WORK CONTINUES ON FERAL CATS

The Department of Conservation and Land Management is carrying out important work in the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve that will further assist in the effective, large-scale control of feral cats.

The department's Desert Dreaming study was the first in Australia to highlight the necessity for feral cat control in order to re-establish native animals in arid areas. The department has since developed reliable techniques to assess cat densities and to control feral cat populations. Scientists have developed a bait that is readily accepted by feral cats and has been instrumental in eradicating them from several islands.

Current work on feral cats is focused on refining baiting procedures to maximise efficiency and minimise risk to native animals. In 2001, with the help of funding from the Wind Over Water Foundation, a series of studies began, the first being at Eagle Bore, to determine a minimum baiting density required to effectively control feral cats.

Non-toxic baits containing the biomarker Rhodamine B were distributed from the air. Mammals that had consumed this bait could be readily identified by the presence of Rhodamine B in growing hair. After the aerial 'drop', animals were trapped, then a whisker sample was taken and examined under a fluorescence microscope. The technique is simple, non-invasive and inexpensive. It also allows scientists to assess baiting effectiveness and the level of risk to native animals at the same time.

Two baiting densities were compared during this first study. It was found that a rate of half that used during successful island eradication work was equally effective, and that no native mammals or reptiles trapped at the site had consumed bait material. On the strength of this information, an experimental permit was obtained to assess the effectiveness of this baiting density using toxic baits.

Previous work at Eagle Bore and other sites predicted that baiting for cats would be most effective during winter, when prey availability is at its lowest. With such reduced activity, the cats are more likely to accept bait material, and there is also very little or no risk to native mammal species and reptiles.

Armed with this information and that provided by the Rhodamine B exercise, toxic baiting was carried out in June 2002, covering half the study site, a total baited area of 625 square kilometres. This resulted in a better than 95 per cent reduction in cat numbers—good news for science and for native mammals and reptiles.

Above right: Thawing baits, which were kept frozen until deployed.

Right: Researcher Graeme Liddelow packaging baits prior to loading the aircraft. Baiting is controlled mostly by electronics. The aircraft is flown along pre-set flight lines that are divided into bait cells. A special navigation console ensures the pilot stays on course and a light indicates to the bombardier when a bag of baits is required in the bait chute.

Photos – John Angus

Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME EIGHTEEN, NUMBER 2, SUMMER 2002–2003

The first stage of a long-distance mountain bike trail, that will ultimately lead from Mundaring to Albany, is now open. See page 49.

Discover the underwater wilderness of the Geographe Bay, Leeuwin-Naturaliste, Hardy Inlet area, a potential marine conservation reserve, on page 18.

Little was known about the distribution of the dalgyte, or bilby, in the south-west forests until scientist Ian Abbott interviewed old timers. Turn to page 28.

Older piles of the Busselton Jetty are crowded with marine life, but it was not always so. How do marine animals gradually colonise the piles? See page 34.

The Stirling Range National Park experiences many extremes of weather, from snow falls to bushfires. Find out why on page 10.

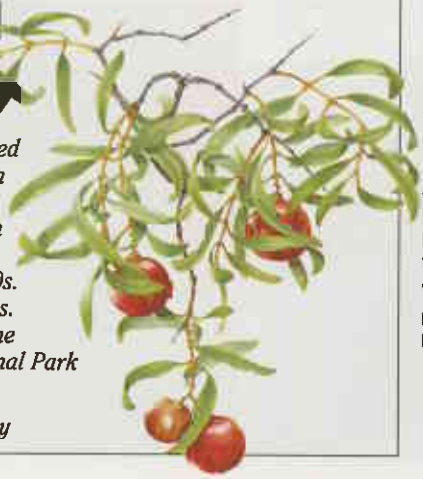
FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

Quandong (Santalum acuminatum) *is one of the most widespread plants in Australia. This small, upright tree is most easily recognised by its bright red fruits, which are edible and also contain a nutritious nut. It belongs to the same genus as the famous sandalwood, which was one of Western Australia's major exports in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Members of this genus are root parasites. Quandong grows in dense stands in some areas within the Woodman Point Regional Park (see story on page 42).*

Cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky



Executive editor: Ron Kawalilak.
Editors: David Gough, Carolyn Thomson-Dans.
Bush Telegraph editor: Verna Costello.
Scientific/technical advice: Keith Morris, Kevin Kenneally, Paul Jones, Chris Simpson.
Design and production: Tiffany Aberin, Maria Duthie, Gooitzen van der Meer.
Illustration: Gooitzen van der Meer.
Cartography: Promaco Geodraft.
Marketing: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (08) 9334 0296 Fax: (08) 9334 0498.
Subscription enquiries: ☎ (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437.
Colour Separation by Colourbox Digital.
Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print.

Please do not send unsolicited material to *LANDSCOPE*, but feel free to telephone the editors.
Visit NatureBase at www.naturebase.net
Published by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.