Domestic dog attacks on sheep in the urban fringe areas of
Perth, Western Australia

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis has been performed by me, except where otherwise clearly stated in the text, and that it has not been previously submitted for application for a degree at any University.

Signed

Garth Jennens
ABSTRACT

DOMESTIC DOG ATTACKS ON SHEEP IN THE URBAN FRINGE AREAS OF PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

In common with many cities, Perth, Western Australia has a problem with domestic dogs attacking livestock, such as sheep on its urban fringe areas. The current study used multiple sources to document 1479 attacks on livestock on 1105 properties by 1900 dogs across eight metropolitan local authorities over a three-year period. The hypothesis that dog attacks on sheep are poorly understood by the community and continue as a result of inaction by local authorities, dog owners and livestock owners, rather than being an unavoidable predator/prey interaction, was supported. The predatory behaviour of domestic dogs and the anti-predatory behaviour of sheep were observed to be similar to that of wild canids and ungulates respectively.

The reluctance of local authorities to prosecute offenders and enforce by-laws meant that there was little voluntary compliance by dog owners to control their dogs. It therefore, became necessary for livestock owners to protect their livestock; however, most failed to take effective preventive measures.

Wild canids predominantly attack the head and neck of prey animals, whereas in contrast, domestic dogs may attack any part of a sheep. Examination of injury sites, in conjunction with information collected from other investigative techniques, assisted with the identification of the breed, size and number of dogs responsible. To overcome difficulties in locating a dog not sighted attacking, tracker-dogs were trained to follow the attacker’s scent back to its home. The majority of dogs (60%) lived within 200 metres of the livestock they attacked and used the same route to and from the property on subsequent attacks.

A single or pair of owned dogs from the same household, belonging to 14 breeds were primarily responsible for attacks. Poor management by dog owners on inadequately fenced smallholdings enabled these dogs to wander unnoticed from their properties. Although most dog owners accepted evidence of their dogs’ involvement, few accepted blame and most
were surprised that their “friendly” pet could attack livestock. Unless dogs were destroyed, relocated or contained by their owners they were likely to attack again.

It is concluded that dog attacks occur commonly in urban fringe areas; however, with appropriate management of dogs and livestock these can be minimised.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION ......................................................................................................................... ii
ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................. iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .................................................................................................................. v
TABLE OF CONTENTS ............................................................................................................... vi
LIST OF TABLES .......................................................................................................................... xix
LIST OF FIGURES ..................................................................................................................... xxiv

## CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Domestication of dogs and sheep ....................................................................................... 1
1.2 The problem of dog attacks on livestock ........................................................................... 2
1.3 Hypothesis and aims of thesis ........................................................................................... 5
1.4 Chapter content ................................................................................................................... 5

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 8
2.2 Assessing losses of livestock due to dog attacks ................................................................. 8
2.3 Identifying the type of dogs responsible for attacks on livestock ...................................... 10
2.4 Predatory behaviour of wild canids and dogs ................................................................. 11
  2.4.1 Chasing and attacking in wild canids and dogs ......................................................... 12
  2.4.2 Killing by wild canids and dogs ............................................................................... 13
  2.4.3 Injury patterns caused by domestic dogs ................................................................. 17
  2.4.4 Breed differences in predatory behaviour .............................................................. 18
  2.4.5 Frequency of involvement of individual breeds in attacks on livestock .................. 19
  2.4.6 Pack characteristics of wild canids and dogs ......................................................... 19
2.5 Anti-predatory behaviour of wild ungulates and domestic sheep .................................... 21
2.5.1 Type of livestock attacked ..................................................... 21
2.5.2 Defensive behaviours of wild and domestic sheep .................. 22
2.6 Farm management practices .................................................. 25
2.6.1 Farm management practices that assist in preventing dog attacks .................................................. 25
2.7 Temporal and spatial patterns of attack ........................................ 29
2.7.1 Temporal patterns .............................................................. 29
2.7.2 Spatial patterns ................................................................. 30
2.8 Methods of controlling predators ............................................... 31
2.8.1 Shooting, baiting and trapping .............................................. 31
2.8.2 Predator control and animal welfare ...................................... 34
2.8.3 Effectiveness of predator control .......................................... 34
2.9 Actions and reactions of witnesses and livestock owners to an attack .................................................. 35
2.10 Methods of identifying and locating dogs ..................................... 36
2.10.1 Animal tracks and hair samples .......................................... 36
2.10.2 Using other dogs to locate predators ...................................... 36
2.10.3 Identifying the routes used by wild canids and dogs .................. 38
2.11 Dogs that attack livestock and their behaviour towards people .......... 39
2.12 Gender and neutering status of dogs that attack livestock ................. 40
2.13 Behaviour and attitudes of dog owners ........................................ 40
2.14 Legislating for the control of dogs that attack livestock ..................... 42
2.15 The cost and impact of dog attacks ........................................... 43
2.16 Solutions to dogs attacking livestock .......................................... 45

CHAPTER THREE: LOCAL AUTHORITY OFFICERS' AND RESIDENTS' VIEWS ON DOG ATTACKS ON LIVESTOCK 47
3.1 Introduction ............................................................ 47
3.2 Materials and Methods .................................................... 48
3.2.1 Perth ................................................................. 48
3.2.2 Terms and definitions .................................................... 48

vii
3.2.3 Survey 1: Local Authority officers in Western Australia ....................... 50
3.2.3.1 Contents of questionnaire ...................................................... 50
3.2.4 Survey 2: Residents in the study area ........................................... 50
3.2.4.1 The study area ............................................................................. 50
3.2.4.2 Number of residents surveyed and purpose of the survey ................ 52
3.2.4.3 Reinterviewing of residents ....................................................... 53
3.3 Results .................................................................................................. 53
Survey 1: Local Authority officers in Western Australia .............................. 53
3.3.1 Rank order of problems caused by dogs ........................................... 53
3.3.2 Dog attacks on livestock .................................................................... 54
3.3.2.1 Causes of dog attacks on livestock ................................................ 54
3.3.2.2 Solutions to dog attacks on livestock ............................................. 55
3.3.3 Problems encountered by local authority officers when carrying out dog control ................................................................. 57
3.3.4 Sterilisation, identification and registration ......................................... 58
3.3.5 Training of local authority enforcement staff ..................................... 58
3.3.6 Enforcement of the Dog Act ............................................................. 59
3.3.6.1 Problems experienced by local authority officers when enforcing the Dog Act ................................................................. 59
3.3.6.2 Problems experienced by local authority officers when prosecuting offenders ................................................................. 60
3.3.7 Co-operation and uniformity between local authorities and centralisation of dog control and education ............................................... 60
3.3.8 Education and enforcement ............................................................. 62
3.3.8.1 Emphasis of dog control ............................................................... 62
3.3.8.2 Type of action taken by local authorities against dog owners ............ 63
3.3.8.3 Type of educational activities carried out by local authorities for dog owners ................................................................. 63
Survey 2: Residents in the study area .......................................................... 64

viii
3.3.9 Resident details and property ownership ........................................ 64
  3.3.9.1 Age and gender of residents .................................................. 64
  3.3.9.2 Property ownership, duration of occupancy and household size ........ 64

3.3.10 Type of livestock kept .................................................................. 65

3.3.11 Dogs owned by residents ............................................................ 66
  3.3.11.1 Number of dogs currently or previously owned by residents .......... 66
  3.3.11.2 Breed of dog ........................................................................ 66
  3.3.11.3 Gender and neutering status of dogs ....................................... 67
  3.3.11.4 Age of dog and duration of ownership ..................................... 68
  3.3.11.5 Ownership and purpose of keeping a dog .................................. 68

3.3.12 Fencing of properties and containment of dogs ............................... 69
  3.3.12.1 Standard of fencing and containment of dogs ............................. 69
  3.3.12.2 Time of containment and occupancy of property ....................... 69
  3.3.12.3 Locations on a property where dogs were kept ......................... 70
  3.3.12.4 Compliance with containment ................................................ 70

3.3.13 Exercise and training of dogs ....................................................... 71
  3.3.13.1 Method of exercising a dog .................................................... 71
  3.3.13.2 Obedience training ............................................................... 71

3.3.14 Dogs wandering from their property .............................................. 72
  3.3.14.1 Locations to where dogs wander ............................................. 72
  3.3.14.2 Residents solutions to stop a dog from wandering ..................... 72
  3.3.14.3 Reasons for dogs wandering from their property ....................... 73

3.3.15 Interaction of dog(s) with livestock ............................................... 73
  3.3.15.1 Current or previous contact with livestock ................................. 73
  3.3.15.2 Likelihood of a dog attacking livestock ..................................... 74
  3.3.15.3 Likely action if own dog attacked livestock ............................... 75
  3.3.15.4 Residents reasons for a dog attacking livestock ........................ 75

3.3.16 Reinterviewing of residents ........................................................ 76
  3.3.16.1 Livestock currently kept and previous attacks ........................... 76
CHAPTER FOUR: DOG ATTACKS ON LIVESTOCK IN PERTH

4.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 88

4.2 Materials and Methods .................................................................................................... 89

4.2.1 Sources of information for attacks ............................................................................ 89

4.2.2 Number of properties where attacks occurred ...................................................... 92

4.2.3 Species and number of animals attacked ................................................................. 93

4.2.4 Categories of attacks ................................................................................................ 93

4.2.5 Number, breed and ownership of dogs responsible for attacks ......................... 94

4.3 Results ................................................................................................................................ 95

4.3.1 Number, location and size of properties where attacks occurred ....................... 95

4.3.1.1 Number of properties ...................................................................................... 95

4.3.1.2 Localities where dog attacks on livestock occurred ........................................ 96

4.3.1.3 Size of property where dog attacks on livestock occurred ................................ 96

4.3.2 Sources of information for attacks ............................................................................ 97

4.3.3 Species of livestock attacked by dogs ...................................................................... 98

4.3.4 Number of animals killed or injured ....................................................................... 99

4.3.5 Number of livestock kept and lost on each property .............................................. 99

4.3.6 Number and location of attacks on people and animals reported to local authorities ................................................................................................................... 100

4.3.7 Ownership, number and breed of dogs .................................................................. 103

4.3.7.1 Ownership of dogs ......................................................................................... 103

4.3.7.2 Number of dogs ............................................................................................. 103

4.3.7.3 Breed of dog .................................................................................................... 103

4.3.8 Reinterviewing of livestock owners ......................................................................... 105
4.4 Discussion .................................................................................................................. 106
  4.4.1 Number and location of attacks on livestock ....................................................... 106
  4.4.2 Sources of information for attacks, and their limitations .................................... 108
  4.4.3 Species of livestock attacked ............................................................................... 109
  4.4.4 Dog attacks on people and other animals ........................................................... 110
  4.4.5 Ownership, number and breed of dogs ............................................................... 112
  4.4.6 Reinterviewing of livestock owners ..................................................................... 115
4.5 Conclusion ................................................................................................................. 116

CHAPTER FIVE: ACTIONS OF DOGS, LIVESTOCK AND WITNESSES DURING AND AFTER AN ATTACK 117
5.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................ 117
5.2 Materials and Methods ............................................................................................. 118
  5.2.1 Behaviour of dogs and sheep ............................................................................... 118
  5.2.2 Signs of an attack and the actions of witnesses .................................................. 119
  5.2.3 On-site investigations of attacks ......................................................................... 120
  5.2.4 Measures used by livestock owners to prevent attacks ....................................... 121
    5.2.4.1 Preventive measures taken prior to an attack ............................................... 121
    5.2.4.2 Preventive measures taken subsequent to an attack .................................... 122
    5.2.4.3 Cage and steel-jaw traps .............................................................................. 122
    5.2.4.4 Tranquillisers, dyes and toxic baits .............................................................. 125
  5.2.5 Attacks by dogs belonging to livestock owners ................................................... 126
  5.2.6 Degree of co-operation by livestock owners with immediate Neighbours and the author ............................................................................................................. 126
  5.2.7 Reporting an attack to local authorities ............................................................... 127
  5.2.8 Month and time of the first known attack on a property ..................................... 127
  5.2.9 Livestock owners solution’s to dog attacks on livestock ...................................... 128
  5.2.10 Cost and impact of an attack .............................................................................. 128
5.3 Results ......................................................................................................................... 128
  5.3.1 Predatory behaviour of dogs and anti-predatory behaviour of sheep ...................... 128
| 5.3.1.1 | Behavioural patterns of dogs and sheep during an attack | 128 |
| 5.3.1.2 | Location of sheep after an attack (dead and alive) | 132 |
| 5.3.2 | Behavioural changes observed in sheep after an attack | 134 |
| 5.3.3 | Discovering an attack | 135 |
| 5.3.3.1 | Witnessing of an attack | 135 |
| 5.3.3.2 | Signs of an attack | 136 |
| 5.3.3.3 | Occupancy of a property during an attack | 137 |
| 5.3.3.4 | Response of a livestock owner's dog to another dog on its property attacking livestock | 137 |
| 5.3.3.5 | Proximity of a paddock to an occupied dwelling | 138 |
| 5.3.4 | Type of actions taken by a witness to an attack | 138 |
| 5.3.5 | Farm management practices | 138 |
| 5.3.5.1 | Precautions taken prior to the first attack on a property | 138 |
| 5.3.5.2 | Reasons for keeping livestock | 139 |
| 5.3.5.3 | Preventive and control measures taken after the first attack | 140 |
| 5.3.5.4 | Trapping | 140 |
| 5.3.5.5 | Pens and enclosures | 143 |
| 5.3.5.6 | Use of dogs and other animals to protect livestock | 144 |
| 5.3.5.7 | Toxic baits and dyes | 145 |
| 5.3.5.8 | Reasons for livestock owners failing to take preventive measures | 146 |
| 5.3.6 | Co-operation by livestock owners with their immediate neighbours and the author | 146 |
| 5.3.7 | Attacks by dogs belonging to livestock owners | 146 |
| 5.3.8 | Reporting an attack on livestock to the local authority | 147 |
| 5.3.8.1 | Reasons for livestock owners reporting or not reporting an attack | 147 |
| 5.3.8.2 | Type of action taken by rangers when an attack was reported to them | 149 |
| 5.3.9 | Seasonal and daily patterns of attack | 149 |
| 5.3.9.1 | Seasonal patterns | 149 |
5.3.9.2 Daily patterns ...................................................... 150
5.3.10 Livestock owner's solutions to dog attacks on livestock ............ 151
5.4.11 Cost and impact of attacks on livestock owners ...................... 152

5.4 Discussion .................................................................. 152
5.4.1 Behavioural patterns of dogs and sheep during an attack ........... 152
5.4.2 On-site investigations of attacks .................................... 155
5.4.3 Discovering an attack .................................................. 157
5.4.4 Preventive measures taken by livestock owners ...................... 159
5.4.5 Co-operation by livestock owners with immediate neighbours and the author ......................................................... 164
5.4.6 Reporting an attack and subsequent action taken by authorities ... 164
5.4.7 Seasonal and daily patterns of attack ................................... 166
5.4.8 Livestock owner's solutions to attacks .................................. 168
5.4.9 Cost and impact of attacks on livestock owners ...................... 168

5.5 Conclusion .................................................................. 169

CHAPTER SIX: INVESTIGATING AN ATTACK .......................... 171

6.1 Introduction ................................................................ 171
6.2 Materials and Methods .................................................. 172
6.2.1 The type and site of injuries to sheep ............................... 173
6.2.1.1 Types of wounds caused by dog bites ............................ 173
6.2.1.2 Other types of injuries ............................................... 174
6.2.1.3 Site(s) of injuries to sheep ........................................ 174
6.2.1.4 Examination of bite marks ......................................... 176
6.2.1.5 Fox attacks ............................................................. 176
6.2.2 Cause of death .......................................................... 176
6.2.3 Treatment of injured sheep .......................................... 177
6.2.4 Dogs feeding off sheep ............................................... 177
6.2.5 Locating the dog's entry into, or exit from a property ................ 177
6.2.6 Tracker-dogs ................................................................. 179
  6.2.6.1 Selection of dogs .............................................. 179
  6.2.6.2 Methods of training ............................................ 179
  6.2.6.3 Training the tracker-dogs to follow the scent trail of another dog (tracking) .............................................. 181
  6.2.6.4 Delays, distractions and discrimination (in tracking) ...... 183
  6.2.6.5 Tracking a dog from the attack scene ....................... 185

6.2.7 Other methods used to locate dogs .................................... 187
  6.2.7.1 Dog prints ....................................................... 188
  6.2.7.2 Locating the dogs route back to its home ................... 188
  6.2.7.3 Observations and enquiries ................................... 189

6.2.8 Distance between the livestock owner's property and the dog's home ......................................................... 190

6.3 Results ................................................................................ 190
  6.3.1 Type and site of injuries to sheep .................................... 190
    6.3.1.1 Type of wounds from dog bites ......................... 190
    6.3.1.2 Sites of injuries to sheep ............................... 199
    6.3.1.3 The site of injury in relation to the breed of dog ...... 202
  6.3.2 Cause of death of sheep ............................................. 206
  6.3.3 Treatment of injured sheep ........................................ 207
  6.3.4 Dogs feeding on sheep carcasses ................................ 208
  6.3.5 The dog's entry into and exit from the livestock owner's property or paddock ......................................................... 210
    6.3.5.1 Location from where a dog entered the livestock owner's property .............................................. 210
    6.3.5.2 Type of perimeter fencing .................................. 211
    6.3.5.3 A dog's method of entry into and exit from the paddock ................................................................. 212
  6.3.6 Location of dog prints after an attack ............................ 212
  6.3.7 The use of a tracker-dog to locate dogs responsible for an attack ................................................................. 214
    6.3.7.1 Locating dogs by using a tracker-dog ..................... 214
    6.3.7.2 Problems associated with the use of tracker-dogs ...... 216
7.2.9 Compensation for livestock owners ........................................ 250
7.2.10 Action by local authorities against the dog owner .................. 250

7.3 Results .................................................................................................................. 250
7.3.1 Ownership of a dog and the location of its home ......................... 250
7.3.2 Examination of a dog responsible for an attack ......................... 251
7.3.2.1 Visual signs on a dog that had attacked livestock, scavenged or wandered ........................................ 251
7.3.2.2 Behaviour of a dog towards people on its property or at the local authority pound ................................. 252
7.3.2.3 Behaviour of a dog towards people on the livestock owner's property .................................................... 253

7.3.3 Age, gender and neutering status of dogs .............................................. 254
7.3.3.1 Age ............................................................................................... 254
7.3.3.2 Gender and neutering status .......................................................... 254
7.3.3.3 The gender composition of two or more dogs responsible for an attack .................................................. 255
7.3.3.4 Residential relationship between two dogs responsible for the same attack .............................................. 256
7.3.3.5 Composition of dogs that returned to a property ......................... 256

7.3.4 Management of a dog by its owner ......................................................... 256
7.3.4.1 Means by which a dog escaped from the dog owner's property ......................................................... 256
7.3.4.2 Location where a dog was kept at night, or when its owner was not at home ............................................. 257
7.3.4.3 Containment of a dog prior to an attack ........................................ 258
7.3.4.4 Reasons given by dog owners for not containing their dog ................................................................. 259
7.3.4.5 History of offending by a dog owner ............................................. 259
7.3.4.6 Length of time a dog had been on its property prior to an attack .......................................................... 259

7.3.5 Dog ownership ............................................................................................... 260
7.3.5.1 Ownership of a dog ................................................................. 260
7.3.5.2 Purpose for which a dog is kept ............................................... 260
7.3.5.3 Ownership and type of property where a dog was kept ................................................................. 260
7.3.5.4 Presence of livestock on a dog owner’s property .......... 261

7.3.6 Awareness and reaction of a dog owner to their dog attacking livestock .................................................. 261

7.3.6.1 A dog owner’s awareness of their dog wandering or attacking livestock ................................................. 261

7.3.6.2 Period of time after an attack to when a dog owner was notified .......................................................... 261

7.3.6.3 Reaction of a dog owner to being advised ................. 261

7.3.6.4 A dog owner’s attribution of blame for a dog attacking livestock .......................................................... 262

7.3.6.5 Physical and behavioural reasons given for a dog not attacking livestock .............................................. 262

7.3.6.6 Reaction of a dog owner to a request by the livestock owner for assistance ........................................ 263

7.3.7 Compensation for livestock owners ................................ 264

7.3.8 Action by local authorities ........................................................ 265

7.3.8.1 Type of action taken by local authorities against the dog owner ........................................................... 265

7.3.8.2 Reasons for a local authority issuing a warning to a dog owner ............................................................. 265

7.3.9 Subsequent attacks by a dog that was kept by its owner .......... 266

7.3.10 Fate of a dog and reasons for destruction or relocation .......... 266

7.3.10.1 Fate of a dog responsible for an attack on livestock ...... 266

7.3.10.2 Reasons for the destruction or relocation of a dog ....... 267

7.4 Discussion ...................................................................................... 268

7.4.1 Dog ownership and the location of a dog’s home ................. 268

7.4.2 Examination of a dog ............................................................... 268

7.4.3 Age, gender and neutering status of a dog ................................. 270

7.4.4 Management of a dog responsible for an attack .................... 272

7.4.5 Reaction of dog owners to their dog attacking, and the attribution of blame ................................................ 273

7.4.6 Compensation for livestock owners ........................................... 276

7.4.7 Action taken by the local authority against the dog owner .......... 277

7.4.8 Fate of a dog responsible for an attack ........................................ 278
CHAPTER EIGHT: GENERAL DISCUSSION

8.1 Summary of major findings of this study ............................................................ 282
8.2 Limitations of the current study ........................................................................... 290
8.3 Solutions to dog attacks on livestock and areas for future research .................. 290

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................. 296
APPENDIXES ............................................................................................................. 310
LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER THREE

Table 3.1 Terms and definitions .............................................................. 49
Table 3.2 Area, distance from Perth CBD, total population and population per square kilometre for the eight local authorities .......... 52
Table 3.3 Rank order of dog problems ...................................................... 54
Table 3.4 Causes of dog attacks on livestock ............................................ 55
Table 3.5 Solutions to dog attacks on livestock ........................................... 56
Table 3.6 Problems encountered when carrying out dog control ................. 57
Table 3.7 Compulsory sterilisation, permanent identification and increased registration fees ........................................................ 58
Table 3.8 Type of training a local authority would provide for, or permit its rangers to attend ........................................................ 58
Table 3.9 Problems when enforcing the Dog Act ......................................... 59
Table 3.10 Problems experienced when prosecuting offenders ..................... 60
Table 3.11 Co-operation and uniformity between councils and centralisation of services .................................................... 61
Table 3.12 Responsibility for the enforcement of dog control legislation .......... 61
Table 3.13 Solutions to the lack of co-operation and uniformity between local authorities .................................................. 62
Table 3.14 Reasons for not supporting centralisation of dog control and dog owner education ....................................................... 62
Table 3.15 Emphasis of dog control ........................................................... 63
Table 3.16 Type of enforcement action ....................................................... 63
Table 3.17 Type of educational activities ..................................................... 64
Table 3.18 Age of residents ................................................................. 64
Table 3.19 Number of householders per property ......................................... 65
Table 3.20 Type of livestock kept on properties .......................................... 65
Table 3.21 Number of dogs owned by residents ........................................... 66
Table 3.22 Fate of previously owned dogs .................................................. 66
Table 3.23 Breed of purebred and crossbred dogs ........................................ 67
Table 3.24 Gender and neutering status of dogs .......................................... 68
CHAPTER FOUR

Table 4.1  Numbers of attacks or properties in each category  .............................................. 90
Table 4.2  Number of properties where livestock were attacked .............................................. 96
Table 4.3  Property size ........................................................................................................ 97
Table 4.4  Sources of information .......................................................................................... 97
Table 4.5  Properties where both sheep and another species of livestock were kept and attacked .............................................................. 98
Table 4.6  Number of livestock kept on a property, before the first documented attack .............................................................. 99
Table 4.7  Number of livestock killed on a property during the year of an attack ................ 99
Table 4.8  Percentage of livestock killed on each property per annum ................................ 100
Table 4.9  Number of reported dog attacks on people and animals .................................... 101
Table 4.10 Location of reported dog attacks on people and animals ................................ 102
Table 4.11 Breed of purebred dogs ..................................................................................... 104
Table 4.12 Breed of crossbred dogs ..................................................................................... 105
### CHAPTER FIVE

| Table 5.1 | Number of attacks and properties in each category | 118 |
| Table 5.2 | Location of sheep after an attack | 132 |
| Table 5.3 | Behavioural changes in sheep after an attack | 134 |
| Table 5.4 | Witnesses to an attack | 135 |
| Table 5.5 | Period of time after an attack to when it was discovered | 136 |
| Table 5.6 | Initial signs of an attack | 136 |
| Table 5.7 | Response of the livestock owner's dog(s) to another dog | 137 |
| Table 5.8 | Action taken by witnesses | 138 |
| Table 5.9 | Precautions taken by livestock owners prior to the first attack on their animals | 139 |
| Table 5.10 | Reasons for keeping livestock | 139 |
| Table 5.11 | Measures taken by livestock owners to protect their animals, the effectiveness of these measures in preventing subsequent attacks and reasons for further attacks | 141 |
| Table 5.12 | Reasons for preventive measures not being taken | 146 |
| Table 5.13 | Chasing and attacking by dogs belonging to livestock owners | 147 |
| Table 5.14 | Reasons given for reporting an attack | 148 |
| Table 5.15 | Reasons given for not reporting an attack | 148 |
| Table 5.16 | Type of action taken by rangers | 149 |
| Table 5.17 | Month of the first recorded attack on a property | 150 |
| Table 5.18 | Time of the first recorded attack on a property | 151 |
| Table 5.19 | Livestock owners solutions | 151 |
| Table 5.20 | Type of costs incurred by livestock owners | 152 |

### CHAPTER SIX

| Table 6.1 | Number of attacks in each category | 172 |
| Table 6.2 | Injury sites on sheep | 200 |
| Table 6.3 | Injury sites on sheep after attacks by purebred dogs | 203 |
| Table 6.4 | Injury sites on sheep after attacks by purebred and crossbred dogs | 205 |
Table 6.5 Cause of death ................................................................. 206
Table 6.6 Survival of injured sheep after an attack ........................ 207
Table 6.7 Primary site of feeding by a dog ......................................... 209
Table 6.8 Location of a dog’s entry ..................................................... 210
Table 6.9 Type of perimeter fencing around the paddock where livestock were attacked ......................................................... 211
Table 6.10 Means used by a dog to enter and leave a paddock .......... 212
Table 6.11 Location of dog prints ......................................................... 213
Table 6.12 Locations where dog prints were lost ................................. 214
Table 6.13 Use of the tracker-dog ......................................................... 214
Table 6.14 Problems encountered when using the tracker-dog .......... 216
Table 6.15 Reasons for not using the tracker-dog ................................. 217
Table 6.16 Areas used by dogs when travelling back to their homes .... 218
Table 6.17 Means by which a dog, or its owner was identified ............. 223
Table 6.18 Type of observations used to identify a dog ....................... 224
Table 6.19 Distance between the livestock owner’s property and the dog’s home ................................................................. 225

CHAPTER SEVEN

Table 7.1 Number of dogs, owners and properties in each category ............ 246
Table 7.2 Location of a dog’s home relative to the livestock owner’s property ................................................................. 251
Table 7.3 Visual signs on a dog ............................................................. 251
Table 7.4 A dog’s behaviour towards people .......................................... 253
Table 7.5 Age of dog ........................................................................ 254
Table 7.6 Neutering status ................................................................. 255
Table 7.7 Gender composition of a pair or group of dogs ....................... 255
Table 7.8 Composition of dogs ............................................................. 256
Table 7.9 Means by which a dog escaped ............................................. 257
Table 7.10 Location of a dog at night or when its owner was not at home ..... 257
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.11</td>
<td>Containment of a dog prior to an attack</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.12</td>
<td>Reasons for not containing a dog</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.13</td>
<td>Length of time a dog had resided on its property</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.14</td>
<td>Ownership and type of the dog owner's property</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.15</td>
<td>Attribution of blame for a dog attacking livestock</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.16</td>
<td>Reasons given for a dog not attacking livestock</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.17</td>
<td>Reaction of the dog owner to a request for assistance</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.18</td>
<td>Reasons for a dog owner not paying compensation</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.19</td>
<td>Reasons for the dog owner being warned</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.20</td>
<td>Fate of dogs responsible for attacks on livestock</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.21</td>
<td>Reasons given for disposing of a dog</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER THREE

Figure 3.1 Location of the eight local authorities included in the study area relative to other Perth local authorities ................................................. 51

CHAPTER FOUR

Figure 4.1 Multiple number of sheep killed by dogs ............................................. 98
Figure 4.2 Shar Pei shot whilst attacking livestock .................................................. 104

CHAPTER FIVE

Figure 5.1 Large cage trap ............................................................................... 123
Figure 5.2 Modified steel-jaw trap ........................................................................ 124
Figure 5.3 Behavioural patterns of dogs and sheep during an attack (1) .............. 129
Figure 5.4 Behavioural patterns of dogs and sheep during an attack (2) ............. 130
Figure 5.5 A dog watching sheep in a paddock ..................................................... 131
Figure 5.6 Sheep bunching into a group when approached by a dog ................... 131
Figure 5.7 Sheep being chased by a dog ............................................................... 132
Figure 5.8 Sheep trapped after being chased ....................................................... 133
Figure 5.9 Sheep unable to escape from the perimeter fence ............................... 133
Figure 5.10 Sheep in a horse’s yard after being chased ........................................ 134
Figure 5.11 Sheep bunched into a group after an attack ...................................... 135
Figure 5.12 Steel-jaw traps set at the dog’s entry into a paddock ......................... 140
Figure 5.13 Rabbit traps set illegally to capture dogs ........................................... 143
Figure 5.14 Permanent and secure enclosure for sheep ....................................... 143
Figure 5.15 Temporary and ineffective enclosure for sheep .................................. 144
Figure 5.16 Livestock guarding dog escaping from its paddock .......................... 144
Figure 5.17 Cattle kept in the same paddock as sheep to protect them ................ 145
Figure 5.18 Dye spread over a carcass ................................................................. 145
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 6.1</th>
<th>Standard livestock fencing on a smallholding</th>
<th>178</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.2</td>
<td>Webbing tracking harness, attached to a three metre lead</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.3</td>
<td>Locating a scent trail from a carcass</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.4</td>
<td>Puncture wound's on a sheep's face</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.5</td>
<td>Lacerated wound on a sheep's neck</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.6</td>
<td>Lacerated wound on a sheep's flank</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.7</td>
<td>Incised wound on an sheep's ear</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.8</td>
<td>Chipped bone on the back of head and neck of a sheep</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.9</td>
<td>Crushed lower part of the nasal bone</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.10</td>
<td>Crushed upper part of the nasal bone and skull</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.11</td>
<td>Injuries other than from bite wounds (broken hip)</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.12</td>
<td>Injuries to hind limbs as a result of a sheep being grabbed during the chase</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.13</td>
<td>Bite wounds to facial region, causing respiratory problems</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.14</td>
<td>Ear removed from a sheep</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.15</td>
<td>Tail removed from a sheep</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.16</td>
<td>Skin removed from part of the body of a sheep</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.17</td>
<td>Disembowelment of a sheep</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.18</td>
<td>Subcutaneous bruising to a sheep</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.19</td>
<td>Extensive internal bleeding from injuries to the neck of a sheep</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.20</td>
<td>Size of bite marks left by a medium sized dog</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.21</td>
<td>Injuries to a single site on one sheep</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.22</td>
<td>Injuries to a single site on several sheep</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.23</td>
<td>Injuries to several sites on many sheep</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.24</td>
<td>Injuries to multiple sites on a single sheep</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.25</td>
<td>Injuries to the back of the neck of a sheep from an attack by a Rottweiler</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.26</td>
<td>Lower facial injuries on a sheep from an attack by a Bull Terrier</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.27</td>
<td>Extensive injuries necessitating euthanasia of the sheep</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.28</td>
<td>Sheep chased into a dam and drowned</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.29</td>
<td>Inappropriate treatment of an injured sheep by a livestock owner</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.30</td>
<td>Minimal feeding by a dog on a sheep carcass</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.31</td>
<td>Extensive feeding by a dog on a sheep carcass</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.32</td>
<td>Damage perimeter fencing</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.33</td>
<td>Dog prints leading into a creek</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.34</td>
<td>&quot;Bondi&quot; following a scent trail</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.35</td>
<td>&quot;Yana&quot; following a scent trail</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.36</td>
<td>Paddock bordering a river</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.37</td>
<td>Public firebreak bordering a rear paddock</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.38</td>
<td>Roadway bordering a smallholding</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.39</td>
<td>Two adjacent paddocks containing livestock</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.40</td>
<td>Bush area bordering a paddock</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.41</td>
<td>Bush tracks used by dogs to return to their home</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.42</td>
<td>Sheep grazing in scrub</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.43</td>
<td>Hilly areas of orchard where sheep were grazed</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.44</td>
<td>Creek bed used by dogs to enter a paddock</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

| Figure 7.1 | Bloodstains on the shoulder of a Rottweiler | 252 |
| Figure 7.2 | Carcass dug up and partially removed by a dog scavenging | 252 |
| Figure 7.3 | Dogs responsible for an attack, friendly to people | 253 |
| Figure 7.4 | Dog responsible for an attack, wary of people | 254 |
| Figure 7.5 | Transportable dog pen used on a smallholding | 258 |