In September and October 2006, 126 volunteers made their way to one of the most remote and demanding parts of Australia to eradicate cane toads. The final tally was a staggering 48,320.

But what would motivate a person to do it?

Here is one volunteer's story:

THE GREAT TOAD MUSTER

by **PAUL BRADLEY**

The ancient Australian dreamtime is slowly transforming into a nightmare in the top end of our great land. Turtles, goannas, fish, snakes and crocodiles are dying at an alarming rate. The cane toad, an imported, toxic crasher of ecosystems which has no natural predator on our continent, has infiltrated the dream, is wreaking havoc and is determined to continue its work.

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THE GREAT TOAD MUSTER

'It was a shantytown camp in the middle of nowhere with some scattered tents and a camping trailer covered by a web of tarpaulins under a small tree. A windmill and cattle trough completed the postcard.'

It was introduced into Queensland in 1935 as a natural predator for the sugar cane beetle, but the experiment quickly turned into a diabolical problem.

In response to this threat, a great West Australian tradition is in its infancy: organised toad mustering. When I first saw the ad for the Great Toad Muster in my local newspaper asking for volunteers to come up to the Territory and catch cane toads, with all food and camping gear provided, the attraction to the cause and possible good time was irresistible. This was my chance to dilute a me-me-me lifestyle and give something back. It was time to act, not talk.

Armed with adventure, planet salvation and two tonnes of aviation kerosene, I caught a plane to Kununurra and bussed it into the remote pit stop of Timber Creek in the NT. It was heading towards the end of the dry season around October and in just weeks the rains would come and the toads would be camouflaged and protected by the big wet.

At the back of the lush caravan park, under the watchful eye of a huge boab tree, I presented at the field headquarters of the Stop The Toad Foundation and received a warm welcome and questioning. Toad One, a Troopy, (Toyota troop carrier), was going out that afternoon to the front line base camp at Auvergne station, 60 km west and would I like to 'get into it?' Everyone was out there.

Soon enough, Toad One took two staff and me out to the bush camp and as we drove into the unknown and swapped stories my excitement and expectations were high. This was just what I was hoping for.

As we approached the bush camp in a choke of dust and 3pm heat, I was slightly disappointed at first impressions. The conditions looked fairly hostile. It was a shantytown camp in the middle of nowhere with some scattered tents and a camping trailer covered by a web of tarpaulins under a small tree. A

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windmill and cattle trough completed the postcard. I mentally revised the amount of time that it would be possible to stay, the camp screamed 'challenge'. This was the deep end in the top end, and there was no quick escape.

I introduced myself individually to about 25 people, promptly forgetting everyone's names, but was relieved by an honest warm welcome from all. Everyone had questions: 'Where are you from?' 'How did you hear about the muster'?

At first there seemed to be no common thread between the collective. There were young travellers - singles and couples and groups of all ages, some from foreign countries. It was Big Brother without the cameras, the spa, and the beautiful people and I was the intruder. My tent – a mozzie dome - had no shaded cover and was like an oven in the middle of the day, but it was the best one available. I spent about five seconds in it and bolted out.

It was time to start from the beginning. The only thing to do was to watch the show and find out where my niche was, how to fit in, survive and to slowly get to know the crew.

Dinnertime was a relaxed affair and then it was time to get my 'battle gear' from the stores tent. My kit consisted of a reflective vest, a high-powered torch, and battery and bum bag, plastic bags and gloves. Personal flair completes the rest of the uniform. I was ready to fight.

Everyone fell into line for the night's briefing. We were going to Dan's Lagoon (named after a recently departed 'toader'). Each group had four to five people and a group leader. The groups were to split up for a couple of hours around the lagoon and to meet back at the aptly named 'big boab'. Then we'd see what the feeling was if we were to continue. So, at dusk, 19 of us squeezed into Toad One and Toad Two and laughed our way out to Dan's Lagoon in more dust. The instant ease, camaraderie

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and combined purpose were to eventually bring me much closer to this bunch of strangers that I ever could have hoped for.

My first toad catch was anything but a graceful exercise but stupidly running around after frogs in the night in such a special place quickly turned into a Zen-like experience with a sense of moment, topped up with more laughter and cries of 'toad!' It was like I forgot everything and all my focus was put into that searching circle of light from my torch, hoping to catch as many as possible. I would eventually develop a bad toad habit after three weeks. It's a highly addictive pastime, guaranteed to bring on a few laughs. It's good exercise too but it's impossible to get used to them pissing on you as you pick them up. It was natural to develop a personal toading style. I can recommend approaching them from the front, as they sit there like statues unsure of what's happening. If I approached them from the rear, they would sometimes hop away at pace but my long legs and boot would put a stop to that.

Allow me some latitude here but some toads really did appear smarter than others. Most would give in without much fight but some would hop madly in every direction with purpose. The more a toad wanted to evade me, the more I wanted to catch it and the hunting gene would kick in. We always had to keep a constant eye out for snakes and crocodiles, all potentially deadly, and there was no escaping the insects and their wicked bites.

For about two minutes I did wrestle with the karmic dilemma of killing living things but given that the species is so supremely destructive of Australian native habitats, it's very hard to love a cane toad. The toads are changing the balance of an ecosystem that has perfected over time. There is no consolation in a depleted food chain that might slowly adapt to the toad. Put simply, cane toads do not belong here.

When we arrived back at camp near midnight, we gassed the bagged toads with carbon dioxide and went to bed exhausted.

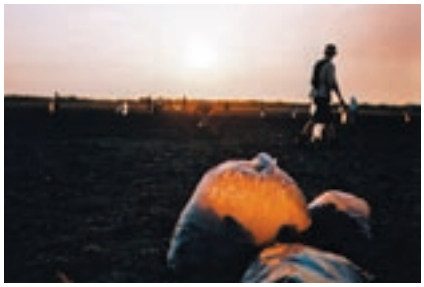
'As days passed and I tuned further into the cycle of light and dark, the day and date become more irrelevant.'

Every toad-mustering night would end like this and I would always fall asleep in my swag in seconds.

Breakfast would slowly bring everyone together again and then the first job of the day would be to count and sex the toads. The toadal tally was a very important part of the day and we would often try to guess the total of the previous night's catch for the grand prize of a Cherry Ripe. I found an opening for the job of gravedigger and strangely enjoyed the ceremony of burial up the dry creek. It wasn't a popular job but I liked it. There was a high likelihood of getting splattered with toad juice and the aroma really was something unforgettable.

There was also an indigenous group working with Stop The Toad. They were the Caring For Country Women's Rangers, a group of six to eight young locals (one of whom was a Traditional Owner) whose mission is to care for sacred women's sites, to collect ingredients and make bush products such as soaps, food and medicines. Their family members also camped with us and eventually they told me some of their dreamtime stories and gave us all a lesson in weeds and what they looked like. It was very sobering listening to traditional owner Laurie Roberts tell me about the effects of the toad on indigenous lifestyles. In the last two years in this area he has noticed a reduction in the numbers of anything that eats the toad, especially new generations of species. Hearing Laurie's suggestion that we build a zoo to protect native animals was a bit of a wake up call. Meeting and working with these people was to be a really positive experience for me.

As days passed and I tuned further into the cycle of light and dark, the day and date become more irrelevant. In the cooler hours, the camp was a hive of activity and jobs were snapped up because there really was not much else to do, except look for jobs. There is always a job somewhere in a bushcamp if you want one. The daily allocation of chores usually got everyone's attention. Our workload was different according to how we felt.



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Sometimes the search and competition for jobs became quite comical; a camp can only tolerate so many chiefs and Indians. Occasionally jobs would be pinched without notice, so you would move on to another one. This was the perfect place to enjoy, with humour, leading and following others I didn't know. Any tensions, ill feelings or thoughts need to thaw quickly in such a camp if the operation is to be effective. There is simply no room for bad attitudes and to carry them around is the best way to alienate yourself. As we were all volunteers and could leave on the next ride out, the priority and motivation was to enjoy ourselves and be positive. The two to three staff were the solid reference points for our places in the camp. They were the benevolent dictators that the group needed.

There were always people coming and going from the camp, it was in a constant state of change. There were, on average, 20 to 30 people per night and there were plenty of characters and 'do-ers'. I never learnt a single person's surname. It seemed irrelevant. If you weren't picking up toads, there was no reason to be out there. The camp was a 'dry' one. No alcohol. This makes life far less complicated.

During the hottest hours of the 46-degree days when chores felt less important, there was not much to do in the camp except read, look at yourself, talk to others, and play chess or cards. The conditions were extreme and there was no escape. Hot wind blew through the defenceless camp intermittently and coated everything in a layer of dust. At times the wind would be cyclonic 300 metres away, yet it would be perfectly still in camp. Siestas only made me more tired so it was better to stay awake in the day. Most of the hard work was done at night.

Occasionally there was a chance to do some daytime reconnaissance of the freshwater billabongs where we were busting. Seeing all the wildlife and the horizons in the day really gave the place more perspective but the best perspective of all came later with a free 50-minute helicopter ride with two other

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volunteers. A local aviation company donated some airtime to help the Foundation search for freshwater bodies that weren't on the map. The ride was a reward for the three of us volunteers who had spent a bit of time for the cause.

The Territory is such a vast space, much of it inaccessible. There were often mixed emotions after a nightly bust. When we first went to a 'hotspot' there would be toads as far as the light could reach. The frenzy of the first bust on a new site would always be exciting, because there would be toads everywhere. Elation would turn to quiet despair on the way back to camp. We would all be asking ourselves: 'How can we ever stop them? Why bother?'

Only after returning to the same spot four or five nights did it become apparent that we were having a positive effect. Areas that once had plagues of toads were cleaned out. Balance was temporarily restored. It is possible to dramatically reduce toad populations and influence their advance. There's no doubt that they will return to areas that have been busted but the exercise is about managing the toads' advance. It's too late to keep them out of the Territory now. Toads are already well established and Territorians and their governments will have to learn to live with their past inaction. The Kimberley still has the slightest of chance to remain toad free, but only if we can stay active and vigilant.

'Not on my watch, not while I'm around,' said Malcolm, a 72 year-old retired surgeon from North Cottesloe. I adopted his mantra. It summed everything up about what I could be.

Later in the Great Muster, when we'd pushed the frontline further east, the bushcamp eventually moved back to the relative luxury of the Timber Creek caravan park. The move was a big operation in the heat but everyone put in their bit and got the job done. It was a bit sad to leave the bushcamp. After two weeks in the bush I was starting to have a really positive connection with the land and the changing light and season, but heat and fatigue were creeping up on those of us who had been there for

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The author, Paul Bradley

Photo: Pam Steele

a while. Swimming pools and beer were calling. I was to spend my last week there at the caravan park, continuing to go out each night to new waterholes but it wasn't the same as the camp. The camaraderie and purpose were still there and growing but the luxuries and 'cool' reduced the way we'd had to rely on each other. There was even the occasional night off if we wanted.

I was promoted to team leader. I felt great pride that I had been asked to lead those who had just joined up and show them the ways. More responsibility meant more gear to carry such as a radio, a GPS, and Glad Wrap for snake bites. Safety and teamwork were our priorities and team leaders worked together well.

After three weeks up north, I'd had one of the best experiences of my life. We all worked hard for our own reward. I'd met some great people, won a Cherry Ripe, seen amazing places that I would never normally have access to, had a helicopter ride, did lots of four-wheel-driving, rode quad bikes and had a positive effect on the land, all for less than a thousand bucks.

Ignorance really is bliss in the comfort of our lounge rooms and it's easy to say that locals, pastoralists, the government and someone else should do something, but eventually we all need to take some responsibility on our own level for our impact on the environment. This exercise has taught me how to do that.

The Stop The Toad Foundation is a positive force and its committed members are an inspiration. Forget politics and dollars, the bottom line is that toads are being picked up off the ground and doing nothing is going to cost us all a lot more.