



MEDIA RELEASE

Central Australia's First Resident Entomologist

A bug expert who honeymooned at Alice Springs last year has recently moved there to become central Australia's first resident entomologist.

Dr Chris Palmer and his wife Leesa spent a week in Alice Springs last year and upon their return to Canberra noticed an advertisement to join the Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts' biodiversity conservation unit.

The Palmers decided Alice Springs would be a great place to move to because the job represented a great opportunity to discover a whole new world of desert invertebrates.

"Not only do I hope to discover what invertebrates exist in the desert during my research in central Australia, but I also want to discover what aspects of the desert environment impact these animals," Dr Palmer said.

"Deserts in central Australia support a rich and diverse array of invertebrates (animals without a backbone), from large, winged stick insects to microscopic mites, but very little has been done in many areas to find out what invertebrates are present.

"We have information about some species, but until now no one has been based in Alice, which would allow long-term studies to be carried out.

"We don't even know what species of moth the common bush tucker witchetty grub metamorphoses into.

"Many of the invertebrates here are totally different from other parts of Australia because they have to adapt to such an extreme environment.

"Many have a different anatomy compared to their counterparts in other areas of the country, such as a smaller wing size, to reduce surface area and prevent moisture loss.

"Some burrow rather than attempt to find limited space on the sparse vegetation, or lay dormant to escape the climate; only emerging when conditions are more favourable, such as after it rains.

"Part of my research will be to revisit areas that have not been surveyed for some species since the historic Horn Expedition in 1894.

"These explorers were the first to discover and describe a whole range of new species only found in arid areas.

"Some species found in 1894 have not been seen since, so being based in Alice will be a great opportunity to revisit those areas and find out what may have affected those species over the last 100 years."

Although Dr Palmer has already done a few reconnaissance trips, he said he would wait until spring and summer to do most of his work, when many invertebrates emerge from their hiding spots.

“Water is essential for life and for most invertebrates part of their lifecycle is linked directly or indirectly to water,” Dr Palmer said.

“Dragonflies lay their eggs in, or close to, water. There is one species in particular that is endemic to central Australia, and I will endeavour to find out the extent of its distribution and its biology.

“Another species endemic to central Australia and considered to be threatened is the desert sand-skipper butterfly, which has not been seen for over 30 years.

“Adults of this species may need very specific climatic requirements before emerging, so I will be conducting surveys throughout the year, over several years if necessary, in order to find it. This kind of work has never been done in Central Australia.”

He said long-term data was important as it can also lead to indications of the effects climate change may have on all species, not just invertebrates.

Part of this work will be collaborative with traditional owners and Parks Australia rangers.

Ends

Media Note – For more information contact Dr Chris Palmer on 8951 8205.

Issued: 8.30am Thursday, 20 July 2006