

Feral animals

Rabbits, feral cats, and foxes

Research tells us that rabbit populations may be sustaining numbers of predators like cats and foxes and subsequently increasing pressure on native animals particularly those in the up to 5kg bracket.

The settlement of Australia and the introduction of feral animals such as rabbits, foxes and cats has changed the predator prey balance in Australian in two main ways. Firstly, new prey species can compete with native species for food and other resources, and they can alter the environment to the detriment of the native species. The introduction of rabbits, for example, has had a profound effect on the habitat and vegetation used by similar sized animals such as bettongs and bandicoots across Australia.



Feral kitten

Secondly, the introduction of abundant new prey species can sustain predators (especially introduced predators that have had a significant period of co-evolution) at higher density than that which the natural prey could support. Thus predators such as cats and foxes, supported by an abundant prey like rabbits, can exert a strong influence on native prey species that are at low levels. This pressure, coupled with clearing, fragmentation, and eradication of habitat, can lead to local extinctions of native animals.

What's happening to Australian marsupials?

At least 16 of Australia's 204 marsupial species or subspecies are now extinct and another 53 are critically endangered or vulnerable across Australia.

The loss of 10 marsupial species in Australia since 1788 represents about a quarter of the total mammal extinctions worldwide in the last 200 years.

Changing land use patterns causing loss of habitat and the introduction of exotic species like foxes,

cats and rabbits are thought to be the main cause of the reduction in marsupial numbers since European settlement.

Since arriving in 1788, Europeans made several attempts to establish the rabbit in Australia. It was finally successfully introduced in 1858 near Geelong, Victoria. Since then the rabbit has caused extensive damage to the Australian environment, through overgrazing and digging that causes changes in plant composition and erosion. They may also compete with native animals for resources like food and shelter.

Australia has approximately 25 species of exotic mammal that have become established in the wild, including camel, donkey, pig, buffalo, horse, cat, fox, rabbit, hare, deer, rat and mouse. There is no ecosystem that is untouched by at least one species of feral mammal.

There are about 5 million foxes in southern and central Australia. They kill small to medium-sized marsupials and have caused the extinction of several native mammals.

Cats occur Australia-wide and are thought to play a major role in the decline of many native animals. They kill insects, reptiles, birds, frogs and mammals for food.

A number of marsupial species that were once distributed on the mainland are now clinging to survival on offshore islands, where there are no introduced predators such as foxes and cats.

The last known Tasmanian tiger died in captivity at Hobart Zoo on 7 September 1936. Prior to this, at least 2,268 were killed for the bounty being offered by farmers and the Tasmanian Government between 1888 and 1909.

Thousands of common wombats were killed in the 1920s for the bounty offered by farmers. Today they are a protected species and habitat destruction and the car are now its most serious threats.

The koala's fur almost caused its downfall when millions were killed in the 1920s for the fur trade. Today, loss of habitat, introduced predators, disease and traffic threatens this protected iconic Australian species.

Nearly everyone would be able to identify exotic species such as a tiger or a meerkat, but how many people could tell you what a chuditch or a potoroo is? To help save our remaining marsupials, it is essential to raise community awareness of the existence of these animals and the threats they face.



Why worry about the loss of marsupial species?

Once a species becomes extinct it is lost forever.

The loss of species results in the loss of biodiversity.

Biodiversity can be defined as the variety of all life forms. Biodiversity is often considered at three levels: genetic, species and ecosystem diversity.

All the different plants and animals interact with each other, the earth and the atmosphere to form the web of life.

The loss of species can affect other living species and can weaken the web of life.

The current rates of extinctions and the loss of biodiversity are the highest this planet has experienced in 60 million years.

Australia has experienced severe declines and extinctions in the past 200 years, especially in the last 50 years.

The loss of biodiversity is the most serious environmental problem we face.

What's being done to help marsupials?

Scientists all over Australia are researching our threatened marsupials and are developing ways to help save them.

Recovery Teams are being formed. These people prepare Recovery Plans that outline the causes of a species decline and what needs to be done to prevent that species from becoming extinct.

These plans are being implemented for some species.

Feral animal control is carried out in many areas.

Captive breeding for release is being implemented for some species.

Some areas are being fenced. Feral animals are being eradicated from these areas and native species are being reintroduced.

What can we do to help marsupials?

Practice responsible pet ownership.

Cats and dogs do not belong in the bush. To prevent unwanted pets being released into the wild, sterilise your cat and dog.

Put a bell on your cat's collar, this may alert potential prey to the cat's presence.

Keep your cat in at night, as this is when they are most active and potentially destructive.

Become pro-active. Encourage your local council to protect remnant vegetation in your local area.

Drive carefully at night. Many nocturnal animals are killed by cars while foraging near roads and tracks or crossing roads.

Take your rubbish home. Small marsupials can get caught in plastic six-pack holders and can be injured or killed. They may eat bubble gum, used band-aids and pieces of aluminum foil. Native animals need to find food from natural sources.

Get involved. If you find an injured native mammal, wrap it in a jumper, towel or blanket and place it in a cardboard box or something similar. The animal will probably be in shock and will need to be kept somewhere that is dark and quiet. Take it to the nearest vet, Wildlife Department or wildlife carer as soon as possible. Be careful when approaching or handling injured animals.

If you find a dead native animal that is uncommon, place it in a plastic bag and take it to your nearest Wildlife Department as soon as possible. Put it in a freezer if you cannot get there straight away.

If you encounter a rare mammal, record the date, location and time and let your local Wildlife Department know.

Volunteer your services to your local Wildlife Department or Wildlife Carer.

Join a community group in on-ground recovery actions, such as native re-vegetation to provide habitat for native animals.

Control feral pests on your property.

Protect a remnant area of native bush on your property.

Take care not to start bushfires.

Take care not to trample on habitat.

Take care not to spread the Dieback disease when travelling through bushland areas.

Do not remove dead trees or logs from the bush for firewood. Dead trees and logs provide important habitat for many marsupial species.