

Media Release:

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Island Ark Providing Quoll Sanctuary from Cane Toad Menace

The Island Ark project involving Indigenous rangers and Northern Territory Government scientists translocating a small population of critically endangered northern quolls to two remote islands off the Territory coast has been hailed a great success.

Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts and Sport (NRETAS) biodiversity scientists have recently returned from the seventh and final annual survey where they were capturing and marking the northern quoll population on Astell and Pobassoo Islands, located off North East Arnhem Land, together with Gurmurr Marthakal Rangers from Elcho Island.

NRETAS Biodiversity senior scientist Tony Griffiths said the native Top End carnivorous marsupials were taken to the remote islands to save the species from being wiped out by cane toads on the Northern Territory mainland.

“Just 65 quolls from the mainland were released on these islands in 2003 and preliminary population estimates from this survey show approximately 2890 adult females on Astell Island and 300 adult females on the smaller Pobassoo Island,” Mr Griffiths said.

“This is the seventh year of ongoing monitoring for the translocated quolls and the surveys consistently reveal the population is secure which means it will no longer be necessary to monitor them annually.

“The quoll populations have stabilised, the health and condition of all animals has been excellent and the other fauna on the islands, including skinks and birds, are also maintaining a good population which indicates overall healthy and balanced ecosystems on the islands.

“While this is great news for the island populations, on the mainland there has been no sign of northern quolls ‘bouncing back’ from the dramatic population losses over the last decade since cane toads arrived, and they are now almost extinct on the mainland.

“The significance of these successful translocated quoll populations has been further reinforced when extensive biodiversity surveys of Territory islands this year undertaken by NRETAS have revealed no new additional natural populations of quolls on islands.”

NRETAS scientists and Gurmurr Marthakal Rangers were joined by a team from the University of Sydney to trial a new ‘toad aversion’ bait which is designed to ‘teach’ quolls to avoid consuming live cane toads.

Dr Jonathan Webb from the University of Sydney said the trial is part of a collaborative project between the University of Sydney, the Western Australia Department of Environment and Conservation and the Territory Wildlife Park.

“Preliminary results showed the quolls on both islands readily consumed toad aversion baits placed both in the open and inside traps, and encouragingly it was found that quolls which ate toad baits were less likely to eat them a second time, which suggests they rapidly learnt to avoid them.”

Mr Griffiths said the northern quoll relocation is a component of the broader ‘Island Ark’ initiative designed to evaluate the conservation significance of Northern Territory islands and to work with landholders to foster those conservation values.

The Island Ark project is a collaboration between NRETAS, Gurmurr Marthakal rangers and the islands' Traditional Owners with financial support from the Australian Government's Caring for Our Country program and in kind support from the Territory Wildlife Park, Parks Australia and Arafura Pearls.

The University of Sydney project is supported by the Australian Government's Caring for Our Country grant program.

Ends

Media Note – for more information contact Tony Griffiths on 8995 5004 or Jonathan Webb on 02 9351 5571

Image – Marthakal Ranger Andrew Gurruwiwi with a northern quoll during the recent survey

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