



Chuditch back in the mallee

THE FIRST RELEASE of captive-bred chuditch into an area where they have long been absent has proven to be a milestone for Perth Zoo's native species captive breeding program.

Only three of the 29 released chuditch are known to have died over the past three months, and the WA Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) hopes to make a second release of zoo-bred chuditch into the same area in March/April. A series of successful releases will consolidate the captive breeding program as a vital conservation tool and an important research area within the Marsupial CRC, in which Perth Zoo is a participant.

The chuditch breeding program is the most advanced of several captive breeding projects planned by Perth Zoo. Each project will attempt to develop protocols for breeding up an endangered species for release back into protected wild habitat. Captive breeding of the numbat is also well advanced, and in the near future it is planned to introduce programs involving the southern dibbler, Shark Bay mouse and greater stick nest rat.

In the past Perth Zoo has supplied chuditch - the largest carnivorous marsupial in Western Australia - for successful releases into Julimar Forest near Toodyay, about 70 km east of Perth. The release of 29 zoo-bred chuditch into Lake Magenta Nature Reserve, in the wheatbelt 340 km south-east of Perth, is the first attempt at reintroducing this species into habitat from which it has long been absent-the WA mallee. Chuditch were once found over much of the Australian mainland, but are now confined to the jarrah forests of south-west WA.

Zoo keeper Glen Gaikhorst was on hand in late October when the 12 male and 17 female chuditch were released into the reserve at 200-metre intervals. He offered each a feed of three mice before they began the hard graft of fending for themselves. About a third accepted the offer.

During the next seven days the 20 chuditch that had been fitted with radio collars were tracked to monitor their progress. Early in the week the animals were sheltering anywhere they could, but later most had established good nests in hollow logs or dug burrows.

Under CALM's massive Western Shield project, competition for food and from predation has been eliminated as much as possible by a preliminary two-year fox baiting program using 1080 poison. Chuditch are resistant to this toxin, which is derived from native plants. Baits will continue to be laid to provide ongoing protection for the animals.

To date, only three deaths have been recorded, all likely to be due to predation by cats. Tracking of the surviving chuditch has continued during the past four months. Now the radio collars are due to be removed and a second release made of 20 more Perth Zoo-bred chuditch.

In 1997 the zoo plans to maintain 20 breeding pairs of chuditch as potential contributors to future releases. Through this program, Perth Zoo is establishing itself as increasingly relevant participant in CALM's conservation projects and making valuable contributions to the Marsupial CRC partnership.

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