



MEDIA RELEASE

Aerial Survey Aids Preliminary Research into Cyclone Impact on Environment

Researchers from the Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts (NRETA) and CSIRO recently flew over Cyclone Monica's Top End path to map the destruction left in her wake.

NRETA spatial scientist Craig Hempel estimates the area of greatest destruction to be about 7000 square kilometres in Arnhem Land, encompassing a large part of the Goomadeer River catchment between Maningrida and Jabiru.

"The destruction ranges from coastal mangrove habitats, Melaleuca swamps, sensitive sandstone country and through Eucalypt woodlands," Mr Hempel said.

"In the worst affected areas, 90 per cent of the vegetation has been destroyed. In many areas only partial tree trunks remain, in others there is complete defoliation.

"It will take decades for the environment to recover from a cyclone of this intensity and management of the area is crucial to ensure recovery happens.

"Using the maps, I can quantify the disturbance to each habitat in relation to wind direction and intensity.

"This will help build a picture of what role these events have in shaping the coastal landscape and focus management on sensitive areas."

Mr Hempel said concerns raised by Parks Australia North in Kakadu about the cyclone's implications for fire management in the area prompted the map's production.

NRETA Bushfires NT scientist Andrew Edwards said the damage the debris left in the wake of Cyclone Monica had increased fuel loads for fires. Guidance

"With the fire season upon us, an increase in fuel loads will cause fires of increased intensity and this could have implications for the recovery of the area," he said.

"The example of the effects of Cyclone Ingrid on Cobourg Peninsula in early 2005 illustrated that vegetation only has one chance to recover after such a destructive event. Fires of greater intensity occur and prevent trees from re-shooting.

"If the area does not recover the native vegetation has the potential to be replaced by weeds, such as gamba and mission grasses that could dominate the area and further suppress the re-introduction of native species."

Mr Edwards said the information gathered from the survey would influence fire management this year.

"Now that we can see the serious extent of destruction we have issued advice to park managers, Aboriginal rangers in Arnhem Land and Bushfires NT operational staff who have created strategic burning regimes to exclude fire from as much of the area as possible," Mr Edwards said.

“We are putting fire breaks around the area in an effort to control and prevent fire for at least one year to enable recovery.

“The aerial survey is the first step in assessing the type and extent of damage and will provide a basis for further studies into the cyclone’s impacts.”

Mr Edwards said using this information, organisations including the Bureau of Meteorology, CSIRO, Charles Darwin University, Parks North Australia and traditional owners, will work in collaboration with the NT Government to further investigate the type and extent of the damage to ecosystems within the area to aid future management.

Ends

Media Note - For more information contact Craig Hempel on 0407 605828 or Andrew Edwards on 0427 270835.

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