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Fears for sub-antarctic island plagued by rabbits. 15/07/2006. ABC News Online

[This is the print version of story <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200607/s1687413.htm>]

Last Update: Saturday, July 15, 2006. 10:42am (AEST)

Fears for sub-antarctic island plagued by rabbits

Antarctic researchers fear there could be irreversible damage inflicted by rabbits on the fragile environment on Macquarie Island, 1,500 kilometres south of Tasmania.

The rabbits were introduced by sealers in the 1800s as a food source, and numbers were reduced to about 10,000 in the early 1980s when myxomatosis was introduced.

But now that cats have been eradicated, and the rabbits have a longer breeding season due to global warming, it is estimated more than 100,000 inhabit the island.

Researcher Jenny Scott says the rabbits have eaten bare the delicate slopes and laid waste to large areas of the island.

"There's nothing stopping them at the moment, it's a situation that everyone who knows and loves Macquarie Island is feeling quite desperate about," she said.

Dr Scott says fragile sub-antarctic plants are being devoured, causing massive erosion and threatening the habitat for endangered species.

"There's severe effects on the small burrowing petrels and also potentially severe effects on the four albatross species," she said.

"Since the cats were taken off, and this was a big reason for eradicating the cats, small species of burrowing petrels like the grey petrel started breeding and everyone was really excited.

"But now that the tussock, their habitat, is being taken away, [the petrels] are much more vulnerable to predation by the the big skuas, native birds, and they're starting to decrease again."

Baiting proposed

A \$10 million eradication program is awaiting the Government's approval.

Parks and Wildlife Tasmania acting general manager Stuart Lennox says the baiting program has been used successfully by New Zealand on Campbell Island.

"We do it in the winter months, not a great time to be at Macquarie Island, that's when the non-target species a lot of the birds and some of the other animals aren't on the island and we can minimise any impact it might have on native fauna and obviously target the species that we're after," he said.

Mr Lennox says there are other sources of funding possible.

"We also think that there's probably a chance for philanthropic contribution to a program of this nature," he said.

"We have about on average about 500 visitors who go to the island every year.

"These are obviously relatively well-heeled people visiting the island and I think they certainly want to engage in such a program and I certainly believe, longer term, that's an option for us."

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