

Media Release

Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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Feral cat research critical in understanding native mammal decline in Australia

A University of Tasmania researcher, working with Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC), has shown that landscape features play a key role in determining the spread of feral cats and their impact on native mammals.

Dr Rosemary Hohnen, who completed her PhD last year with the University's School of Biological Sciences, now works as field ecologist with AWC.

The research was conducted in partnership with AWC at its properties in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia in 2013, and the report has been published in the United States' Public Library of Science journal PLOS ONE.

Dr Hohnen said the domestic cat was an invasive exotic species in many locations around the world, and thought to be linked to mammal declines across northern Australia.

"Mammals have declined dramatically in Australia over the last 30 years and feral cats are thought to be a key factor driving that decline," she said.

"This research looked at the relationship between feral cat occupancy and mammal abundance.

"Mammals tend to have strongholds in rocky and complex terrain and we found that feral cat occupancy tended to be lower in these areas."

Many mammal species native to this region now persist only in areas with high topographic complexity, provided by features such as gorges or escarpments.

The research shows the occupancy of feral cats was lower in mammal-rich habitats of topographic complexity, supporting the idea that predation by feral cats is a factor contributing to the collapse of mammal communities across northern Australia.

Dr Hohnen said researchers were trying to understand the drivers behind mammal decline, and these findings were one piece of the puzzle.

“Managing the impacts of feral cats is a global conservation challenge, and actions such as choosing sites for small mammal reintroductions may be more successful if variation in cat occupancy with landscape features is taken into account,” Dr Hohnen said.

MEDIA OPPORTUNITY

Researcher Rosemary (Rosie) Hohnen is available via phone between 2pm and 6pm Australian Eastern Standard Time (AEST) (12pm and 4pm in Western Australia) today on (08) 9191 7014, or via the Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary on (08) 9191 7425.

Images are also available by emailing Media.Office@utas.edu.au.

The full report is available online here:

<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0152520>

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