

MONTEBELLO RENEWAL

1. RAT MONITORING PROGRAM, 1997 TO 1999

Montebello Renewal, a Western Shield project, is designed to rid the Montebello Islands Conservation Park of feral Black Rats and Cats and to re-introduce locally extinct species.

During 1996, a three month project involving nearly 40 CALM staff and volunteers and costing around \$300 000 (including sponsorships and volunteer labour), laid and serviced bait stations on a 50 m grid throughout the archipelago of about 100 islands. To ensure the success of this work follow-up monitoring and control is required. It is essential that any remaining pockets of rats are located quickly and eradicated before they breed up and disperse, especially to other rat-free islands.

Montebello Renewal, apart from being the largest rat eradication project ever undertaken in Australia, is also the first rat eradication project in Western Australia to treat large areas of rocky country— all previous projects had been on sandy islands (on Barrow Island, the rats were restricted to a small portion of the islands, which has a sand substrate). We can not be sure that rat eradication in rocky habitats will be as straightforward as it has been on sandy areas. Monitoring for remaining rats in rocky areas is more difficult and time-consuming, as it has to involve trapping as well as searching for tracks.

A brief monitoring visit to the Montebellos by CALM Pilbara Region staff in March 1997 confirmed the need for monitoring and follow-up work, as they found small numbers of rats on two of the islands (both rocky) that they visited. Bait stations were re-laid on these islands. Sandy islands visited during this trip appeared rat-free.

1997 PROGRAM

As well as the March visit by Pilbara Region staff, a three week visit is proposed for July 1997. It is proposed that this will involve four people, two from WATSCU/SID at Woodvale and two from Pilbara Region. During this period, all the sandy islands will be visited and searched for tracks, and all the larger rocky islands will be trapped, using medium Elliott traps. A budget for this trip has been requested from the CALM Western Shield allocation. During this visit, it is proposed that personnel from the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory will join the team to assess the suitability of Trimouille and North West Islands for introduction of the 'Extinct in the Wild' central Australian subspecies of the Rufous Hare-wallaby (the Mala). CALM costs will be met from Commonwealth or NT sources. It is also planned that some feral cat research will be conducted during 1997. This will be designed to assess the effectiveness of the trapping techniques being used in Project Eden at the Montebellos (see below).

Sufficient bait stations and Talon poison bait are on hand at the Montebellos to re-bait any island except the largest two in the group (Hermite and Trimouille). Four people will be able to re-bait any of the smaller islands found still to have rats.

Should rats be found on either of the two largest islands, or should rats be found on numerous smaller islands, a new major field project will have to be designed and costed and additional funds will have to be found to allow rebaiting of these islands. Baiting Hermite Island took eight persons four weeks during 1996. This work should take place during August and September 1997, to minimise the possibility of reinvasion of clean islands. No budget has been sought for this work as an optimistic view is being taken of the success of the project; however, it needs

to be made clear that there is a finite possibility of the need to additional funds for this project in 1997/98.

1998 AND 1999 PROGRAM

Assuming that the 1997 trip finds no major remaining rat populations, monitoring should continue in 1998 and 1999, with at least annual three week visits to allow extensive trapping on rocky islands. Budgets of around \$10,000 will be needed in each of 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

Should major infestations remain in 1997, this monitoring program will need review.

2. FERAL CAT RESEARCH AND ERADICATION

Feral cat work was put on hold for 1997, due to budget and staff shortages in the feral cat research group. As discussed above, some feral cat research is proposed during 1997. This will involve laying traps on Hermite Island to tests their effectiveness on the local cat population.

More detailed and labour-intensive work will be required on 1998 and, possibly, 1999 to eradicate the Hermite Island cats. A budget for this will be prepared in early 1998.