

5 February 2007

Dr Ian Holland
Committee Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: ecita.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Dr Holland

Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas – TNPA supplementary submission

Thank you for accepting the following supplementary submission containing important new information received by the TNPA by since its original submission to the Committee in February 2006. Please bring the following and two attachments to the Committee's immediate attention.

The new information concerns the urgent problem of serious ongoing degradation by rabbits and rodents of the Macquarie Island World Heritage Area and Nature Reserve, and the considerable delays which are being experienced in provision of Government funding to eradicate these feral pests.

All aspects of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry are relevant to this issue.

Overview of the issue

The TNPA is extremely concerned about the current rate and extent of damage to the subantarctic Macquarie Island World Heritage Area and Nature Reserve by feral rabbits and rodents. In recent years the rabbit population has increased dramatically due to a combination of likely factors:

- Myxomatosis, used previously as a control, is no longer available and no other biological control method seems suitable.
- In the past 5-10 years rabbits have been breeding all through the year instead of only spring-summer, seemingly due to warmer drier conditions; and
- Feral cats, a major predator, were removed by 2000.

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The expanding rabbit population has resulted in an alarming increase in land degradation around the island – extensive loss of the main plant species (tall tussock grass and the megaherb Macquarie Island cabbage) and soil destabilisation resulting in numerous new landslips and eroded gullies. Most significantly, the steep seaward-facing tussock slope habitat, the most iconic landscape feature of Macquarie Island and habitat for a number of threatened seabird species, is now being degraded at a rapid rate.

A detailed eradication plan for both rabbits and rodents has been prepared, with this work funded by the Commonwealth and State Governments. However, after more than a year of sitting on Ministerial desks, and months of stalling by Commonwealth and State governments, the plan itself has still not been funded.

The matter needs addressing urgently, as there is considerable lead time needed to address the complex logistics of the eradication plan before the on-ground eradication work can proceed. Meanwhile the damage continues at an ever-increasing rate as the rabbit population continues to expand.

The images in Attachment A give a few examples of the damage.

Additional images and information can be found on the TNPA's web page covering this issue: <http://www.tnpa.asn.au/macquarie/index.html>

That web page also gives examples of the substantial national, regional and international media coverage of this issue since mid-2006.

Examples of the most recent media coverage, in December 2006 and January 2007, are attached to this submission as Attachment B.

Summary of the problem and the solution

- Listed World Heritage values are being negatively affected (see below).
- Four seabird species listed as threatened under the *EPBC Act 1999* (Cth), and eight seabird species listed under the *Threatened Species Protection Act 1995* (Tas), are being actively compromised by escalating damage to the tussock slope habitat.
- There are no current means of controlling the rabbit population and the rapidity of damage which is occurring, other than eradication.
- A detailed eradication plan has been prepared, based on the most up-to-date and successful island eradication methods with input from expert practitioners, and is urgently awaiting funding for its implementation.

World Heritage Values

Macquarie Island Nature Reserve was listed as a World Heritage Area on the basis of two of the four criteria for listing a natural site, as follows:

- 'as an outstanding example representing major stages of the earth's evolutionary history, including the record of life, significant on-going

- geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features; and
- containing superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance’.

Source: *Macquarie Island Nature Reserve and World Heritage Area Management Plan 2006* p.4; quoted from the World Heritage listing statement, Australian Government Department of Environment, Sport and Territories, 1996.

The *Management Plan* may be viewed at

<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/publications/tech/macquarie/summary.html>

How World Heritage values are being damaged by rabbit activity

‘Values’ in italics are as given in the listing statement, as quoted in the *Management Plan*, p. 5.

Spectacular steep escarpments

*Many of the vegetated escarpments, especially in the south of the island, are being rapidly denuded of the dominant plant species (tall tussock, *Poa foliosa* and *Macquarie Island cabbage*, *Stilbocarpa polaris*). New landslips and severe erosion in gullies are common. The slopes have a degraded and ugly appearance, with dead tussock stumps, bare soil and erosion.*

Dramatic changes in vegetation cover due to climatic conditions

Detecting vegetation changes directly due to climate conditions is difficult and sometimes impossible due to the widespread confounding effect of rabbit grazing (however, it appears incontrovertible that the large increase in rabbit numbers is partly a response to ameliorating climate conditions on the island which is resulting in dramatic, but undesirable, changes to the vegetation).

Majestic albatross (4 species) nesting on cliffs

The nesting habitat of three species is under threat from rabbit-induced steep-slope degradation. Nests of Light-mantled sooty albatrosses have already been reported as lost in longterm study areas. On Petrel Peak in the island’s south, almost the entire slope habitat of the Black-browed albatross and the Grey-headed albatross has now been denuded of tussock, landslips have been reported, and nest lost is expected if not already occurring. All three species are listed as threatened under the *Threatened Species Protection Act 1995* (Tas), and one (Grey-headed albatross) under the *EPBC Act 1999*.

The remote, dramatic and essentially undisturbed location

The location is most definitely not undisturbed, and the disturbance is spreading rapidly.

Management objectives for the Macquarie Island World Heritage Area and Nature Reserve

Removal of feral pests is clearly stated as one of the Key Desired Outcomes (p. 42) and Specific Reserve Objectives (p. 49) of the *Macquarie Island Nature Reserve and World Heritage Area Management Plan 2006* (<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/publications/tech/macquarie/summary.html>).

Eradication of rabbits and rodents is stated as one of the highest priorities for management of the Reserve (p.66).

The first sentence of the Summary of the Management Plan (<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/publications/tech/macquarie/summary.html>) states:

"Macquarie Island Nature Reserve is one of the most valuable reserves in Australia and the world, well recognised for its conservation, geological, ecological and scientific values".

Macquarie Island has this potential, but in reality its conservation, ecological and scientific values are being significantly impacted and this will continue to get worse until the current level of land degradation from rabbit damage is halted, degradation which is increasing rapidly and urgently needs addressing.

Summary

The case of Macquarie Island is a clear and dramatic example of the ecological consequences of failure by both Commonwealth and State Governments to provide sufficient resources to protect the values of an internationally renowned reserve from ongoing threats. However, unlike many other problems relating to reserve management, this can be solved in a straightforward manner by an adequate injection of funds to implement the eradication plan, i.e. to complete what has been started in terms of previous government funding.

Action is needed urgently before too much irreversible damage occurs.

Yours faithfully

Tom Baxter

Tom Baxter
Public Officer, TNPA

Attachments:

- A** *Rabbit-induced landslides: two of many, Macquarie Island, 2006*
- includes images showing rabbit-induced vegetation damage and consequent landslides on Macquarie Island.
- B** Examples of recent media coverage: December 2006, January 2007.