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**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.

