The Elusive Threatened Black-Footed Rock-Wallaby

WWF is working alongside the Nyikina Mangala Rangers and the Kimberley Land Council to build a knowledge base for a rare and threatened wallaby in the remote West Kimberley region of Western Australia. A survey in the Grant Ranges and surrounding outcrops around Mt Wynne was conducted in October 2012, searching for evidence that the black-footed rock-wallaby (*Petrogale lateralis*) still persists in these areas.

The Kimberley race of the black-footed rock-wallaby inhabits very remote and isolated patches scattered through the rugged and hostile West Kimberley environment. With the location of rock-wallaby habitat making the study very difficult, existing information about this animal was found to be inadequate and out-dated. The presumed range was determined from a handful of specimens and very limited survey work conducted well over a decade ago.

The sheer cliff edges, scorching temperatures, and sparse vegetation of this area allow only for the survival of the fittest. The black-footed rock-wallaby is amazingly adapted to life among steep sandstone cliffs, rocky outcrops, and scree slopes. Its rough feet provide good grip while its long tail helps to maintain balance while moving through this treacherous landscape. It is able to climb to high-perching ledges, and seeks shelter from the intense Kimberley sun in caves. Living in an arid environment, this wallaby can extract most of the water it needs to survive from its diet, which consists of grasses, herbs, leaves, and fruits.
The black-footed rock-wallaby is found in isolated, shrinking populations scattered across Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and at the northern tip of South Australia. There are very few, if any, secure and stable populations remaining in the wild. The overall population is decreasing, and populations in at least 5% of known occupied sites have disappeared in the past 30 years. It is listed as “Vulnerable” under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act and as “Near Threatened” on the IUCN Red List, while the populations in WA are considered “Threatened.”

The populations in the Kimberley were previously described as ‘conspicuously abundant at several sites’ and may have been thought to be stable because they are just outside the range of foxes, the primary threat to other populations across the country. However, results from this survey may indicate that other factors are causing the West Kimberley race of the black-footed rock-wallaby to decline.

The Survey Work

The survey team walked transects across cliff edges and rocky outcrops, looking for any evidence of the black-footed rock-wallaby, particularly fresh scats. Camera traps were also set up to capture images of the wallabies. Unfortunately, no evidence of them was found at Mt Wynne. Since the last record of the black-footed rock-wallaby in this area dates from 1904, it is unlikely that the population here still exists. In the Grant Range, results from scat findings, camera traps, and a sighting confirm that there is still a small population remaining. However, not all available habitat (i.e. suitable cave systems) is being occupied. This indicates that the Grant Range could potentially support a higher population, but other factors may be limiting the population, such as predation and/or fires.

The survey team also evaluated the habitat throughout the range, noting that frequent and severe fires are likely to be having a large impact on the composition of vegetation. Fires have burned through much of the area, leaving behind vegetation dominated by Acacia and spinifex. Investigating the scats, the team found that the wallabies’ diet often includes figs that grow high up in the walls and overhangs of the range. Fires may be one of the greatest threats to the West Kimberley race of the black-footed rock-wallaby, destroying food sources (at least temporarily), as well as reducing cover from predators. Evidence of wild dogs/dingoes and feral cats was found in the area, which could potentially cause a significant threat to the population. The presence of other feral animals
was recorded from damage around the range; cattle, donkeys, pigs, horses, and camels may pose stiff competition for the limited food.

During the survey, evidence of many other native species inhabiting the ranges and outcrops were recorded. Some of the most interesting include the Spectacled Hare Wallaby (*Lagorchestes conspicillatus*), Euro (*Macropus robustus*), Brushtail Possum (*Trichosurus vulpecular*) with young perched on the mother’s back, Northern Nailtail Wallaby (*Onychogalea unguifera*), and Short-beaked Echidna (*Tachyglossus aculeatus*).

This year, WWF hopes to conduct more wallaby surveys in collaboration with Indigenous ranger groups from the Kimberley Land Council’s Working on Country funded Kimberley Ranger Program, particularly in the large and complex Edgar Ranges on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, which are likely to support the largest population of black-footed rock-wallabies in the Kimberley. These studies will help to establish the current range and population estimates for this wallaby and to record and assess the threats to its survival. This information will serve as a starting point for future conservation of West Kimberley rock-wallabies and help build the foundation for a long-term ranger-led monitoring program. WWF’s long-term aim is to work alongside Aboriginal rangers, Traditional Owners, and other land managers to alleviate threats and protect the West Kimberley race of the black-footed rock-wallaby.

"IT WAS REALLY GOOD TO EXPLORE THE GRANT RANGES, LOTS OF HIDDEN CAVES AND ROCK HOLES. WE FOUND SOME GOOD ROCK-WALLABY PLAYGROUNDS. THEY ARE ALWAYS ON THE CLIFF EDGE WITH THE BEST VIEWS."

RANGER BAYDEN RIVERS

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WWF would like to acknowledge the following people for their advice and assistance: David Pearson (WA DEC), Alison McGilvray (WA DEC), Linette Umbrello (WA Museum), John Watson (Jarlmadangah community), Ian and Dawn Stirling (Liveringa Station) and Jason Pitman (WWF volunteer). This project was funded by the Australian Government.

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WWF-Australia National Office
Level 13, 235 Jones Street,
Ultimo NSW 2007
GPO Box 528
Sydney NSW 2001
Tel: 61 2 9281 5515
Freecall: 1800 032 551
Fax: 61 2 9281 1060
Email: enquiries@wwf.org.au

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