

# **MONTEBELLO RENEWAL**

## **PROGRESS REPORT, 16 JULY 1996**

*Montebello Renewal* is on schedule, despite considerable problems with unseasonable heavy rain. Unfortunately, however, the rain means that the chances of Phase I of the project (rat eradication) being successful are somewhat reduced and further work has been and will be necessary to maximise the chances of success.

Phase I, the rat eradication, commenced on 29 May, when Andrew Burbidge (WATSCU), Steve Grenfell (Engineering Branch), Geoff Kregor (Pilbara Region, Millstream National Park) and volunteers Peter Keppell (Mundaring District) and Bill Morrow (ACI Plastics Packaging) left Dampier by charter boat for Hermite Island. The WAPET-chartered barge *Karinya II* arrived at CALM's Hurricane Hill Hut on Hermite Island on Monday 3 June and unloaded the large quantities of fuel, food, bait stations and other equipment required for the project. As well as organising these stores and other gear, the advance party had to repair the building which had been damaged during Cyclone Olivia, and set up a generator and reverse osmosis plant to ensure a regular supply of fresh water.

Communications proved a major problem. CALM Communications Branch supplied masts and antennas to replace the mast destroyed during Cyclone Olivia, as well as providing a high gain antenna for the mobile telephone. Neither the CALM VHF radio link to Karratha nor the Mobile telephone worked reliably and a satellite telephone had to be purchased and shipped at short notice. As well, seven of the eight NiCad batteries supplied by Communications Branch with the VHF hand-held radios proved not to hold a charge and new batteries had to be purchased. This meant that communications between field teams and the base and the helicopter were unreliable during the first two weeks of the operation.

Baiting was scheduled to commence on 11 June. However, on the evening of 10 June a storm with 70 km winds and heavy rain hit Hermite Island, turning most of the cardboard boxes in which the bait stations were stored into pulp. So the first working day was spent rescuing and sorting gear. Baiting commenced on Trimouille Island on 12 June.

Further rain fell on 17 June and another working day was lost. On Tuesday 18 June the CALM-chartered helicopter was used to search for two overdue boats at the request of Onslow Police. Both boats were located and a report made to the police on their whereabouts and intentions.

On Monday 24 June the rain was so heavy and persistent that the WAPET-chartered jet from Perth was unable to land at Barrow Island until late afternoon and the CALM-chartered Jet Ranger helicopter was unable to fly from Barrow to Hermite. WAPET accommodated our team at Barrow Island overnight and they were able to get to Hermite the next day. The heavy rain during June, especially on 24 June, caused major problems with the rat bait, partly filling the bait stations with water and causing the bait to disintegrate and ferment. This necessitated re-baiting the whole of Trimouille Island for a fourth time so that fresh bait was available to the few remaining rats. I returned to the Montebellos for the week 1 to 8 July to help the crew catch up with the baiting back log. Extra baitings were also necessary on Ah Chong, Brooke and Gardenia Islands because of very high rat numbers.

By 8 July the project was back on schedule and baiting commenced on the 1020 ha Hermite Island. At this time baiting was complete on the following larger islands: Trimouille (522 ha), North West (135 ha), South East (ca 10 ha), Karangi (ca 5 ha), Primrose (41 ha), Brooke (15.2 ha), Gardenia (ca 8 ha) and Ah Chong (22.6 ha). As well, about 80 small islands and rocks had been baited with plastic bags of bait laid from the helicopter.

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On 15 and 16 July, further rain fell in the area from the remnants of Cyclone Lindsay. Evaluation of bait condition following this most unseasonable rain had not been carried out at the time of writing.

As well as causing bait deterioration, the heavy rain during winter 1996 has led to rapid vegetation growth and many plants are flowering and seeding, resulting in a substantial increase in the availability of natural food for rats at the Montebellos. On its own, this should not be of major concern, as the bait is highly attractive to rats and is consumed preferentially. However, combined with bait deterioration, the increase in natural foods is of major concern and the unseasonable rain must increase the chances of the project failing to eradicate rats from the archipelago. Evaluation of bait condition on islands already baited will be made, together with an evaluation of rat numbers remaining, and plans will be developed for re-baiting as necessary. However, if there is continued heavy rain during the second half of July and during August it will be very difficult to leave bait in good condition on all islands for several weeks as was planned.

A feature of *Montebello Renewal* has been that the vast majority of the 25 or so volunteers who are working in the field are CALM staff who have donated part of their annual leave to help with the project. Volunteers who worked at the islands up to 16 July were Peter Keppell and Ian Gale (Mundaring District), Diana Papenfus (Science and Information Division, WA Herbarium), Jane McRae (SID, Woodvale), Richard Fairman (SID, Dwellingup), Jill Pryde (WATSCU), Martin Clarke and Howard Robinson (Narrogin District), Michelle Widmer (CALMfire, Nannup), Kevin Morrison (Wildlife Protection, Como), Bob Rickman (Busselton District), Caroline Brocx and Tom Wood (Mornington District) and Luke Bouwman (Walpole District). CALM staff leading the project had nothing but praise for the volunteers who all worked hard under often trying conditions and remained cheerful despite being zapped by sandflies! Without the contribution of the volunteers the project would not have been possible.

CALM staff who have participated as leaders so far include Andrew Burbidge and John Blyth (WATSCU), Brent Johnson (SID, Woodvale), and Fran Stanley, Peter Kendrick and Peter Moore (Pilbara Region). Don Noble (Wildlife Protection) navigated *Pseudorca II* to the Montebellos, where it is being used to transport workers and equipment between the base on Hermite Island and the areas being baited. He was replaced by Doug Cochrane on 15 July. Trainee Wildlife Officers Matt Dowling and Ben Tannock have taken part as part of their training in wildlife management.

Support from sponsors has been invaluable. The major sponsor, West Australian Petroleum Pty Ltd (WAPET) has provided transport of equipment from Perth to Hermite Island and return and has also donated seats for CALM staff and volunteers on its Ansett jet charters between Perth and Barrow Island. Apache Energy, who operate oil and gas fields near the Montebellos, has transported CALM staff to and from Karratha and has also provided some helicopter support and fresh food to keep the teams working. ACI Plastics Packaging donated 13,800 plastic bottles to be used as bait stations for the rat eradication program. ICI Crop Care provided the rodent poison Talon® G at a discount price and Selleys Chemical Company donated some of the "All Clear", needed to glue bait stations to rock, free of charge.