

SAVING THE WILDLIFE OF THE CENTRAL KIMBERLEY: THE PRIVATE SECTOR ROLE

On 3 September 2003, Martin Copley, founder of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, spoke to a Kimberley Society meeting about the work of the Conservancy and, in particular, about Mornington Station in the heart of the Kimberley. The purpose of the AWC is to save wildlife and ecosystems. Mammals have been the main focus of the work as a high proportion is threatened and they are a proxy for the health of the ecosystem.

The AWC started ten years ago with Karakamia Sanctuary near Mt Helena. This is a small property (250 hectares) which is securely fenced against feral animals and has been spectacularly successful in increasing populations of Woylies, Quenda and other small mammals. The excess population is translocated to Paruna, a nearby Avon Valley AWC sanctuary from where they spread naturally into adjacent National Parks.

The Conservancy now owns twelve sanctuaries around Australia, three in Queensland, one in NSW, three in South Australia and five in Western Australia. One of these is Faure Island in Shark Bay, a pastoral lease that had a big population of goats and feral cats. These have now been removed, making the island a safe sanctuary for rare species such as the Shark Bay Mouse and Burrowing Bettong, which were translocated to the island and are now breeding.

Mornington Station, of 312,000 hectares, is by far the largest property managed by AWC. It consists of tropical savannah with black soil plains, open eucalypt woodlands and rocky spinifex covered ranges including part of the King Leopold Range, and part of the upper Fitzroy River with Dimond and Sir John Gorges.

Until recently, the biodiversity of northern Australian was thought to be intact, and Mornington was to have displayed an intact ecosystem. But, prior to its purchase, wildlife populations had declined through subtle environmental changes and particularly a change in the fire regime with severe wild fires. There are believed to be a number of threatened species of mammals on Mornington.

Part of the strategy for restoring the ecosystem is to remove cattle, at least from the southern half of the property, and change the fire regime to a mosaic of burns leaving areas of different fire ages, which is not at all easy in practice. The fauna is incompletely known and there may be 40 species of mammals on the property; bird and fish lists are also incomplete. The Adcock and Hann rivers and numerous creeks run through the property providing over 100 km of riparian habitat with huge *Focus* and *Terminalia* trees on the banks of some and Pandanus thickets in the creeks. Annie Creek runs parallel to the access road to Mornington Wilderness

Camp and borders the general camping area. It provides habitat for Purple-crowned Fairy Wrens and Crimson Finches among other birds. *Livistona* palms and rainforest remnants are features of some sheltered gullies.

Gladstone Lake, which is on the stock route rather than Mornington Station, is a wetland with a rich bird fauna sorely in need of conservation as it is badly degraded by cattle trampling. AWC hopes to be able to add Lake Gladstone to its conservation program.

Martin told us he had seen 63 species of birds, including the rare and spectacular Gouldian Finch, on one early morning walk of several hours. These birds are the subject of intense study to determine the cause of their decline. For most of the year Sorghum grass seed is the finches' staple food but fires kill other grasses that seed during the wet season, when food is needed for their young. A change of fire regime to favour these grasses is one of the management tools proposed to assist recovery of the Gouldian Finch population.

Management is planned to be research driven so that the effects of cattle removal and changed fire regime are properly documented. AWC hopes to work with educational institutions and museums to document the fauna and carry out ecological research.

Mornington Station encourages visitors, providing a safari-style wilderness camp as well as a general camping area. They inherited a liquor licence and now have a restaurant in the same open-sided building among huge shade trees. Despite its remoteness (95 km south of the Gibb River Road), it is popular with visitors during the dry season. Several walk trails have been developed and more are planned.

Martin gave us an exciting insight into what can be achieved by the private sector in conservation to complement the work being undertaken by government agencies.

Loisette Marsh