

## Keith Greenfield – A family history of rabbit control

My family have been in the country west and north west of Lake Torrens in SA since the early days of European pastoralism, as employees of absentee lessees and then as owners in their own right.

It's a toss up who got there first, us or the rabbits.

In 1877 great uncle William Greenfield, with his boss John Phillips, didn't see any on a reconnaissance around the lake starting from Kanyaka south of Hawker.

The run of good seasons had convinced the government that much of the pastoral country from Quorn to Farina was suitable for farming and Kanyaka was one of the properties to be resumed. William was sent to open up country in the South Gap area where he would spend the rest of his life.

By 1895 his bosses had had enough of drought and bad prices, so took the government compensation for value of improvements and gave up their leases.

William's younger brother George (my grandfather) was his overseer at South Gap.

The place was their home so they formed a partnership and took up the lease in their own right. Hard work, frugal living, boom and bust, drought, dingos and rabbits were their lot for the rest of their lives.

They took on Purple Downs in 1901 and George moved there.

William died in 1922 and George in 1926 but William's descendants are still on South Gap and George's on Billa Kalina which his widow Edith bought in 1938. Her youngest son, Colin (my father) moved there in 1939 and was joined by his new wife Eunice Sanderson in 1940.

In 1951 Dad bought a Fiat crawler tractor for dam sinking but the very first job it did was to rip all the rabbit warrens within a mile of the house. My son Colin is still at it in targeted areas along with other conservation measures.

The big plague of the mid 1950s is still a vivid childhood memory. It seemed every acacia bush in every watercourse had a couple of blind holes at the base containing several skinny rabbits, as did every wattle bush or canegrass on every sand hill.

By September the weather had warmed up, they had cleaned out the feed and started to travel. Billa Kalina is outside the Dog Fence but it forms our western and southern boundary, so the south west corner formed a natural trap. The rabbits piled in the corner and died, but the tide kept coming, forming a ramp of carcasses for the late comers to hop over the fence.

The same thing happened at the homestead. Dad built a rabbit fence around the stock water trough, with trap funnels into it, and every morning us kids would slaughter the rabbits and cart the carcasses away. We never got more than 1200 a day because the piles in the corners made a ramp for the stronger ones to escape over.

We used a Willy's Jeep with trailer to cart the bodies away to a huge pile but had to start another one because the stench became too strong to get near our heap.

Despite Dad's best efforts they got into the homestead well. The first hint of a problem was pale grey, very dead rabbit smelling liquid with the odd bit of fur dribbling from the fowl house water tap. A lot of lime went down the well to cure the problem. Luckily we had rain-water tanks.

Then myxo arrived: end of plague. No more rabbit-induced instant drought.

Myxo bent the bunnies but didn't beat them; there was always a residual population to knock down regeneration of perennial vegetation. Boom years would bring on a rabbit population explosion before myxo and a dry spell would trim their numbers enough to prevent an old time plague, but as their immunity increased so did the problem.

Perennial vegetation only germinates or comes away in a wet year; the trees, especially western myall, need a very big rainfall event and are slow growing but very long lived, eight hundred years being quite common.

Through the 1980s and 90s I was involved in the development of the Pastoral Act and subsequently on the Pastoral Board which is responsible for the long-term sustainable management of pastoral land. During this period I met many people whose commitment to land management was both genuine and practical.

At this time research was going on into revitalising myxo and the promising calicivirus. The problem is research is by nature a lengthy business and therefore expensive with no guarantee of success, which does not endear it to government funding.

Sometime in 1990 I suggested that a fund be set up from tax deductible donations to promote and support rabbit research. I was pleased that others agreed and they set about organizing such a fund which was launched in 1993, with some considerable donations.



Keith Greenfield, holding a steel-jawed rabbit trap - now converted to an alternative use – and showcasing a Rabbit-Free Australia (RFA) membership sticker.

Through the 1980s and 90s, as members of the Kingoonya Soil Board, we also did warren ripping trials over an extensive area and erected exclosures to measure and document the difference in vegetation between exclusion of livestock only, exclusion of livestock and rabbits, and access to everything.

Then in 1996, great rejoicing! Calici arrived. The effect was dramatic – in no time at all it looked like no rabbits. As it turned out hardly a rabbit, but unfortunately not no rabbits. The increase in vegetation on our country has been remarkable, dented only by the current very extended drought, but at least we can now destock and not leave the remnants to the rabbits.

We've ripped and blown up rabbit warrens, shot, gassed, poisoned, trapped, netted, spot lighted, dug rabbits out by hand and cursed rabbits but the only methods that are effective over South Australia's vast arid areas, much of which are virtually unoccupied, are biological.

The Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia is most important as experience has shown we must keep funding rabbit research, even as we face the huge economic cost of the COVID19 virus.