Eradication project gains momentum

Welcome to the first issue of the Macquarie Island Pest Eradication Project (MIPEP) newsletter, which will be produced three times a year for the duration of the project.

The Parks and Wildlife Service has been managing feral animals on Macquarie Island since the 1970s. Rabbit numbers have increased dramatically since 2001 and rabbits and rodents (rats and mice) are causing a number of adverse impacts on the island's ecosystems and landscape.

As control of rabbits is no longer considered feasible, a combined rabbit and rodent eradication program is planned.

The eradication of rabbits, rats and mice from Macquarie Island is planned in two phases. The first phase involves the spreading of the anti-coagulant bait brodifacoum across the island by helicopter. This will be done in winter 2010.

The second phase involves hunting teams locating and removing rabbits that survive the aerial baiting. This will take up to three years and will commence as soon as the baiting has been completed. Two years of monitoring will follow to ensure no rabbits or rodents have survived. This is by far the largest eradication project to be attempted worldwide for these three species.

The project so far
In June 2007 the Australian and the Tasmanian Governments agreed to jointly fund the eradication project. The budget for the project is A$24.7 million over the seven year duration of the project.

The current focus for the project team is the planning work required to ensure that all components of a project of this scale and importance are covered in the necessary detail. This includes gaining regulatory approvals and permits, training the hunting dogs to be used on the island, the supply of all the necessary resources as well as staff recruitment and training.

Winter is the best time to undertake the aerial baiting because the naturally available food sources are low (which will enhance bait uptake) and because much of the native wildlife leaves the island during winter, thus reducing impacts on non-target species.

The aim is to eradicate rats and mice during the aerial baiting. Some rabbits will survive the baiting program, necessitating follow-up hunting. This will involve teams of skilled hunters and dogs. The dogs will be used to track and indicate the presence of rabbits to hunters. Training of the dogs commenced earlier this year.

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Project vision
Macquarie Island biodiversity is restored to a natural balance – free of the impacts of introduced pest species. Vegetation, seabird and invertebrate populations have recovered to levels naturally supported by the environment.
New Zealand expertise in project team

The project team is responsible for planning and implementing the project, including all the logistics, management and staffing. It currently has three full-time members and is based in Hobart, Tasmania.

Project manager Keith Springer has responsibility for overall planning for the project. Keith began this role in August 2007. He previously worked on Macquarie Island as the ranger-in-charge and also led the cat eradication team on the island in 2000. Recruited from New Zealand, Keith has previously worked in Antarctica and spent 20 years as a forest ranger and national park ranger with the Department of Conservation in New Zealand.

“The opportunity to spend a couple of years on Macquarie Island has really brought home to me the impacts rabbits are having on this remarkable but fragile island. The chance to be involved in reversing the impacts of rodents and rabbits on such a large island is a great opportunity to help achieve a major conservation outcome,” Keith said.

Geoff Woodhouse joined the Macquarie Island Pest Eradication Project in March 2008 as assistant project manager. Geoff was recruited from the Department of Conservation in New Zealand. He has experience in aerial and hunting-based control and eradication projects, including goat eradication in the Galapagos Islands.

When he is not busy pondering the design of bait pods, helicopter storage or shipping options, Geoff’s contract development skills have proven to be a great asset to the project. Geoff is working on regulatory requirements for the project, including the required approval of bait under the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA).

Keith Springer, dog training coordinator John Cheyne and Geoff Woodhouse on Macquarie Island earlier this year.

Geoff said the attraction of the Macquarie Island Pest Eradication project was being involved in a conservation project that will make a difference.

“I can say to my kids ‘I was part of that project’. There is no doubt the project will be the most logistically challenging operation ever attempted in the world. I believe the project will need to take some calculated risks to be successful and you don’t get too many opportunities in your life to do this so that is exciting. When the project is declared successful, it will be very rewarding and satisfying knowing you have made a difference.”

Yeutha May is the administrative officer for this project. Yeutha joined the team in December 2007 from the Southern Region of the Parks and Wildlife Service. She looks after all administrative matters for the project, including finance, correspondence and travel arrangements.

“I’m really enjoying my involvement in this major conservation project. We have the chance to turn things around and to improve the environment on Macquarie Island by restoring the natural balance. It is terrific to play a part in achieving that goal,” Yeutha said.

Continued from page 1

While baiting on Macquarie Island won’t commence until 2010, considerable work has been done on the island since 2005. Trials have been conducted to assess weathering rates, palatability and likely bait uptake by non-target species. Bait pods have been trialed to ensure bait is kept weatherproof. Helicopter flights have been undertaken to determine impacts on wildlife.

Project team members

The MIPEP has a number of component parts, and the people involved in each of these will be introduced in future issues of this newsletter.

The project team is responsible for planning and conducting the project.

The field team will work on Macquarie Island, commencing in May 2010.

The dog training team is training 11 dogs for use on Macquarie Island from 2010 onwards. It is overseen by the dog training co-ordinator.

The project is overseen by a steering committee. The committee includes representatives from the Tasmanian Government, Australian Government, Australian Antarctic Division and the New Zealand Department of Conservation Island Eradication Advisory Group.

A scientific and technical advisory committee provides guidance to the project manager and the steering committee.

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