EMERGENCY CONSERVATION ACTION TO HELP SAVE THE WOYLIE

The State Government recently pledged $600,000 to fund an Emergency Conservation Action Plan for the woylie (*Bettongia penicillata ogilbyi*) to establish insurance populations at risk of extinction in the wild. DEC will use $500,000 to establish a 400 ha predator-free enclosure in Perup Nature Reserve (300 km south of Perth) that should be capable of naturally supporting up to 500 woylies. At least 40 founders will be sourced from the surrounding area, which previously constituted the largest of three indigenous populations that persisted after pan-continental declines of the species in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In 1996, the woylie was the first Australian vertebrate to be removed from state and national threatened species lists in response to a spectacular recovery facilitated by extensive fox-control and woylie translocations since the 1970s (see *Western Shield* Project at www.dec.wa.gov.au/programs/western-shield/index.html).

However, the species is now relisted as endangered or critically endangered (depending on jurisdiction) as a result of even more spectacular population collapses that have so far led to an 80% decline of the species since 2001. As yet, there have been no clear signs of a recovery. Since 2002 the Perup population has declined by more than 95% to less than 300-500 individuals.

The remaining $100,000 will be directed towards a collaborative captive breeding program at the Perth Zoo with a focus on conserving the genetics of the Batalling woylie population (150 km south of Perth), which also has unique genetic attributes and has been reduced by more than 97% to almost undetectable levels.

The cause of the recent declines remains to be verified but both predators and disease have been implicated (see Woylie Conservation Research Project at www.dec.wa.gov.au/programs/saving-our-species/woylie-conservation-research-project.html). However, these initiatives will present particularly valuable research opportunities to improve the understanding of the species and the declines in a manner that is necessary to deliver a sustained long-term conservation outcome for an otherwise robust species with a proven ability to bounce back from the brink of extinction.

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