

Rock-wallabies share eco-tourism award

THE winners of this year's David Brand Tourism Award for the Environment were Neil and Rhonda McGregor who operate Yardie Creek Tours in Cape Range National Park.

Since 1990, the McGregors have been involved in collecting data for a CALM fox-control experiment that Woodvale Science and Information staff had implemented in collaboration with Frank Batini's Environmental Protection Branch and Exmouth District staff.

Once abundant throughout the whole of Cape Range, rock wallabies had become restricted to some gorges within the park and on Ningaloo Station south of the park.

Moreover, their numbers were few, probably because of predation by foxes, as previously demonstrated in the Wheatbelt.

Studies by research sci-

by Jack Kinnear

entist Dave Algar and now-retired senior technical officer Tom Leftwich, indicated that two baitings a year might be a sufficient and cost-effective practice to control foxes, thus enabling rock wallabies to increase.

This is where the McGregors have been making a vital contribution. They enter into a computer database all rock wallabies sighted during the course of their nature tours along Yardie Creek Gorge.

If our experimental two-baitings-a-year program worked according to plan, the McGregors would have recorded more rock wallabies each year, and this trend would be clearly evident from their database.

At first, the sightings steadily increased for the

three years following the implementation of twice-yearly baitings.

But then it became clear from the database that the 1994 sightings of rock wallabies were down; there was a mini-population crash as 30 per cent of the rock wallabies seen during 1993 went missing during the tourist off-season.

Fortunately, the decline was only temporary, as the trend throughout 1994 and 1995 has been upward.

We know the decline was real because of the quality of the data. This is because the line transect along Yardie Creek is so highly replicated—a statistician's dream.

The data, being so extensive, allows one to conclude with certainty that the population did increase following the introduction of fox control; what is equally certain is that there was a mini-crash—but why?

The evidence suggests that the six-month interval between baitings is too long. This lengthy interval allows foxes to re-invade and provides ample time for foxes to kill enough rock wallabies to reverse previous gains.

But this does not happen every year; bouts of predation can happen sporadically and there is no way to predict when such events will happen.

The solution is to increase the baiting frequency and thus remove offending foxes before they do too much damage.

Four baitings a year are now recommended. This is desirable, not only from a conservation viewpoint, but also for sound economic reasons.

A conspicuously abundant population of rock wallabies contributes to the tourism potential of the Exmouth region.

The tour along a spec-

tacular, picture postcard gorge is a memorable experience in itself, but even more so when one sees at close range infant rock wallabies peering out of pouches or snuggled up next to proud mums.

Neil and Rhonda readily concede that the presence of rock wallabies is one of the key attractions of their tour. It's good for business to have more rock wallabies about, and from CALM's viewpoint it's

also good conservation.

This is eco-tourism at its best; an example of a government agency and the private sector having a common interest in promoting the welfare and abundance of wildlife.



A rock wallaby and her young. Photo courtesy Yardie Creek Tours