



Agonising debate over ticks for bat control

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SCIENTISTS using ticks to kill bats and halt the spread of the potentially deadly Hendra virus are nervous about using biological controls after the disaster of cane toads, an expert says.

Paralysis ticks kill thousands of bats on the Atherton Tableland in far north Queensland every breeding season.

Townsville expert Dr Lee Skerratt said research had found the paralysis tick (*Ixodes holocyclus*) was unlikely to meet strict criteria of a biological agent against plague proportions of spectacled flying

foxes. But, inexplicably, such a high death rate has not been found in other heavily populated flying fox camps.

"Some scientists do cringe at the mention of biological controls," Dr Skerratt, a parasitologist who also works on toads, said. "But they should not. Some methods have been very effective. There have been some success stories."

He said rabbits would be in plague proportions without myxomatosis, while the use of cactoblastis against prickly pear was a classic example of a useful biological control agent.

Dr Skerratt said it was believed the bats came into contact with ground-dwelling ticks

when they moved lower to feed on wild tobacco in the state's far north.

Tolga Bat Hospital's Jenny Maclean, who cares for more than 50 orphaned flying foxes every year, said a 12-gauge shotgun would be a preferred control method over tick paralysis deaths.

"Here on the Tableland, thousands of bats die every tick season between September and January, peaking in November.

"It is a native tick and the same one that kills lots of dogs and cats along the east coast.

"It is a horrible death, the little animals gasp themselves to death, their breathing muscles and heart and lungs get

paralysed, and it takes days for them to die. You'd be better off shooting them and make sure you kill them.

"It is a long-winded way of going about giving them a horrible death."

The bat lover said she was against any culling option.

"Flying foxes are intelligent, smart animals that look you in the eye and do marvels for the environment in seed dispersal.

"Because they are such a vilified animal, I feel someone has to stand up for them."

She said the Tableland was a hot-spot for tick paralysis but it remained unknown why the parasites did not have such a kill rate farther south.

