



Cassowary vehicle strike research findings

How can we prevent more incidents between cassowaries and vehicles on Mission Beach roads?

James Cook University student India Marshall spoke with drivers who volunteered to be interviewed about collisions, near misses or other encounters with cassowaries. India also analysed video footage - from roadside wildlife cameras at known cassowary hotspots - showing driver-cassowary interactions.

This study was designed by James Cook University, CSIRO, Terrain NRM and the many other members of the Cassowary Recovery Team (ranging from conservation groups to vets).

Background

The southern cassowary is an endangered species found in the Far North of Australia. There have been 22 recorded cassowary strikes in the last two years alone, many of them in the Mission Beach area. Cassowary conservation groups and road managers have been working to reduce road strikes for many years. Due to a stigma around cassowary-driver incidents, information about these incidents has been limited. This study sought to fill a gap in information by encouraging drivers to anonymously share their stories.

Goals

- Reduced cassowary-vehicle strikes
- Increased reporting of cassowary incidents
- Greater community awareness and driver awareness

Findings

The endangered southern cassowary is highly regarded in the Mission Beach community, as evidenced in the positive attitudes of drivers who were interviewed, and in the wider community.

Video data showed that most drivers detected and reacted to a bird on the road or roadside, avoiding a collision by slowing down, swerving away from the bird and warning other drivers by flashing headlights or hazard lights.

Cassowary Recovery Team members and the drivers interviewed for this study spoke about a stigma surrounding cassowary strikes. This was identified as a potential barrier to reporting: "Some people say if they happened to hit one, they'd just keep driving because they'd be worried about the repercussions".

The study found that cassowary strikes are often not the fault of the driver, and that drivers experienced emotional trauma from strike incidents. (Vehicle damage, up to \$7000, was also reported.)

It is hard to predict how a cassowary will react to a vehicle. In the majority of observed interactions, cassowaries stood on the roadside and did not cross. Often they did not pay any attention to a vehicle's presence. Most footage of road crossings showed cassowaries walking across in a leisurely fashion. But video data also showed some unpredictable road-crossing behaviour by cassowaries - including running across the road, standing in the middle of the road, walking up the middle of the road and eating off the road surface.

Despite being aware of the possibility of cassowaries on roads, drivers interviewed about cassowary interactions found themselves in compromising near-miss or strike situations. Most drivers considered a cassowary strike to most commonly be unavoidable due to the unpredictable behaviour of cassowaries and little to no time for a driver to respond. This is evident in two strike incidents where a cassowary collided with the side of a vehicle, indicating that the driver had no chance to even see the cassowary approaching from the rainforest.

Dangerous or careless driving may cause some cassowary strikes. Road users who volunteered to be interviewed because they'd witnessed cassowary-vehicle interactions reported what they considered to be dangerous and/or careless driving in others. (These incidents were not necessarily the same events as those reported on by drivers.) Hazardous driver behaviours were also observed in video data – including overtaking, reversing, tailgating, distracted driving and unnecessary stopping on the roadway.

Interview respondents said signs help to raise awareness but do not necessarily have a big effect on driver behaviour. They suggested that driver education would be the most effective technique for reducing cassowary strikes.

Drivers interviewed said the process for reporting a cassowary strike was not well-known in the Mission Beach community.

Possible solutions

- Changes to the environmental/road conditions where incidents occur. For example, reducing speed limits, revegetating crossing areas and installing cassowary crossing signs at known crossing zones.
- Greater policing of local roads can be a deterrent to speeding/reckless/careless drivers.
- If cassowary strikes are often unavoidable, a functional reporting system needs to be in place to ensure injured cassowaries are treated as soon as possible. The Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads, the Queensland Department of Environment and Science or the Cassowary Coast Regional Council could send an annual courtesy text message to all Mission Beach, Tully and El Arish residents with the Queensland Department of Environment and Science phone number for reporting collisions. Residents could save the number - which is 1300 130 372 - to their phone or refer back to the message. This would ensure a faster response time and a greater likelihood of a cassowary surviving a vehicle strike.

We commend the tireless efforts of those managing cassowary-vehicle interactions at Mission Beach. It's an emotionally exhausting field of work, and your efforts do not go unnoticed. We hope that together we can create solutions to better support the co-existence of cassowaries and people at Mission Beach.