

Introduced species



CREDIT: Gordon Sanders

Anangu and Parks Australia are working together to minimise the adverse effects of introduced animals on the natural and cultural values of the park.

What is an introduced animal?

Introduced animals are species that have arrived from different countries or regions and established wild populations, often causing many problems in their new environment. They are recognised as the major factor in the extinction of native species in Central Australia.

Currently, 40 per cent of native species in Central Australia are either extinct or locally extinct.

Introduced species in the park

Introduced species in the park are mice, rabbits, foxes, camels, dogs, and cats. Each of these animals has its own way of impacting on the environment within the park.

You will notice from the list some animals are predators and some are prey species. These animals interact within the natural food chain. Both introduced predator and prey species need to be controlled to protect the natural environment.

Who is responsible?

Humans are responsible for the introduction of all non-indigenous species into Australia and we have responsibility to find a humane solution to fix this issue. Most introduced species were imported into Australia deliberately by people to serve a purpose. Examples are dogs and cats, who were introduced as domestic pets. Foxes and rabbits were introduced for game and recreational hunting and camels to provide transport. Mice, however, likely stowed away in imported food stocks.

What is the impact?

Camels cause significant damage to waterholes and soaks throughout the park. A thirsty camel can drink up to 200 litres of scarce water supply in three minutes. Water is very sacred to Anangu – without water nothing can survive. So by polluting and draining waterholes, camels pose a significant threat to some of the most culturally significant areas within the park.

Rabbits and camels are herbivores – they eat vegetation which holds soil together. Bare soil is more susceptible to wind and water erosion. We have very ancient and fragile soils here in the Central Desert and it does not take a big shift in soil use patterns to create significant changes in the overall soil structure.

Trees and shrubs are also targeted by both these grazing animals. Rabbits eat the roots of some plants, ringbark trees in drought conditions and also enjoy eating sapling trees and shrubs.

Foxes and cats are carnivores – they hunt a large number of smaller animals in the park, with a direct and devastating impact on native populations.

The effects of competition are more severely felt during a drought when native animal populations may already be reduced to a bare minimum. This increased competition further threatens rare species in the park.

Feral animals' use of plants and water means native animals must compete for resources



Anangu perspective

Anangu have a different way of looking at introduced animals compared to non-Indigenous Australians. Anangu hunted cats before the first European explorers visited Central Australia and have adopted introduced species into their lifestyles. Rabbits are a common food source. Anangu are aware of the threats of introduced species to their native Australian species and fully support control within the park.

What is being done in the park?

There are no fences around the park and the most effective way to control introduced species across borders is to work in partnership with our neighbours – such as Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife, the Central Land Council and private landholders.

Camels – Anangu opinion is divided on the management of camel numbers. The park closely consults traditional owners on guidelines which are established for ground culling, particularly in the mala paddock area where camels pose risk to damage fences and public road networks where traffic accidents may occur.

Cats – Feral cats pose the biggest threat to park native animals. Seasonal trapping of cats occurs in winter when food is least available to cats.

Rabbits – Kata Tjuta began controlling rabbits in 1989 with a successful reduction in numbers. Other areas of the park remain an ongoing challenge. Healthy rabbit populations often increase the populations of foxes and cats because they are a favoured food for those species.

Foxes – Highly elusive, the fox species is a difficult challenge for park staff. Many foxes are spotted on monitoring cameras but are difficult to control, with several eradication methods trialled without success.

Dogs – Usually confined to the areas around Mutitjulu waterhole, local community dogs often search for rabbits for food. A focus is placed on teaching the community to control their dogs and to discourage dogs from roaming the park.

Introduced plants

Thirty four species of flora have been introduced to the park since non-Aboriginal people first settled in Central Australia. The most invasive is buffel grass, a perennial tussock weed, native to Africa, India, and Asia. The plant was first introduced to Australia in the 1870s for erosion control and pastoral purposes and it has since spread widely across most land types. In the 1970s buffel grass was introduced to the base of Uluru to reduce erosion and dust.

Buffel grass now thrives and chokes out other native grasses, destroying habitat for our native animals and changing the way wildfire bushfires behave.

Current management uses a combination of physical, chemical and fire-related techniques.

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