

View to a kill: pests threaten rare island life

* Selina Mitchell, * February 19, 2007

WORLD Heritage-listed Macquarie Island is falling apart under the weight of more than 100,000 grazing rabbits, while the federal and Tasmanian governments fight over who should pay the pest eradication bill.

The World Heritage Bureau is investigating Australia's management of the island, which supports more than 17 threatened species of marine mammals and seabirds and is an important roosting habitat for king penguins.

The rabbit population on the sub-Antarctic island has increased ten-fold since an effort in the 1980s to eradicate feral cats.

Rats, which eat seabirds in their nests, are also increasing.

The \$16.5 million rabbit and rodent eradication plan was prepared last year, but it is yet to be funded because Tasmania wants Canberra to pay for it.

Macquarie Island is considered part of Tasmania, but the commonwealth has responsibility for World Heritage sites.

Environment and Water Resources Minister Malcolm Turnbull last week offered Tasmania \$8.25 million and urged the Lennon Government to find the other half so pest baiting could begin as quickly as possible.

Tasmania's Environment Minister Paula Wriedt said the protection of Macquarie Island was in the national interest.

"The federal Government should stop penny pinching and loosen its purse strings just as they have done with the \$10billion water plan which includes \$3billion for the Murray-Darling Basin," Ms Wriedt said.

Mr Turnbull said the federal Government was very concerned about the rabbit and rodent plague, but it was Tasmania's responsibility.

"Macquarie Island is part of Tasmania and day-to-day management of Macquarie Island, including the controlling of feral pests, is the responsibility of the Tasmanian Government.

Last week, UNESCO World Heritage Centre representatives met Tasmanian government officials and NGOs to discuss the Macquarie Island problem.

WWF and Peregrine Adventures have donated \$100,000 to help kickstart the eradication plan to save the globally important island.

"We are already on borrowed time if the eradication is to be done in winter 2008," WWF spokesman Andreas Glanznig said.

"The situation is akin to paramedics with an ambulance full of life saving gadgets having to wait outside – instead of acting quickly to save life," he said.

Rabbit grazing is destroying albatross breeding areas and increased landslides are causing king penguin deaths and the loss of albatross nests.

Unless the Australian and Tasmanian governments resolve the dispute in the next month, the eradication program will be delayed by another year to winter 2009.

The poisoning must occur in winter, when the seabirds are off the island, which is 34km long and up to 5km wide.

"The situation on Macquarie Island needs urgent action and we have sought the Tasmanian Government's urgent consideration and decision," Mr Turnbull said.

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