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Environmental impact of State's growing deer problem to be explored

Analysing the current and potential distribution of Tasmania's growing fallow deer problem and the environmental impacts of deer is central to a new state-wide project.

Professor Chris Johnson, University of Tasmania's School of Natural Sciences, will lead a collaborative study addressing the threats posed by fallow deer to unique and sensitive environments in Tasmania, in particular the World Heritage Area.

Researchers will quantify the current and potential distribution of deer numbers across Tasmania and describe their impacts on vegetation.

"The rate of growth in the State's fallow deer population is an ongoing concern," Professor Johnson said.

"They were introduced in the Midlands in the 19th century, and their population stayed small for a long time.

"However, we have seen a recent increase in numbers and they have spread into the North and North West. They could pose a very serious threat to the State's unique wilderness areas.

"To date, what we haven't known is the current size of the population, its rate of growth and the impact deer could have on the wilderness."

Professor Johnson said conservative estimates put the total population between 20,000 - 40,000.

He said modelling carried out by his team suggested that there could eventually be a million deer in Tasmania without management to control population growth.

"The increase that we have seen in numbers has hit a point where we cannot ignore it anymore," he said.

"We want to gain a greater understanding of the number of fallow deer, where the animals are, where incursions begin and where to focus suppression."

The research is being carried out in partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment.

The project also includes collaboration with the NSW Department of Primary Industries, Tasmanian Land Conservatory Inc, Bush Heritage Australia and the University of Auckland.

In particular, researchers are looking at the threats posed by deer to the World Heritage Area.

“What we are most worried about is the World Heritage Area and the Highlands. We know they are currently on the edges of these areas now,” Professor Johnson said.

“The deer pose a very series threat to these protected areas where, for example, they browse on regenerating pencil pines, which are unique to the region.”

Researchers will also test the impact deer have on vegetation and how that interacts with fire.

“Fire kills adult pencil pine trees, so they depend absolutely on regeneration to persist after fires. If deer follow fire and browse regenerating plants, we could see those woodlands quickly disappear,” Professor Johnson said.

“Ultimately, we aim to develop options for management of deer to limit their environmental impact and safeguard ecosystems of high value.”

The project is funded through the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Projects scheme.

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