

The Curse of the Fox

Foxes and Wildlife Extinctions - The Evidence

It is generally accepted by most (though not all) biologists that foxes are bad news for native wildlife. Often, however, the public has a different view, with the fox's attractive appearance often causing public opposition to attempts to eradicate it. As we shall see, however, there have been many studies which illustrate the problems caused by foxes.

The Rock Wallaby Lesson

There could be no better study to show the effects of foxes than the work of CALM's Jack Kinnear. Between 1979-1986, Mr Kinnear studied populations of the Black-footed Rock-wallaby *Petrogale lateralis*, in the WA wheatbelt. Surveys of previously known rock-wallaby populations produced startling results. Of five sites surveyed, wallabies had become extinct at one site, and had dropped to dangerously low numbers at the other two. Studies showed that there were about 75-100 individuals left in the whole area. These individuals appeared to show no evidence of disease and had high reproductive outputs. Animals appeared fit and healthy during handling. Thus it seemed that these apparently healthy wallabies were showing no population growth due to some unknown factor. Foxes were proposed as this factor, due to frequent sightings in the study area.

To test this hypothesis, foxes were shot and baited with 1080 (sodium monofluoroacetate - a naturally occurring poison which native animals have a high tolerance for, but which introduced animals like the fox, are killed by ingesting) for a period of 4 years. The results were astounding. In the two baited populations, foxes were eradicated and wallaby numbers soared by 138% and 223% for the two populations. By contrast, in two sites left untreated for foxes, wallaby numbers crashed by 14% and 38% respectively. It was hence concluded that the fox is a significant factor in the demise of native mammals

(All of the above paragraph is based upon Kinnear *et al.*, 1988).

Other Success Stories

Similar stories of success have emerged from other researchers in WA. Intensive 1080 baiting of the south-west forests have seen a massive increase in the number of numbats and woylies, along with several other native species. The woylie *Bettongia penicillata*, recovered with such vigour that it has now been removed from the Endangered list! An example of the dramatic increase in fauna populations following fox control is the recovery of woylies at Batalling. Only one woylie was caught per 200 traps laid at Batalling, near Collie, in the 1980s. In 1995, just four years after regular fox control began, 24 woylies were caught per 100 traps. At Perup, near Manjimup, it's now common to catch more than 50 woylies per 100 traps (CALM homepage). Perhaps another testament to the fox's curse on fauna, is the fact that many endangered species such as the Western Barred Bandicoot, Golden Bandicoot, Burrowing Bettong and Stick-nest rat, thrive on predator-free islands off the north-west coast of WA, but are now extinct on the mainland. See CALM's homepage for more information on Western Shield.





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