

Desert dreaming

by Per
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IT WAS an emotional moment as the plane came in to land at the remote Hussar air strip in the Gibson Desert with our load of 40 boodies and 40 golden bandicoots from Barrow Island.

After years of planning and preparation and the setback in May when the desert was flooded delaying the release, we had finally arrived.

Exciting project

This exciting research project to investigate the reasons for the disappearance of so many of the mammals of the central deserts got under way on September 11 with the release of the animals into their temporary holding pens.

Aboriginal elders from the communities at Wiluna and Leonora were brought in to participate in the historic release. They seemed not to recognize the boodie but became excited when they saw the bandicoots which they immediately recognized and remembered as being kuka pulya (good meat).

In good health

The project got off to a good start with all animals arriving in good health. The boodies were released into warrens which are still present in the hard calcrete (a limestone rock) of the area and the bandicoots disappeared under the nearest spinifex clumps.

Already on the first morning of the release a boodie was out of the compound and trying to get back in. A magnificent rugby tackle (for an

ex-footballer!) by Neil Burrows finally brought to an end a long chase round the perimeter fence and the boodie was returned safely to the warren inside.

On the second morning two of the boodies' mates were out - we got the message - they wanted out, so we opened the fence on the third night.

Neither the boodies nor the bandicoots paid much attention to the supplementary food we had provided. They immediately started foraging and digging for their own food from the very first night.

Paying volunteers

A week after the release the CALM team was joined by 20 paying volunteers on the first *LANDSCOPE* Expedition. They assisted in radio tracking, searching for signs of animals having moved location, pit trapping for small animals, adding to the bird list, and amassing an impressive collection of 250 plant specimens.

The *LANDSCOPE* Expedition is an important part of the whole project. It is hoped that when the initial funding by WAPET and the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (ANPWS) predator control dries up, further expeditions may raise funds for continuing management of the new colony of animals.

After six weeks of continued monitoring the project is going well.

Animals have demonstrated their ability to feed themselves in the new environment and are selecting their preferred habitat.

New locations

The bandicoots have moved to new locations in dense spinifex up to two km from the release site. Some of the boodies still occupy the original release warren but others are expanding to other sites nearby.

They foraged up to two km away at night and tracks of one individual were recorded six km from the release site.

Weighing recaptured animals shows that the bandicoots, in particular, are putting on weight.

The animals are also breeding and two boodie joeys have already left their mothers' pouches to fend for themselves.

Most of the bandicoots, few of which had young when they left Barrow Island, are now carrying young.

Predator control has been largely successful with good control of foxes.

Feral cats are the major concern; they have taken six of the 80 animals, (all boodies) released so far.

Monitoring

Renewed effort is being put into cat control and further monitoring during the summer months will tell whether or not the new colonies can cope with the level of predation being experienced.

It is hoped that breeding will outstrip the losses, as happens in successful natural populations.