

Use of shelter by Merino sheep

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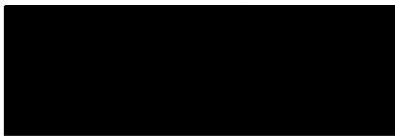
A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the
University of New England

April 2011

School of Environmental and Rural Science
Faculty of Arts and Science

DECLARATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification at any university. I certify that all help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been duly acknowledged.



Donnalee B. Taylor

21st April 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Few great accomplishments are achieved singlehandedly. I would like to take this opportunity to gratefully acknowledge all those who have inspired, supported and illuminated me throughout this journey.

Thank you to AWET, AWI, Sheep CRC and UNE for generously funding most of this project.

Sincere appreciation goes to James, Caroline and Charlie Street for generously providing their flock, paddocks, assistance and keen interest.

My deepest gratitude to my principal supervisor Professor Geoff Hinch for being a steady source of strength, guidance and a fountain of knowledge. Special thanks to my associate supervisors Dr Ian Price and Dr Wendy Brown for their support, guidance and contributions over the past couple of years.

Thank you to the staff of PARG-UNetracker and Dr Mark Trotter and Derek Schneider for generously supplying GPS collars and technical support.

Thank you to the staff of ICT International and Dr Peter Cull for generously supplying the EnviroStation weather station equipment and technical support.

Thank you to the staff of the UNE Science and Engineering Workshop and Brad Dawson for the ingenious construction of trial equipment, enthusiastic support and endless mechanical and IT support .

Thank you to the staff of the School of Environmental and Rural Sciences. Dr. Emma Doyle provided initial input into the project. To the technicians, Paul Arnott, Neil Baillie, Graham Chaffey, Mark Porter, Michael Raue, Gary Taylor for their assistance in trial setup, animal care and general knowledge.

And finally a special thanks to James Taylor for his moral support and encouragement.

ABSTRACT

The objectives of the studies conducted in this thesis were to improve knowledge of pregnant and lambing Merino ewes sheltering behaviour and to investigate an alternative means of moving sheep flocks within paddocks or to protected areas. Animal collar tracking devices with global positioning system (GPS) capabilities enabled continuous, unobtrusive tracking of sheltering behaviour throughout two lambing seasons in two nearby paddocks. Behavioural measures such as shelter-seeking was observed throughout the two experimental years and in both paddocks. The ewes consistently used shelter more than expected and more than the remainder of the paddock which was devoid of shelter. Extensive use of the leeward and windward side of shelter during high sheep chill days, suggests there may be wellbeing issues associated with inadequate provision of shelter for sheep throughout the year. Night camping in this study did not occur at the highest altitude, but rather at a high altitude where shelter was located. Bayesian change-point (bcp) analysis successfully identified change-points (reduced velocity) that could be associated with lambing in the majority of the closely monitored ewes. Based on this analysis the time period of morning grazing appeared to be the best in which to identify lambing. The feasibility of training Merino sheep and using these trained sheep to move flocks of naive sheep was also investigated. The sheep learned to approach the visual, auditory and visual+auditory stimuli and T-maze tests indicating that the sheep retained memory of the cues for over 130 days without reinforcement. The sheep were able to transfer the learned task from a familiar location to a novel one. Individual temperament of these animals was not related to their learning. This study demonstrated that sheep trained to respond to a stimulus do provide leadership when mixed with naive sheep flocks causing a flock to rapidly change position to congregate around an activated stimulus. These findings suggest that trained animals could be used to manipulate animal movement for farm management purposes such as movement to shelter.

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