Where are all the Warru?

by DAVID PEARSON

For the Aborigines of the rocky interior ranges of WA, the Warru or black-footed rock wallaby *(Petrogale lateralis)* is an important Dreamtime force and was once a prized food item.

The mammal was common in small granite rockpiles and "whalebacks", as well as in large quartzite, rhyolite and gabbro ranges throughout the area adjoining the Northern Territory and South Australian borders.

However, the Warru's numbers have crashed in the last 50 years, like many other "critical-weight range" mammals (35 g to 5.5 kg) (see Landscope 2(4)).

Interviews with local Ngaanyatjarra people suggested that rock wallabies survived in only a few pockets in remote ranges.

In an effort to learn more about its former distribution, sites where the mammal still survived and the sort of habitat it occupied, a survey in co-operation with the Ngaanyatjarra Council was conducted during 1988-99.

Aboriginal custodians were employed (using funds from the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service) to guide researchers to sites where they believed rock-wallabies might still exist and where they were hunted in the past.

To tell whether rock-wallabies were present, areas were searched on foot for signs such as tracks, fresh droppings (scats) or perhaps just a glimpse of a rock wallaby.

Eleven remnant populations were located. They were persisting in rugged cliffs or rockpiles in major ranges, usually close to permanent waterholes, the environs of which provided green feed even during dry periods.

Factors which are thought to have caused population declines in other desert mammals, such as changes in fire regimes and exotic competitors (eg rabbits) and predators (eg foxes) probably affected rock wallaby populations in different ways depending on the habitat occupied. Remaining populations are inhabiting pockets of the best habitat.

Rock Wallaby

Nonetheless, they are still vulnerable to the impact of drought or heavy fox predation in reducing breeding success and hence survival.

Local extinctions as recently as 1986 have been recorded. In the past, such disasters on a localized scale were overcome by recolonization by rock wallabies from nearby rocky areas, but as fragmentation and isolation of population continues, this becomes less and less likely.

The future for the Warru in the desert ranges looks grim. The remote nature of the areas they occupy makes research and any management an expensive and difficult operation. Aboriginal assistance in both these aspects will be vital.

In the future, a joint CALM - Ngaanyatjarra monitoring program is planned, as well as preliminary research into why rock-wallaby populations are continuing to decline.

With this combination of knowledge, expertise and personnel, we hope to arrest the pattern of local extinctions of the Warru.