

Quoll-ity control: Endangered native animals leaving tropical East Arnhem island paradise

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<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-04/endangered-100-quolls-returned-to-mainland-northern-territory/6910912>



Endangered quolls purposely segregated from cane toads are returning to the Australian mainland after more than a decade isolated on a tropical East Arnhem island paradise.

[Photo: The northern quoll is a marsupial native to the north of Australia threatened by introduced cane toads. \(Jonathan Webb\)](#)

The island quolls have spent the last 12 years rapidly breeding, with numbers rising from 64 to around 8,000.

Their return to the mainland this month will be the latest step in a long plan to protect the native marsupials against cane

toads, which have devastated quolls across the Northern Territory.

Dion Wedd, curator of zoology at Territory Wildlife Park, said the islands quolls had been doing "very well".

"There's been absolutely no human interference on that island with fire management or predators to eat them," Mr Wedd told 105.7 ABC Darwin.

"Clearly enough, they've been doing well."

CANE TOADS POSE THREAT TO FUZZY NATIVE

The quoll — a fuzzy brown marsupial closely related to the Tasmanian Devil and about the size of a small cat — was once common across the Territory, including in the capital city Darwin.

"Everyone had them in their shed ripping out their chickens," Mr Wedd said.

But in the 1990s their numbers started declining due to several factors, including fire management in their bush environment and predators like feral cats and dogs.

Then cane toads — an introduced pest that is lethally poisonous to predators when consumed — reached the Territory in 2003.

"Quolls have this propensity to pounce on anything and the cane toads just pushed them over the edge," Mr Wedd said.

"We figured with the toads arriving we'd lose the quolls on the mainland.

"We had to do something about it."

The solution was populating Astell and Pobassoo — two tiny connected islands off Arnhem Land — with 64 quolls captured by rangers and Darwin community members on the mainland in 2003.

"People were collecting quolls from their sheds for us," Mr Wedd said.

"It was an insurance population."

TOAD SAUSAGES AND RESEARCH BOLSTERS HOPE

In the last decade, while the quolls were largely left alone on the island, new research emerged to protect mainland Northern Territory quolls against the cane toad.

A 2011 landmark study that fed cane toad-laced sausages to quolls in Kakadu National Park gave academics hope the nocturnal animals could learn not to eat the poisonous pest.

"The sausages gives them a bit of a stomach ache and they get sick, and they don't want to eat it again," Mr Wedd said.

"The most exciting thing about that is that quolls show parental care and mothers have taught their babies not to eat toads too."

The 100 quolls set to be taken off Astell island this month by Mr Wedd's team and Aboriginal rangers will receive the same sausage training before being released into Kakadu.

It is unclear if the process could be repeated on other native animals, such as dwarf crocodiles or goannas, threatened by the millions of cane toads now found hopping across the Territory.

"It'd be the best thing if we could sort out these cane toads and make them sterile or disappear [but] I don't know how to do that," Mr Wedd said.