



MEDIA RELEASE

Research Project Combines The Old With The New

A new NT Government research project aims to combine traditional Aboriginal knowledge and western science to help discover why some Territory animals are in decline.

The project, in collaboration with the Northern Land Council, Aboriginal ranger groups and Top End communities, will attempt to chart the pattern of mammal decline across much of northern Australia.

Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts scientist Mark Ziembicki said localised studies have shown this decline to be significant and ongoing.

Of particular concern are the so-called “critical weight range” mammals such as quolls, bandicoots, possums, smaller wallabies and larger rodents that have proved most susceptible to decline in other parts of Australia.

Mr Ziembicki said that while there seem to be signs of trouble for mammals in the north, the scientific information is patchy and incomplete.

He said traditional knowledge could help determine where, when and why certain species have disappeared.

“Many Aboriginal people have an extensive knowledge of the status and ecology of plants and animals on their lands, and much of it has important cultural and spiritual values,” Mr Ziembicki said.

“However, this knowledge is slowly being lost yet is important to Aboriginal communities and can play a significant role in environmental conservation and management.

“We will be travelling with a suite of stuffed, museum specimens of each species to help facilitate discussions and help with the identification of mammals.”

The project began in September with five field surveys conducted so far with the bulk of the work to be done during next year’s dry season.

“One thing we have found interesting so far are records for animals from areas that we previously had no information about,” Mr Ziembicki said.

“For example, Aboriginal informants noted the presence of the northern brush-tail phascogale in parts of Arnhem Land 20 to 30 years ago, though they haven’t been seen or recorded in those regions since.”

The project builds on previous efforts and is modelled on work done by scientists and traditional Aboriginal owners across Australia’s central deserts in the 1980s that successfully described patterns of decline among central Australian mammals.

For different areas across northern Australia the research aims to document knowledge of local names for each mammal species, whether the species still occurs

in the area, whether it has changed in abundance, when such changes occurred and what factors are thought to have contributed to any changes.

Mr Ziembicki said the project highlighted the “two-tool box approach” to land and biodiversity conservation by incorporating both traditional Aboriginal and western scientific knowledge systems.

“This problem that we share is too big to be fixed with just one set of solutions, so we need to use two toolboxes, two systems together,” Mr Ziembicki said.

“Knowing about science helps Aboriginal rangers and communities look after animals and country at a time when things have changed a lot since the old days.

“And knowing about Aboriginal knowledge helps scientists understand country and what is important to Aboriginal people living on country”.

Scientists also hope to pass on their knowledge to the communities they visit through discussions, school visits and educational materials.

The research is supported by an Australian Research Council grant and involves collaboration with the Australian National University, the Northern Land Council, the Wilderness Society and the NT Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts.

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