



## Traditional Ecological knowledge of Mammals

### What is the project about?

Some of our mammals and birds are disappearing at an alarming rate across northern Australia. Many of these species are even declining in national parks and extensive areas of native vegetation. Scientists have chronicled some of this decline and speculated about possible causes, but the scientific information is patchy and incomplete.

In contrast, Aboriginal communities have an extensive knowledge of the status, distribution and ecology of plants and animals throughout Australia. Many plants and animals also have important cultural and spiritual values. Traditional knowledge already forms an important part of conservation management planning and could help biodiversity scientists to piece together when and why certain species have disappeared.

### Research

In June this year, the Biodiversity Conservation section of the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Environment, will commence a project in collaboration with the Northern Land Council and numerous Aboriginal ranger groups and communities across the Top End. The research will aim to chart the pattern of change in status of mammals across much of northern Australia through documentation of Aboriginal traditional knowledge of the current and past status of mammals and some birds. It will be based on a previously successful project in central Australia where Aboriginal communities described the patterns of decline of animals, through discussions fuelled by props of museum specimens. Aboriginal informants living at a series of outstations and communities across northern Australia will be informally interviewed to discuss their knowledge about the targeted species. These discussions will be aided using stuffed animals and photos as prompts, using interpreters where required. Broadly, the survey will ask for information on: names for each mammal species, whether the species still occurs in the local area; whether it has changed in abundance; if it has become locally extinct, when such loss occurred; and what factors are thought to have contributed to any change in status.

The study aims to facilitate two-way exchange of information. Aboriginal participants and communities will be informed of western science's knowledge of the status of fauna in Northern Australia and results of the current study. Should the Traditional Owners perspective support conclusions from the scientific approach it would indicate the need to increase resourcing and management across the landscape in order to maintain biodiversity values. This project will highlight the potential of the two tool box approach to land and biodiversity conservation by incorporating both traditional Aboriginal and western scientific knowledge systems.

