

Overrun by rabbits

MICHELLE PAINE

RABBIT numbers on Macquarie Island have exploded because of no cats, warmer winters and disease-resistance.

Research on bunnies razing island vegetation has scored a prize at international Antarctic conferences in Hobart.

Of 450 posters depicting research on display, all three awarded prizes yesterday were written by Tasmanian scientists.

A paper about the impacts of rabbits on the sub-Antarctic island using photo-monitoring was written by University of Tasmania scientists Justine Shaw and Jenny Scott.

"We have a 40-year dataset of photos from the 1960s, with coverage of the entire coast," Dr Shaw said.

The photos are matched with GPS technology to match areas and compare vegetation loss. Dramatic loss of vegetation has been seen in just six years.

Eradication of the last



BREEDER: Macquarie Island menace.

cats on the island was reported more than six years ago.

Dr Shaw said that was a factor, but not the only one, behind the rabbit breeding.

"The rabbits here have developed natural resistance to myxomatosis, which had previously dropped the numbers down," she said.

"As well, climate change has brought warmer and drier winters, so breeding is responding well to climate change.

"Now they breed successfully all year round.

"We are seeing warming on Macquarie Island, the data is showing that."

Until recently, winter breeding was unsuccess-

ful because the kittens would drown or females were too thin to breed.

"We've been able to see a lot more loss of vegetation. Since 1999/2000 much is now completely bare," said Dr Shaw.

"We hope our research helps managers understand some of the complexities of the problem."

Co-authors were Aleks Terauds, Geoff Copson and Noel Carmichael.

Australian Antarctic Division marine biologists Jason Gedamke and Sarah Robinson won first prize for their poster on using acoustics to assess the distribution of Antarctic marine mammals.

Dr Shaw and Dr Scott came second, and University of Tasmania PhD student Kathryn Wheatley was third, with a poster on fatty-acid mobilisation in lactation in Weddell seals.

There is an open day today at the Hotel Grand Chancellor, with a talk at 2.30pm and displays including art inspired by nature.

