

Surprise finds in Kakadu feral cat research

Posted Thu 24 Mar 2016, 6:24am Updated Thu 24 Mar 2016, 8:59am
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Researchers say a two-year study in Kakadu National park has found evidence that feral cats are having a broader impact on native wildlife than was previously understood. It was already believed feral cats are wreaking havoc on native mammal populations in northern Australia, but the new research suggests feral cats are eating reptiles in large numbers too.

Transcript

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- **MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:** Researchers say a two-year study in Kakadu National Park has found evidence that feral cats are having a broader impact on native wildlife than was previously understood.

It was already believed feral cats were wreaking havoc on native mammal populations in northern Australia, but the new research suggests feral cats are also eating reptiles in big numbers.

Kakadu National Park says it is taking steps to manage feral animals such as cats.

Sara Everingham reports from Darwin.

SARA EVERINGHAM: Researchers have been trying to get a better picture of how feral cats are affecting native wildlife in the world heritage-listed Kakadu National Park.

Ecologist Danielle Stokeld from the Northern Territory's Department of Land and Resource Management worked on the project in the field, and says some of the results were unexpected.

DANIELLE STOKELD: We were quite surprised by the response of reptile numbers and diversity that was something that hasn't been shown in other studies. So that was quite a significant finding signifying that cats are having quite an impact on reptile populations.

SARA EVERINGHAM: Under the federally-funded program, territory government researchers and Parks Australia set up two large fenced sites in Kakadu where they were able to keep feral cats out.

Over two years they watched what happened to the native wildlife.

Dr Graeme Gillespie, the Territory Government's director of terrestrial ecosystems says the biggest changes were recorded for reptiles.

GRAEME GILLESPIE: We're talking about small things like little geckos and skinks and dragons and small goannas and even small snakes, things that people wouldn't see. But all these things are out there, there's probably 20 or 30 species that inhabit that area. Generally speaking across the board they all

recovered significantly once we excluded cats.

SARA EVERINGHAM: Scientists already suspected feral cats were contributing to the decline of small native mammals in northern Australia.

The researchers in this latest study couldn't find enough small mammals to record changes in small-mammal numbers.

And Dr Gillespie says the study shows feral cats are having a significant impact beyond mammals.

GRAEME GILLESPIE: We suspected there was an impact on reptiles because when we dissected feral cats and went through the stomach contents we find lots of reptiles in there, we find things as large as children's pythons inside feral cats from time to time - and always find lots of small geckos and skinks.

But this is the first really hard evidence from northern Australia that shows that they're having what we call an ecologically significant impact. Essentially that the richness of reptiles, the abundance of reptiles doubled in only two years. That's a very, very fast recovery so that means the cats are having a very big influence on the number and diversity of reptiles that are out there, in particular areas like Kakadu National Park.

SARA EVERINGHAM: Kakadu National Park's manager Peter Cotsell says the park's looking at strategies for managing feral animals including cats.

PETER COTSELL: Work really did commence three years ago on monitoring the effect of cats across the park. Now we've got some quite conclusive evidence about what they eat, what they prey on, their numbers. So, I guess from that research we can start taking action against those feral species.

SARA EVERINGHAM: He says a threatened species strategy drawn up for the park 18 months ago is being implemented.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Sara Everingham with that report.

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