

Media Release

Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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Zoology project seeks help from Hobart residents to research mammalian backyard wildlife

Hobart is a special place – the city is surrounded and intertwined by bushland areas. These areas, combined with backyards gardens, are all places which can provide a refuge for wildlife.

A University of Tasmania Zoology researcher's citizen science project wants to see how the public and scientists can work together to locate and provide wildlife refuges to prevent any further loss of species in Australia.

Dr Anke Frank said globally, Australia has the worst record for extinction of native mammals.

“We have lost nearly 30 species in the last 200 years due to human-induced habitat change and the introduction of non-native species, particularly mammalian predators.

“In Australia and elsewhere, the natural environment is under threat from increasing urbanisation and people's companion animals, primarily cats and dogs, which can cause additional stress and predation pressure on native species.”

This project will quantify for the first time the effects of domestic cats and dogs on native mammals and how these impacts might be mediated by garden size, features and location.

Dr Frank said Tasmania is still a “mammal paradise.”

“For many species of wildlife which have been lost on the mainland, Tasmania has become the last remaining refuge and all of these species are still to be found within or at the fringes of Hobart,” she said.

Dr Frank's collaborators from the University of Sydney and Macquarie University recently discovered that in Sydney residents' backyard dogs, but not cats, led to lower activity of long-nosed bandicoots – a rabbit-sized marsupial. They attributed this to thousands of years of exposure of bandicoots to dingoes, a close relative of the dog, whereas these native marsupials remain naïve towards cats, which only arrived with Europeans about 200 years ago.

“In Tasmania, where dingoes have never occurred, it is quite likely that native wildlife species are vulnerable to dogs and cats alike.”

Dr Frank said “If this is true that Tasmanian wildlife is at equal risk by cats and dogs, it is really concerning, because even in Tasmania, several iconic species like Tasmanian devils, quolls and bandicoots have declined. Therefore, any new pressures put upon threatened or declining species from expanding human settlements and their associated dogs and cats could be fatal.”

The survey will ask questions such as

- What type and size of garden the respondent has
- If cats and/or dogs use their backyard
- What sort of resources there might be that native mammals might be attracted to, like food, shelter and water
- The types of mammalian wildlife that appear in the backyard

“The results of this study will locate priority management areas through reports of rare species and potential discovery of wildlife diversity hotspots, in order to aid conservation efforts of our native species.

“We require participation from people who don’t have pets, as much as those who do,” Dr Frank said.

“We’re interested in gathering people’s thoughts and opinions and we are very keen to get as much participation as we can.”

By engaging people in this citizen science project, Dr Frank and her team also aim to improve the knowledge and understanding of native mammals and create empathy for the species we may stand to lose.

“This research will enable us to see how the native mammals we share this city with are going, where refuges for mammalian wildlife exists, how to keep them as such, and how to provide more to secure their survival. Hopefully it will also promote more responsible pet ownership.”

Free public lecture: Dr Frank has also been delivering free public lectures detailing the project. The next will be held at the Sustainability Learning Centre, Mount Nelson, on Wednesday 24 September at 3.45pm (entry at 3.30pm). The talk goes for about 45 minutes. Children are welcome and refreshments will be provided. Dr Frank is happy to deliver more talks at the request of community groups.

The 10-15 minute survey is completely anonymous and can be completed online here: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TVDFYG5>

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