

MACQUARIE ISLAND

Australia in firing line for environmental disaster

IF IT wasn't for the 900 visitors a year who pay big money to make the tempestuous, gut-wrenching voyage to Macquarie Island, the fact that it is falling down might not have come as quickly to public attention.

This once amazing wildlife sanctuary, a territory of Tasmania and 1500km to the northeast, is home to millions of penguins, petrels, albatrosses and seals. It has become a magnet for eco-tourists since it was accorded World Heritage listing in 1997.

Now, when people make that voyage, a scene of shocking devastation awaits, as the steep slopes of a rugged island roughly 35km by 5km betray the ugly scars of recent massive land slips.

"It's a shocking situation. The tourists are really distressed when they see this horrible destruction," says Dr Jenny Scott, a biologist specialising in the sub-Antarctic environments at the University of Tasmania. "It's usually teeming with wildlife."

Scott blames the disaster on the eradication of feral cats and the failure to anticipate and eliminate the sudden explosion of rabbit numbers once their natural enemy was no longer there to keep them in check.

In fact, the sequence of calamity on Macquarie Island can be traced to 1810, when it was discovered with the huge colonies of fur seals and penguins that were driven close to extinction for their skins, before their bodies were rendered into oil in large, pot-like "digesters", of which traces remain to this day.

In the modern era, the first mishap came from the introduction in 1978 of the myxomatosis virus to curb the rabbits, which had arrived with the sealers.

Unbeknown to the scientists who targeted the rabbits, Macquarie Island was afflicted with two introduced pests that largely kept each other in check. Once the feral cats ran out of rabbits to eat, they turned on the penguins and other birds.

It took wildlife officers until 2004 to declare the last feral cat dead on Macquarie Island. Almost immediately, rabbits reappeared and proliferated, as did once-limited numbers of rats and mice.

While the rodents attacked the nests and eggs and chicks of the birds, the rabbits devoured the thick layer of natural vegetation that protected the lower slopes of Macquarie Island from the full force of the elements.

Erosion took over. Rookeries that exploited caves and crevices covered by cushion-shaped tussocks lost their cover in as little as one short southern "summer", and the loosened debris plunged down on to the rocky beaches favoured by the Royal King, Gentoo and Rockhopper penguins and the fur and elephant seals.

It could take thousands of years for the rock slopes to weather a replacement coat of soil and grasses.



CALAMITY: The once spectacular wildlife sanctuary is turning into a scene of devastation.

Now that eco-tourists are releasing damning photos and accounts of how Australia has let its World Heritage treasure turn into a heap of rubble, the Federal and Tasmanian State governments are disagreeing over which is the more responsible before deciding how much of each other's funds are spent trying to stop what is left of it slip-sliding away.

The general manager of Tasmania's Parks and Wildlife Service, Peter Mooney, says there is a practicable, five-year plan for simultaneously eradicating the rodents and rabbits. But he cautions that stability will take much longer to return to steep slopes stripped bare of most soil and vegetation.

"This is the Galapagos Islands equivalent of the Southern Ocean," Mooney says. "We mustn't lose it."

And Scott says that if the last alien curses of rodents and rabbits aren't eliminated the island will quickly become irretrievably degraded.

"It's just a disgrace," she says. "It's a loss of biodiversity, it's a loss of World Heritage values, it's a loss of critical habitat, it's just an international disgrace."

Observer

NZ Herald Sept 9th