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MEDIA STATEMENT

GOVERNMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

17 May 1996

Chocolate Bilbies

Western Australia is set to benefit from Australians' love of chocolate.

Major retail chain Coles Supermarkets has donated \$60,000 from the sale of 'Easter Bilbies' to help fund a national plan to bring back their native wildlife species back from the brink of extinction.

The funds were presented to the Queensland Wildlife Preservation Society and the Australian Conservation Foundation today.

WA Environment Minister Peter Foss today said the organisations had in turn contributed \$23,000 to the State Department of Conservation and Land Management to set up a captive breeding program as part of the recovery strategy.

Mr Foss said CALM's breeding program would be part of the *Western Shield* initiative that aimed to conserve native wildlife species through controlling foxes and feral cats over almost 5 million hectares of the State's conservation lands.

The bilby - or rabbit-eared bandicoot - was one of the species CALM would reintroduce into areas such as the Peron Peninsula in the World Heritage listed Shark Bay region and other parts of WA once foxes and feral cats had been controlled under the *Western Shield* program.

Bilbies bred in WA also would be sent to South Australia for reintroduction into their former range.

Mr Foss said CALM research had shown that populations of medium size native mammals increased dramatically where feral predator numbers were controlled.

Predator control also enabled species to be reintroduced into areas from which they had become locally extinct.

The bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*) once roamed throughout the arid and semi-arid areas of Australia but now are confined to northern deserts including parts of the Pilbara and in isolated pockets of the Northern Territory and south west Queensland.

Bilbies are nocturnal animals that dig burrows up to 2 metres deep. In sandy soils they can burrow out of site within a few minutes. They feed mainly on bulbs and insects such as termites, witchetty grubs and honeypot ants.

"CALM will establish the breeding colony this spring with animals captured from

known wild populations in the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve north-west of Warburton," the Minister said.

"The species can breed throughout the year which allows them to take advantage of good seasons in the harsh desert environment."

Mr Foss said a CALM team headed by one of the department's most senior research scientists, Keith Morris, had been established to supervise the bilby breeding program.

Mr Morris also had extensive experience in the recovery of another endangered species, the chuditch.

"This collaborative approach with other States builds on previous work that has successfully seen the reintroduction of species such as numbats and woylies from WA into their former ranges in SA," Mr Foss said.

"As well, greater stick-nest rats have been translocated from SA to WA."

"The contribution of the private sector in particular is appreciated and reflects the growing awareness among big companies that they can make a significant contribution to conserving Australia's unique wildlife."

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