

FIRE CLUES FOUND IN OLD PHOTOS

By *NEIL BURROWS*

THE discovery of aerial photos from the 1940s may provide the key to reversing the decline of native mammals from the arid interior of WA.

Changes in the fire regime since Aborigines left their nomadic lifestyle and moved into urban areas is believed to have contributed to the decline and, in some cases, extinction of these animals.

Aborigines used fire for many reasons.

The diversity of vegetation that resulted from their mosaic system of burning provided favourable animal habitat and stopped large, devastating bushfires from developing.

However, detailed information about the size and frequency of the fires was scanty.

Then, aerial photos of the deserts taken in the 1940s, when there were still small Aboriginal groups living a traditional lifestyle, were found.

Fire scars on the photos show burning was carried out by Aborigines in a number of desert areas, such as Mt Madley and Lake McKay.

Straight edges at the base of fires show where people dragged a fire stick to torch the flammable spinifexes on the sand dunes.

A computerised digitising system allows research scientists to measure the distribution, size and perimeter of burnt patches.

The age of fire scars can be measured by tonal differences.

Over a 20-year period most of the landscape which could carry fire was burnt.

Most fires were less than 100ha, although a few burnt 950ha.

By studying these photos and using aerial burning, CALM will be able to implement the Aboriginal patch burning system in the desert.

Together with ecological and biological studies, CALM should be able to regenerate habitat and reintroduce selected animal species from isolated colonies.

Tackling fire problem in north

A fire burning out of control is always frightening.

But what do you do when a fire burns for months and months, and affects 5.5 million hectares of the State's north?

That's what happened in the Kimberley last year and, what is more, fires of this magnitude aren't that uncommon in this region.

Both CALM and the Bushfires Board are working to rectify this situation.

CALM regularly prepares fire plans for its national parks and nature reserves, while the Bushfires Board is responsible for

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