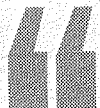


our view ▶ At a World Heritage site administered by one of the richest nations in the world, it should never have got this bad.



Editorial

Your Tasmania

Island on burrowed time

MACQUARIE Island is meant to be an Australian sub-Antarctic treasure, a special place Tasmania proudly claims as its most distant possession.

The Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens has built an airconditioned pavilion to house a collection of plants from Macquarie, a celebration of its delicate ecosystem and our links with the Antarctic region.

Now rabbits and rodents are destroying that ecosystem and the island is becoming a monument to federal-state inaction.

Since a feral cat eradication program eliminated that pest in the 1990s, the population of rabbits and rodents has exploded. In an island just 34km long and 5km wide, there are now an estimated 100,000 rabbits, up from 10,000 in the 1980s, plus countless rats and mice.

MERCURY

The tussock grass that once covered the dramatically steep slopes is disappearing, causing extensive, ugly landslips that have killed some penguins in their rookeries. Rabbits and rats are getting into burrows and the loss of vegetation has deprived nesting seabirds of shelter and protection from predators such as skuas.

At a time of acute environmental awareness and at a World Heritage site administered by one of the richest nations in the world, it should never have got this bad.

It doesn't take a PhD to work out that by eliminating feral cats, rabbits and rodents could become a problem yet it has taken years of widespread degradation before a plan is even close to being implemented.

Scientists based at the island's Australian Antarctic Division station must be horrified by the inaction as they watch these events unfold.

Macquarie is managed by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service. Its UNESCO World Heritage listing means the Federal Government, though its international treaty obligations, also shares responsibility.

State and federal departments have come up with an eradication plan to drop poisoned baits from helicopters but funding of several million dollars has not yet been approved.

The failure of state and federal governments to agree to a funding arrangement and deal quickly with this problem is scandalous.

World Heritage listing is not granted lightly. It has to be a place of exceptional environmental value. Macquarie Island is a precious place, or should be. It is a refuge and nesting

site for an estimated four million seabirds, including some of the world's largest and most endangered migratory species. It has huge penguin rookeries and beaches crowded with elephant seals and it attracts tourists on Antarctic cruises.

Macquarie has not been pristine since the sealing days of the 19th century when many introduced species arrived but this new crisis is the most visibly destructive yet.

It adds another sorry chapter to Tasmania's history of loss: so much Aboriginal tradition, the thylacine, and now so many other species under pressure, from the wedge-tailed eagle to the devil and even platypus.

As with Easter Island, denuded by its Polynesian settlers who wrecked the remarkable statue-carving culture in the process, Macquarie Island now looks like another symbol of human folly.