KANGAROOS & WALLABIES FACING EXTINCTION

Recently there has been considerable publicity on the subject of conservation of kangaroos and the threat to their continued existence. Most of this concern has been directed toward the large kangaroos, but what of the other species of kangaroos and wallabies?

At one time in the south-west of the State there were 14 species of the kangaroo and wallaby family. Now, only four or five species are common and the rest are either extinct or very rare.

Among the most common of marsupials in the south-west, and the largest, is the Grey Kangaroo *(Macropus fuliginosus)*, which is found in areas of natural bush and forest. The greatest threat to the "Grey" is the destruction of its habitat by clearing. The Brush Wallaby or Black-Gloved Wallaby *(Macropus irma)*, is also common and is frequently seen on roads and highways at night. Provided the present system of forests and reserves is maintained, these animals should be safe from extinction.

The Tammar *(Macropus eugenii)*, a smaller wallaby about two feet in height, is far less common. However, it still occurs on a number of wildlife sanctuaries and State Forests so its future seems fairly secure. The Tammar is also found on islands off the Western Australian coastline including the Wallabi Islands in the Abrolhos group, Garden Island and islands in the Recherche Archipelago.

The Quokka *(Setonix brachyurus)*, another small wallaby, also occurs on islands, including Rottnest Island near Fremantle and Bald Island, about 30 miles east of Albany. Once abundant on the mainland the Quokka is now rare—occurring only in small populations in swampy areas near Busselton, Albany and in the Darling Range. Many of these areas are in State Forests and therefore the Quokkas' environment is protected to a large extent.

One of the rarest wallabies is the Crescent Nail-Tailed Wallaby or Wurrung *(Onychogalea lunata)*. This animal was common in the drier regions of the south-west, but has rarely been sighted over the past 30 years. The most recent record was at the Warburton Ranges in 1964. Since that time unconfirmed reports have come from the Kalgoorlie area. The two hare wallabies present a similar picture. Relatively frequent sightings of the Western Hare Wallaby or Wurrup *(Lagorchestes hirsutus)* and the Banded Hare Wallaby or Munning *(Lagostrophus faciatus)* were reported in the wheat belt and drier parts of the south-west in the early part of this century. Both species are still found on Bernier and Dorre Islands off Carnarvon, but are now probably extinct on the mainland.

The range of the Brush-tailed Rock Wallaby *(Petrogale penicillata)*, has also been drastically reduced since the early days of the Swan River Colony. It is now found in the Kellerberrin-Bruce Rock area, on Barrow Island and the Recherche Archipelago and in isolated areas in the north-west of the State.

Another uncommon species is the Woylie or Brush-tailed Rat Kangaroo *(Bettongia penicillata)*. This animal was once widely distributed throughout the southern half of Western Australia and the other States but is now very restricted in its range. In Western Australia only two or three localities are known and these are in Wildlife Sanctuaries or State Forests. The biology of this animal is being studied at the Tuttanning Wildlife Sanctuary east of Pingelly. The other species of Rat Kangaroo, the Boodie *(Bettongia lesueur)*, is extinct on the mainland although it was common up to the 1930's.

This animal is unique among wallabies in that it lives in a burrow in the ground. Fortunately, the Boodie is still found on Bernier and Dorre Islands and Barrow Island. The last two species, the Potoroos, are also believed to be extinct. The Long-nosed Potoroo *(Potorous tridactylus)*, still occurs in the Eastern States but the Broad-faced Potoroo *(Potorous platyops)*, was restricted to Western Australia and has not been reported since 1875.

From this summary it is evident that only a few of the fourteen species of kangaroos and wallabies of the south-west are plentiful. The reasons for the disappearance of some species and the increasing rarity of others is unknown—it is probably a combination of factors; the fox and other exotic predators are often blamed, but many of the wallabies became rare before the fox arrived in Western Australia. Disease introduced by man's domestic animals is one possible answer. This is supported by the fact that some wallabies are recovering in numbers, probably having built up resistance to the diseases.

Habitat destruction is another possible cause, but in the case of the wallabies. this does not follow as many became extinct around 1900 when clearing was not very extensive. With so many unanswered questions, perhaps more research could be undertaken to determine the underlying causes of the decline in the smaller species of kangaroos and wallabies—not merely those subject to commercial exploitation.