

Recovery of the Woylie

Following the successful implementation of a recovery plan, the woylie, or brush-tailed bettong (*Bettongia penicillata*), was recently removed from threatened species lists in Australia.

The woylie is a small (1.5 kg) member of the marsupial family Potoroidae, a group often known as rat-kangaroos. Only two decades ago, on the verge of extinction, it was listed in the IUCN Red List and under Australian federal and state legislation as Endangered. It used to inhabit over half of Australia, but by 1975 was restricted to three tiny pockets in the southwest of Western Australia (WA), where its numbers were very low.

Pioneering research into the decline of rock-wallabies by Dr. Jack Kinnear of the West Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management led to the understanding that the introduced European red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) was the main cause of the decline of many species of medium-sized (1 to 8 kg) marsupials.

The vertebrate pesticide 1080 is an environmentally friendly toxin in the southwest of West Australia as it occurs naturally in native shrubs of the genus *Gastrolobium*, and native mammals have evolved a high degree of tolerance to it. Thus, it is possible to formulate baits that will kill foxes without any effects on native species.

The Woylie Recovery Plan was written in 1990 with an objective to downlist it to Vulnerable within 10 years. The Recovery Team implementing the Plan included members from West Australian and South Australian (SA) state nature conservation agencies and from the Australian Nature Conservation Agency.

But the planners did not allow for the fast response of woylie populations to the relief from fox predation and the ease of translocating woylies to previously occupied sites. Within two years, the Recovery Team rewrote the Recovery Plan aiming for removal of the woylie from threatened species lists by the end of 1995.

Towards the end of 1995, the Recovery Team reviewed the status of the woylie against the 1994 IUCN Red List criteria and against

the criteria for success in the Recovery Plan. The conclusion was clear—the species no longer met criteria for Endangered or Vulnerable. However, it did meet criteria for Lower Risk (conservation dependent) since it would quickly become threatened if fox control ceased.

The removal of the woylie from the Schedule 1 of the Commonwealth Endangered Species Protection Act and from the threatened fauna notice published pursuant to the West Australia Wildlife Conservation Act was announced in April 1996 jointly by the Commonwealth and West Australia Ministers for the Environment.

In mid-1996, woylies were thriving at six sites in West Australia, as well as at three islands and two mainland sites in South Australia. Translocation to a further 20 sites in West Australia is underway.

This is a major achievement for nature conservation in Australia, being the first time that a species has been delisted because of scientific research and conservation management. Other taxa have been removed from lists in the past because they were found to be more abundant or widespread than previously thought.

The West Australia government recently announced a major initiative, code-named "Western Shield," to step up fox control from the present 1 million to around 5.5 million hectares, together with dramatically increased levels of translocations of threatened species. Already, several native mammals, birds, and reptiles are responding to reduced levels of fox predation. As well, research into the control of feral cats, the other major exotic predator of the Australian bush, is being stepped up with the aim of achieving broad-scale control.

(Contributed by Andrew A. Burbidge, Chair, IUCN/SSC Australasian Marsupial and Monotreme Specialist Group, and A.N. Start, Chair, Woylie Recovery Team)

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