

Politics adds to Macquarie Island's pest problem

A comprehensive eradication program to rid Macquarie Island of rabbits, rats and mice is being delayed by a dispute between the Tasmanian and Federal governments over who will foot the bill.

The delay has concerned UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, which will take up the issue at its annual meeting in New Zealand in June.

Macquarie Island is politically a part of Tasmania, but lies about 1500 km south-east of Hobart, in the Southern Ocean. The island supports more than 17 threatened species of marine mammals and seabirds and was listed as a World Heritage Area in 1997.

In late 2006, the Tasmanian Government signed off on a comprehensive rabbit and rodent eradication plan for the island. The Federal Minister for the Environment and Water Resources offered to pay half the costs, currently estimated at \$24.6 million.

The Tasmanian Government has rejected the offer arguing that, because World Heritage sites come under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act*, pest eradication is the Federal Government's responsibility.

But the island has also been a State Nature Reserve – the highest status conservation reserve in Tasmania – since 1978. Under the *National Parks and Reserves Management Act*, which governs the management of nature reserves, the Tasmanian Government is required, among other things, to 'protect the Nature Reserve against, and rehabilitate the Nature Reserve following, adverse impacts such as those of fire, introduced species, diseases and soil erosion ...'.

Meanwhile, rabbits are multiplying and time is running out. It will take at least two years after funding is secured to put the five-year eradication program in place.

'Even if the two ministers agreed on a funding solution today, baiting could not begin until the winter of 2009,' says Dr Jenny Scott, a University of Tasmania plant ecologist who has been studying Macquarie Island's ecology since 1979.

As Dr Scott explains, the anticoagulant

bait – to be dropped by helicopter – cannot be laid until winter, when threatened seabird species leave the island.

Dr Scott says a number of factors have contributed to the rabbit population explosion from 10 000 or so in the late 1990s to the current estimated 100 000. These include an apparent resistance to the myxo virus, which was introduced in 1979; eradication of feral cats by 2000; and increased rabbit breeding success, possibly due to climate change.

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The intense grazing pressure from rabbits on steep coastal slopes has caused landslips on slopes used as nesting areas by albatrosses and burrowing petrels.

One landslip in September 2006 destroyed a king penguin rookery, killing hundreds of birds.

'It was a turning point for people to sit up and take notice,' says Dr Aleks Terauds, who spent 11 years studying the island's seabirds as a researcher with Tasmania's Department of Primary Industry.

Dr Terauds says four albatross species nest on Macquarie, with the grey-headed – listed under the EPBC Act – being the most vulnerable to habitat damage.

'The grey-headed only breeds on one small area – on and around the slopes of Petrel Peak. Grazing damage from rabbits is bad here. Nests are literally falling off the side of the hill.'

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Even more threatened are the island's burrowing petrels. Rabbits are destroying





Above: Macquarie Island is the only Australian breeding habitat for the wandering (pictured) and grey-headed albatross. Rabbit grazing has badly damaged the nesting areas of the four albatross species that breed on the island. Karen Alexander

Left: A light-mantled sooty albatross chick face-to-face with 'the enemy'. More than 100 000 rabbits are devastating the Macquarie Island landscape.



The tourist staircase at Sandy Bay in 1990 (left), when the rabbit population was low, and in 2006 (right), when a landslide closed the boardwalk (royal penguins in foreground). Bill Ramsay



Macquarie Island once had extensive fields of 'megaherb' flora such as the Macquarie Island cabbage (inset), which have disappeared in many areas (main photo). Corey Bradshaw

the tall tussock grass that regulates the temperature of the nesting burrows and also provides critical cover from predators.

The WWF's Andreas Glanznig visited Macquarie Island in April to oversee the installation of an Automatic Weather Station – part of a \$100 000 package funded by WWF and Peregrine Adventures to 'kick-start the eradication plan'.

Weather station data will be critical to the helicopter baiting program.

'If the Tasmanian Government can't afford to look after its own island, it is time to cede it to the Commonwealth, which

could then manage the three sub-Antarctic World Heritage listed islands – Heard, McDonald and Macquarie – and their surrounding marine reserves as an integrated sub-Antarctic conservation zone,' says Glanznig.

● **Mary-Lou Considine**

More information:

Tasmania National Parks Association:
www.tnpa.asn.au/macquarie/index.html

WWF: wwf.org.au/ourwork/oceans/macquarie-island