

Desert Dreaming Becomes a Wet Dream

"Where The Creeks Run Dry or Ten Feet High"

In May 1991 four CALM researchers sat around a camp fire in the Gibson Desert discussing details of the "Desert Dreaming" project. Sponsored by W.A. Petroleum, the project aims to shed light on the mysterious disappearance of medium sized desert mammals. A key element of this research is the planned reintroduction of two rare mammal species which were once common throughout the arid zone. Boodies (*Bettongia lesueur*) and Golden Bandicoots (*Isodon auratus*) were to be flown to the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve from Barrow Island in May 1992.

Camp fire conversation was full of concern about the poor condition of the country into which the animals were to be released. This part of the Gibson Desert looked terrible; we had dubbed it the "mother of all deserts". The three year drought had caused patchy death of desert vegetation including groves of mulga and plains of spinifex, hitherto assumed to be drought resistant. The succumbing of these plants lead us to believe that this drought was severe, even by the deserts standards.

We debated the wisdom of introducing animals to this drought stricken part of the Western Desert. The sort of comments circling the camp fire included; "It would be suicide", "They will perish for sure", "We'll have to wait for a couple of good seasons", "No, it's a good time to reintroduce them - the foxes, cats, dingoes and rabbits are in low numbers", "Boodies are adapted to arid environments", etc.

The group decided that the reintroduction would go ahead in May 1992, regardless of the

drought. Statistically, we could expect the drought to break by then. The 38 years of weather data from Giles showed that the last big drought in the early 1960s lasted 40 months. But, what if this drought we were now experiencing was "the severe once in fifty years drought?" The meteorological data were only for 38 years! We agreed that it would probably be necessary to provide supplementary feed and water, at least until the drought broke.

April 29th 1992 and the Desert Dreaming advance party of Graeme (Tub) Liddelow, Alex Robinson, Bruce Ward and I left Perth in two 4-wheel drives for the Eagle Bore study site in the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve. Per Christensen and Ray Smith were to meet us in the desert about a week later with the Islander aircraft and the animals from Barrow Island.

We were obviously aware that the Pilbara, Gascoyne and Murchison had experienced substantial rain over February, March and early April, but we had no way of knowing just how wet it was at the Eagle Bore study site. We discussed postponing the reintroduction, but decided to leave that decision until we had more accurate information about conditions at the release site. For several days before leaving the south-west, Tub rang authorities at Meekathara, Wiluna, Kalgoorlie and the caretaker at Carnegie station seeking information about road conditions. Up to the time of our departure, the roads were open, although there seems to be some confusion and conflicting reports about road conditions. There had been an enormous amount of preparation for this moment and we were reluctant to call it off unless we were certain.

The first tell tale signs of

what we were in for over the next few days appeared along the road between Paynes Find and Mount Magnet. The bush was lush and green, the mulga was a healthy blue-grey and large sheets of water glistened in the sunlight. As we travelled north-east towards Magnet, my home town, the country became noticeably wetter. The bush had that delightfully sweet aroma unique to wet mulga country; an aroma that filled me with nostalgia and revived memories of my childhood in the Murchison. Any rain in this parched landscape makes you feel good, but to see the country like this was just terrific. The wildflowers in the Paynes Find, Mullewa, Yalgoo area are going to be outstanding this year!

We drove on to Meekatharra and called at the Police Station to enquire about the condition of the Wiluna road (which is gravel). To our disappointment and surprise, we were told that the road was closed and would remain so for at least 2 days. Tub had rung from Manjimup the day before and was told that the road was open! We figured that we could, if necessary, delay the reintroduction for a couple of days if necessary and prepared ourselves for two days of thumb twiddling in Meekathara.

The following morning (April 30th) we killed 5 minutes by strolling the streets of Meekathara. We eventually wandered into the Meeka Royal Flying Doctor Base to chat with Val, one of the radio operators. During the course of conversation, the incredible amount of rain and the condition of the roads inevitably came up. Val was surprised to learn from us that the Wiluna road was closed. She had just received a fax from the Geraldton Regional office of the Main Roads Department and the official

word was that the Wiluna road was open to 4 wheel drive traffic! Without delay, we packed up and headed for Wiluna and Carnegie.

The 530 km or so of dirt road between Meeka and Carnegie station was wet and muddy, but passable. The worst section was between Wongawol station and Carnegie. There was some treacherous claypan country and a few deep creek crossings. All the low lying country was awash. We camped that night at Carnegie. Ken and Ronda Johnson, the caretakers, were very glad of some company. They had seen only 7 people in as many weeks! They informed us that there had been good rains in the desert, but a group of travellers had crossed the Gunbarrel Highway from the east about a week ago and there had not been much rain since then. Hearing this news raised our hopes of getting to the release site in the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve. If we could get in, and if the airstrip was in good shape, we were away!

As we headed east from Carnegie the next morning, the road became noticeably drier. On the high country we were actually kicking up dust. However, the low country was still very wet and we became bogged several times before reaching Mungilli claypan. The claypan was full. The gunbarrel Highway disappeared into the muddy waters of Mungilli and reappeared on a sand dune about 3 km away. It was a spectacular site but did not look good for the Desert Dreaming project.

We turned north along Eagle Road, but had travelled only 2 km when we were stopped by a large bog hole. We camped for two nights about 1 km from Mungilli claypan in hope that the bog would dry sufficiently for us to pass. On Sunday (May 3rd) we broke camp and travelled further north along Eagle Road. We were hoping to

get to Hussar airstrip to see if it was firm enough for the Islander to land with its precious cargo of animals. The Islander was due to leave Perth for Barrow on Monday, so we had to make a quick decision. We had arranged a midday radio sched with Ian Kealley at Kalgoorlie, at which time we would pass on our decision to go ahead with the reintroduction or to post-pone it.

About 4 km north of the Gunbarrel, Tub, who was in the lead vehicle, called Alex and me on VHF. "There's a stretch of water on the road about a kilometre long" he said. Alex and I assumed Tub was exaggerating and figured that there was another puddle across the road. Unfortunately, his estimate of the extent of water was accurate.

We had struck the claypan country which runs for several hundred kilometres along a fossil river system. The Eagle Bore study site where we were to release the animals was at the head of this system. As far as we could see, the fossil river, now a chain of claypans, was inundated. It was a spectacular site, but sealed the fate of any plans of reintroduction for at least two months. Tub made radio contact with Ian in Kalgoorlie and cancelled the project.

The bright side to the record breaking rains in the interior is that in September, the country will be in peak condition, giving the re-introduced animals then every opportunity to establish before the next inevitable drought. Unfortunately, the foxes, cats and rabbits will also increase in numbers, necessitating another aerial and ground baiting before the repatriation of Boodies and Golden Bandicoots to their home on the Australian mainland.

Neil Burrows

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On Friday September 11 1992, an aircraft from Barrow Island touched down on Hussar airstrip in the Gibson Desert with a cargo of 40 Boodies and 40 Golden Bandicoots. Research Scientist Per Christensen and Wildlife Officer Ray Smith had managed only 7 hours sleep in three days as they prepared the animals on Barrow for their journey to the interior of Western Australia.

Meanwhile, Graeme Liddelow, Alex Robinson and Bruce Ward were finalising preparations to the release site in the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve; checking the compound, testing radio tracking equipment and baiting introduced predators. A large buffer area around the release site had been aerielly baited with 1080 meat baits twice prior to the arrival of the animals from Barrow. Surveys had shown that the operation had successfully eradicated foxes and dingoes from the area, but had not affected the cat population. In fact the cat density had increased 7 fold in twelve months, mainly due to very good rains in the area. Since the inception of the Desert Dreaming project, we have been concerned about cats; it seems that our concerns are well founded. Cats could prove to be a serious threat to the survival of the re-introduced animals.

The animals were quickly unloaded from the aircraft and trucked the final 40 km to the release site. All had arrived in good health. Mr Hill, an elderly Aboriginal man who had travelled to the reserve with Dave Pearson, released the first Boodie into the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve as the sun set on an exciting and happy day.

CALMScience News

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Inside...

	Page
Newsbriefs	6
Funding of Research Projects	15
Desert Dreaming	18
Networking Science & Information Division	22

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Newsletter of the Science
and Information Division
of the Department of
Conservation and Land
Management

I'm delighted to present CALM's new science newsletter. It is the vehicle for communicating the news of science within the Science and Information Division and with our colleagues in the Department. The aim is to produce a quality newsletter that aids communication and helps integrate the scientific work of CALM.

This first issue covers a wide range of topics:

- The staff profiles will be a feature of the newsletter, informing staff about the backgrounds of the science staff and their areas of expertise. The Management Council are under the spotlight in this issue; in future issues we'll get to hear about the Management Teams in each Science Group and about the work of the various Science Programs - my own profile will appear in the next issue!*
- The Recent Staff Publications section highlights the papers recently submitted by science staff for publication - the 'plain English' summaries will help communicate the important work that our science staff have recently completed.*
- The Q & A section provides information about the State and National Committees that science staff contribute to - in this issue the role of the Research Working Groups is discussed and an explanation given of how these Groups interact with CORD and the Standing Committee on Forestry.*
- The forest science theme is continued with a section on forest research in New Zealand and an analysis of forest research expenditure in Australia.*

The success of the newsletter, which we plan to produce three times a year, will depend on the support of the science staff in CALM. Your contributions and ideas are welcome - remember, its our newsletter so lets get behind it and make it something we're all proud of!

Dr Jim Armstrong