## MEDIA STATEMENT 12/6/96

## MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Australia's biggest nature conservation program - Western Shield - moved offshore this month to eradicate black rats and feral cats on Western Australia's Montebello Islands.

The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) program aimed to remove all feral cats and rats from the Islands- something even nuclear tests in the 1950s failed to.

It will be conducted by CALM's WA Threatened Species and Communities Unit and staff from the Department's Pilbara region, with corporate sponsorship worth more than \$50,000 from the petroleum and chemical industries.

The baiting program started yesterday.

Announcing Montebello Renewal, Environment Minister Peter Foss said the introduction of feral cats and black rats to the islands about 100 years ago had caused the extinction of at least four native animals - the spectacled hare-wallaby, golden bandicoot, black and white fairy-wren and spinifex-bird.

"The survival of these predators is remarkable considering the islands were used as an atomic weapons site in the 1950s," the Minister said.

"Three nuclear devices were detonated between 1952 and 1956 as part of Operation Hurricane and Operation Mosaic.

"The islands were returned to WA control and declared a conservation park in 1992. Today they were vested in the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority under CALM's management.

"They are increasingly used by tourists, especially for fishing expeditions."

The Montebello Renewal program was planned in three phases.

Phase one involved eradicating rats, phase two would be the eradication of feral cats and the last stage would be the re-introduction of species of mammals and birds that had become extinct on the islands because of predation.

The Minister said Trimouille Island might also be used for the introduction of species that were highly threatened on mainland Australia, such as the Tanami Desert form of the rufous hare-wallaby.

Bait stations containing the commercial poison Talon would be laid in a grid pattern about 50 metres apart on the islands. The stations would be re-baited during the next six to seven days and then left for several months before being cleaned up.

Volunteers were vital to the project's success because of its size and labour-intensive nature.

It was pleasing to learn that many of the volunteers were CALM staff who were donating their time while on annual leave, the Minister said.

"The main precaution necessary is to prevent native species from taking the baits," he said.

"However, CALM has devised a bait station that will allow entry of rats but prevent birds having access to the polson.

"These ball stations consist of plastic bottles with holes cut in the sides. Native birds that occur naturally on the islands might have been affected had not the bait station design been developed and successfully tested."

Mr Foss said because black rats occurred on nearly all of the Montebellos and could easily swim between islands, the eradication program had to take place on all islands at the same time to avoid re-invasion.

The private sector had generously sponsored Montebello Renewal.

The West Australia Petroleum (WAPET) was the major sponsor, providing \$35,000 to transport all heavy equipment to the Montebello Islands and flying CALM staff and volunteers to Barrow Island free-of-charge.

Apache Energy, ACI Plastics Packaging, ICI Crop Care and Solleys Chemical Company were other significant sponsors.

Mr Foss said Montebello Renewal was the most ambitious rat eradication project ever undertaken in Australia but had every chance of success with CALM's experience and expertise in feral animal control projects and the support of local companies.

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