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Rabbits, rodents vs. penguins, albatross on isle

Nonnatives causing landslides; rats, mice appear to be eating chicks

Albatross try to nest on tussock grasses destroyed by rabbits on Australia's Macquarie Island.

WWF



CANBERRA, Australia - Landslides caused by tens of thousands of rabbits have destroyed fragile penguin and albatross habitat on a remote Australian island near Antarctica, and the World Wildlife Fund is urging the government to eradicate the nonnative species.

A plague of more than 100,000 rabbits on Macquarie Island, which is listed as a U.N. World Heritage site, has stripped native tussock grasses, causing loss of nest cover and shelter from predators at breeding grounds for four million seabirds, among them members of two threatened albatross species.

"Albatross are extremely faithful to their sites and are unlikely to breed anywhere else if their habitat is lost," WWF invasive species expert Julie Kirkwood said in a statement. Story continues below ↓ advertisement

She added that the erosion had caused 20 landslides. "We are still looking into the damage caused by landslides last month on penguin colonies," Kirkwood told Reuters.

One large slide at Lusitania Bay killed an unknown number of birds, including penguins. The island is a breeding ground for about 850,000 pairs of penguins and 100,000 seals.

The damage was being made worse by rats and mice also living on the island, Kirkwood added. "Rat and mice numbers are also growing on the island, with evidence of rats killing young petrels in their nests," she said. Albatross chicks have also been seen being attacked by mice.

"The damage can be controlled, but it needs to be done quickly," she said, calling on the Australian government to fund a \$7.5 million eradication program.

IMAGE: LANDSLIDE CAUSED BY RABBITS

WWF

This landslide, caused by digging rabbits, destroyed albatross habitat on Macquarie Island.



Rabbits, introduced by European settlers in 1788, are one of Australia's worst animal pests, causing millions of dollars in agricultural losses each year.

Control measures include viral sterilization and rabbit-proof fencing. In 1950, the government released the Myxomatosis virus into the rabbit population, causing numbers to drop from 600 million to around 100 million.

But Macquarie Island, about 930 miles southeast of Tasmania in the Southern Ocean, has seen its rabbit population boom from around 10,000 in the 1980s, the World Wildlife Fund said.

The group said several other nearby islands are facing the same pressure from rabbits and rodents.

Reuters contributed to this report.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6080114.stm>

Rabbits 'destroy' seabird habitat

King penguins on Macquarie Island. Photo: Karah Wertz



King penguins have been killed in landslides. Photo: Karah Wertz

Rabbits are destroying the habitat of threatened seabirds on a remote Australian island and should be culled, the environmental group WWF has warned.

Rabbits are stripping Macquarie Island, near Antarctica, of its grasses causing landslides and destroying nesting sites for penguins and albatrosses, WWF said.

The group has been joined by the Australian Greens party in urging an immediate cull of the pests.

Rabbits were introduced to the island by European sealers in the 1800s.

Nesting site destroyed

The population of rabbits has swollen in the last two decades to more than 100,000, WWF says.

The rabbits have stripped entire hillsides of native tussock grasses that seabirds use for shelter and nesting.

The island, 1500km (932 miles) south-east of Tasmania, is an important breeding ground for almost four million seabirds, including two threatened albatross species.

Landslides on Macquarie Island

Rabbits are denuding hillsides causing landslides

"Albatrosses are extremely faithful to their sites and are unlikely to breed anywhere else if their habitat is lost," said Julie Kirkwood, WWF's policy officer for invasive species.

Macquarie Island, which is about 34km (21 miles) long and 5km (three miles) wide, is also a breeding ground for about 850,000 pairs of royal penguins and 100,000 seals.

It was listed as a World Heritage area by the United Nations in 1997.

A recent landslide caused by loss of grass cover on one hillside destroyed half the nests on one albatross site, WWF said.

And 20 landslides were reported on the island in one month, killing a number of king penguins and their chicks, the group reports.

Rats and mice are also increasing in number and are eating young seabirds in their nests.

Last week, the Australian Greens joined the WWF's call for a rabbit and rodent eradication plan to be implemented on the island at a cost of \$7.5m (£4m).