to the Fox Eradication Branch. From viewing the program, include a discussion on the range of modern scientific technologies used in tracking, positioning and identifying foxes and the chemical composition of fox scats.
- You are a feral fox in the forests of Tasmania (or operating near farmland). Is it your fault you were born? Are you to blame for being in Tasmania? Is life difficult enough for you? Do you like outwitting all those humans who are out there trying to flush you out, hunt you down, set traps or poison baits for you? Or is it all just a game? What do you think of Tasmanian devils and feral cats? Write a short fiction story from a fox's viewpoint, drawing on what you have observed in the program and from further research. Consider story events and plotting, characters, character relationships, settings and themes. (You may wish to collaborate with another student to create the story in comic strip form—or as a storyboard for a short animated film.)

Saving the Tasmanian devil

With population numbers of Tasmanian devils in rapid decline since the 1990s, and the consequent threat of the rise in population numbers of feral foxes, the Federal and Tasmanian Governments realise that intensive—and financially expensive—measures need to be undertaken to save the devil from possible extinction.

- After viewing the program and from further research, plan and create an introductory illustrated display poster about Tasmanian devils. What kinds of mammals are they? What role do they play in the ecological chain and in the Tasmanian natural environment? What is unique to their species? How do they live in the wild? What do they eat, and how do they acquire food? Enquire into the myths, or popularly held beliefs about their manner and behaviour, and question whether this is the reality.
- From the program and from research, write your own account of the history of Devil Facial Tumour Disease (DFTD). What is DFTD? When was it discovered? What is unusual about this disease, and in what ways is it transmitted from animal to animal? Is the disease transmissible from one species to another, or is it known only to be confined to devils? What has been—and still is—its effect on devil populations in Tasmania? Provide the fall in population numbers over the past decade or more in statistical graph mode, and accompany it with a map of Tasmania showing the regions where DFTD is prevalent, and where it is not yet believed to have spread. (See relevant website references.)
- During the program, zoologist Rodrigo Hamede says there is 'now a policy that we have to remove every diseased animal [Tasmanian devil] from the landscape'. From the program, what later happens to the removed animals? Discuss in class whether this human intervention is ethical. For example, does it amount to an interference in what might be a purely natural event, an event that may have similarly happened to many now-extinct species over millions of years?
- Following from the above discussion, research how DFTD may have begun. There are some popularly-held claims that the disease was initiated indirectly by humans (see DFTD website references). What do ecologists and other science researchers currently believe? Write a short report on the possible causes of DFTD, and the general likelihood of the truth of each claim.
- Research and write a detailed account of Project Ark and the Save The Tasmanian Devil Program (STTDP). What is Project Ark? How and why was it set up? How is it funded? Who participates in the project and what kind of work is carried out? Explain what is meant by the term, 'insurance

population', as applied to Tasmanian devils. What results has the program achieved? Is it a success? Should it be continued, particularly at taxpayer expense?

- Plan and write a fiction short story about a Tasmanian devil like 'Lucy', and narrate it from her viewpoint. The story should have events, situations, characters, themes and settings that form a plot. You might even consider working in pairs to adapt the story into a daily newspaper-style comic strip serial, containing three or four panels per daily edition. The story might run for as many daily editions as you see fit. Each edition could be uploaded to your school's intranet site.
- As well as trapping and removing a selection of healthy young devils from their natural habitats and sending them to other locations for breeding purposes, *Feral Peril* shows us another means of attempting to preserve the species, through the story of Cedric and Clinky. In your own words write a description of this project, ensuring that you adequately define and explain relevant terminology used during the program, such as: transmissible cancer, immune response, classical vaccination, therapeutic treatment, and classical anti-cancer drugs. You may also wish to find and include more recent, updated information about Cedric and Clinky, the outcome of the experimentation, and the long-term chances of overcoming the disease through these methods.
- Discuss in class then write your own commentary on the ethics, risks and ramifications of injecting animals, such as Cedric and Clinky, with cancer cells, and of experimenting with treatments of cancers that consequently develop, even under strict laboratory conditions.
- Plan and create a consciousness-raising, illustrated poster display or an informative pamphlet for the wider school community, about the activities of STTDP. Use desktop publishing to format, lay out and print your presentation. Your class may even wish to consider other ways of becoming involved in the program, such as inviting speakers to visit your school. (See 'Volunteers and helpers' in website references.)

The 'true feral species'

Carry out the following activities on the role and nature of human beings.

- Near the end of the program environmental philosopher Andrew Brennan says, 'Fox is the mirror of us. We human beings are the true feral species'. Discuss in class and write your own notes on what you think he means. Comment on whether you think the program demonstrates and presents evidence that his viewpoint is correct.

- Discuss the plot, setting, thematic and character possibilities in class, then, in any genre and style you consider appropriate, plan and write a short fiction story about humans being the true feral species.

Media Studies

Carry out the following activities.

- In the film's press kit, *Feral Peril* director, Andrew Sully, says that the issues surrounding the hunt for feral foxes in Tasmania 'presented all the ingredients of a classic detective genre story', with the fox as 'villain' and the endangered devil as the 'damsel in distress'.
Discuss in class then write your own detailed commentary and analysis of how and where, and to what purpose and effect, the film employs a range of story-telling elements that draw on the 'classic detective genre' and on the associated characteristics of *film noir*. Look at camera shots and angles, lighting, settings, characterisations and on-screen behaviour, mode of costume and props, voice-over narration, soundtrack music and sound effects. Follow up with a discussion as to whether this filmmaking approach to the subject is successful. For example, is the approach too lighthearted for a serious subject? (For a general introduction to *film noir*, see website references. Much more about *film noir* will be found by searching the internet.)
- Discuss in class and write notes on the role and style of the narrative voice-over (delivered by actor William McInnes) as the all-knowing, all-seeing, authoritative 'voice of God'.
- Following from the previous two activities, discuss and write a short commentary on other filmmaking approaches used during *Feral Peril*: fly on the wall observational documentary techniques, science and on-location natural wildlife filming, use of animated graphics.
- Discuss in class the film's attitude to the animal shooters and hunters group. For example, why does the film contain scenes related to duck shooting, and to what purpose and effect are these scenes edited and displayed?
- Construct a display poster to promote *Feral Peril* to a wide viewing audience. As the program employs *film noir* techniques, you may wish to design the poster in this mode.
- Write a review of *Feral Peril* in 400-500 words designed for your school's regular newsletter or its intranet site. Consider carefully the audience you are aiming at, and present your review accordingly.

References and Further Resources

Books

- Andrew Brennan, *The Ethics of the Environment*, Dartmouth, Aldershot, 1995
- David Hancocks, *A Different Nature: The Paradoxical World of Zoos and their Uncertain Future*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2001
- Tim Low, *Feral Future: The Untold Story of Australia's Exotic Invaders*, Penguin, Ringwood, 2001
- David Owen and David Pemberton, *Tasmanian Devil: A Unique and Threatened Species*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2005
- Robert Paddle, *The Last Tasmanian Tiger: The History and Extinction of the Thylacine*, Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, 2000
- Clare Palmer (ed), *Teaching Environmental Ethics*, Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2006
- Stephen G Post (ed), *Bioethics for Students: How Do We Know What's Right? Issues in Medicine, Animal Rights, and the Environment*, Macmillan Reference USA, New York, 1999
- Peter Singer (ed), *In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2006
- Ron Thomas and Jan Stutchbury, *Foxes*, Macmillan Education Australia, South Melbourne, 1996
- Gary A Twyford, *Australia's Introduced Animals and Plants*, Reed Books, Balgowlah, 1991

Film/TV

- David Bradbury (director), *Wamsley's War*, Ronin Films, 2001
- Lesley Hammond and Jenny Walsh (directors), *Satan or Survivor – The Tasmanian Devil*, LJM Productions, 2002
- Mark Lewis (director), [Cane Toads – An Unnatural History](#), Film Australia, 1987
- Gary Steer and Alice Ford (directors), [Ten Million Wildcats](#), Film Australia, 2000

Websites

Australian Reptile Park:

www.reptilepark.com.au/

Devil Facial Tumour Disease (DFTD):

www.dpiw.tas.gov.au/inter.nsf/WebPages/JCOK-65X2Y6

www.themercury.com.au/article/2008/12/14/44375_tasmania-news.html

www.devilsonverandah.com.au/what_causes_dftd.htm

Feral animals in Australia:

www.feral.org.au/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.welcome

Film Australia's Wilderness DVD:

Film noir:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_noir

www.imagesjournal.com/issue02/infocus/filmnoir.htm

Fox Eradication Program:

<http://dpiw.tas.gov.au/invasive-species/current-programs/fox-eradication-program>

<http://www.tasmaniantimes.com/index.php/article/the-red-fox-incursion-into-tasmania>

Health risks in exporting Tasmanian devils from Tasmania:

www.tas.greens.org.au/News/view_MR.php?ActionID=1435

Introduced species (includes links to many sites):

<http://science.uniserve.edu.au/school/curric/stage6/ees/introsp.html#introspecies>

Project Ark (saving the Tasmanian devil):

<http://reptilepark.com.au/animals/mammals/tasmanian-devil/>

www.smh.com.au/news/national/devil-of-a-challenge-to-save-species/2008/02/13/1202760399022.html

Sodium fluoroacetate (1080):

<http://apvma.gov.au/node/12716>

www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/11/20/2096244.htm

https://www.daf.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/75140/IPA-1080-PA5.pdf

<http://greens.org.au/policies/vic/animals>

Tasmanian devil:

www.tassiedevil.com.au/

www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,23802569-5017092,00.html

Volunteers and helpers:

www.dpiw.tas.gov.au/inter.nsf/WebPages/SSKA-6W83AF?open

www.tassiedevil.com.au/schools.html

Feral Peril

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Executive Producer Screen Australia: Penny Robins

Executive Producer Magic Real: Ian Walker

Producer: Gina Twyble

Director: Andrew Sully

Writers: Andrew Sully, Alex Barry, Ian Walker

Narrator: William McInnes

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