



MEDIA RELEASE

If Rats Could Talk

A team from the Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts (NRETA) and Charles Darwin University (CDU) will today release and track colonies of rabbit-rats near Darwin to investigate the decline of mammals in northern Australia.

NRETA project officer Brooke Rankmore said before release each rabbit-rat will be equipped with a carefully-fitted radio-transmitter, allowing the researchers to follow the daily activities of each individual over a period of at least six months.

“This is one of the most systematic studies ever attempted for this critical conservation question,” she said.

“We hope that lessons from this study will provide a powerful message for prioritising conservation management actions in this region.”

CDU researcher and project leader, Professor Barry Brook, said the decline and loss of Australian mammals during the past 200 years represents one of the world’s worst extinction records.

“The evidence suggests that we are now witnessing some of this decline in northern Australia and scientists are still unsure why,” Professor Brook said.

“The brush-tailed rabbit-rat *Conilurus penicillatus* was formerly common across much of northern Australia but has declined across much of this range and gone locally extinct in the Darwin region, so this species is certainly a mammal under threat

“This study is the first in northern Australia to rigorously test some of the possible causes of its decline”.

Professor Brook said 20 of the large eared rabbit like rodents were collected at Garik Garnu Barlu National Park (Cobourg Peninsula), one of the few sites where they remain common.

He said the rabbit-rats then spent a year in specially constructed boutique accommodation at the Territory Wildlife Park, where with love, care and natural high spirits they produced another 60 rabbit-rats.

“Colonies of these brush-tailed rabbit-rats will now be released into the wild at four sites around Darwin,” Professor Brook said.

“The sites have been carefully chosen specifically to test the major factors thought to influence mammalian survival in the NT, as well as supporting the sort of habitat rabbit rats like to use.

“Fire and predation by feral cats are thought to be major causes of decline, so the sites will differ in fire regimes and cat control”.

This project is supported by specific funding from the Australia Research Council’s Linkage Grant program; with considerable help from the Territory Wildlife Park and the Board of Garik Garnu Barlu National Park.

Ends

Media Note - For more information contact Professor Barry Brook on 0448 869 465 or Brooke Rankmore on 8944 8458.

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