

Death by dehogaflie – The high-tech way to hog heaven

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WILD pigs are rooting around in a field in the dark. Partly hidden by tall grass, their tails wag happily as they snuffle around for roots and insects. A shot rings out and the biggest pig is down. The rest scatter quickly; yet a shooter picks them off one by one with uncanny accuracy.

Pigs are clever and hard to hunt; it can take a day to stalk one. But they are no match for an aerial drone such as the “dehogaflie” operated by Louisiana Hog Control, a pest-extermination firm. It is a remote-controlled aircraft with a thermal-imaging camera and a laser pointer. It easily spots the pigs’ warm bodies from 400 feet and points them out to a hunter on the ground wearing night-vision goggles, who then shoots them.

Each year America’s 6m feral pigs cause an estimated \$1.5 billion of damage to crops, lawns and wildlife. In May *The Economist* reported that Texans were trying to shoot them from helicopters under the state’s “pork chopper” law. This turns out to be ineffective. Helicopters are noisy; pigs quickly learn to hide from them. Drones, by contrast, are quiet. Cy Brown of Louisiana Hog Control guesses that, working on weekend nights over the past six months, he and his partner have dispatched around 300 porkers to hog heaven.



Have drone, will feast

People have two objections to hunting with drones. Some animal-lovers think it cruel. “This is disgusting. I really feel sick,” comments one under the “2013 Pig Killing Highlights” video, complete with perky soundtrack, on Louisiana Hog Control’s Facebook page.

Traditional hunters think it unsporting when it comes to game species such as elk. Hunters are supposed to stalk an animal using wit and woodcraft, says Tim Brass of the Backcountry Hunters and Anglers Association. The Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission recently agreed to consider draft regulations to ban the use of drones for hunting or scouting in Colorado.

However, the rules that apply to hunting for sport typically do not apply to pest control. It is illegal in many states to hunt or scout for elk or deer from the air, but pigs are fair game. A law in Louisiana specifically allows private-property owners to hunt “outlaw quadrupeds”, such as coyotes, hogs and armadillos, at night. Farmers welcome Mr Brown and his drone onto their land. He explains: “If you were to hunt deer from an aeroplane you would be put in jail; if you do pigs you get a high five.”

He adds that, although he has a reputation as a bloodthirsty killer to maintain, he has a soft spot for the cutest pigs. “Sometimes I feel bad. I’ve got one as a pet, Curly. Truth is I shot his mom and he was there in the water and he would probably have died. I took him home and he lives with us and eats peaches and oatmeal.” Mr Brown says he consumes as many of his kills as he can, however. Curly’s days may be numbered.

Given the immense damage that feral pigs cause in Australia, something like this is worth considering as a control measure.