



Pilbara northern quoll regional project

Surveying and monitoring *Dasyurus hallucatus* in the Pilbara,
Western Australia

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Parks and Wildlife



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Contents

1.1	Scope.....	4
1.2	Background.....	4
1.3	Objectives of the northern quoll project	5
1.3.1	Desktop review.....	5
1.3.2	Presence survey and distribution modelling.....	5
1.3.3	Long term monitoring sites.....	5
1.4	Methods.....	7
1.4.1	Trapping.....	7
	Data collected:	7
1.4.2	Camera trapping	8
1.4.3	Habitat monitoring and distribution modelling:	9
1.5	Reporting	9

Appendices

Appendix 1	Habitat data sheet.....	10
Appendix 2	Example trapping data sheet.....	10

1.1 Scope

This document outlines the objectives of the Department of Parks and Wildlife Pilbara northern quoll project, and provides methodologies to be used to achieve these specific objectives. Other organisations undertaking quoll monitoring projects can then align with these methods and feed comparable data in to the regional survey.

1.2 Background

The northern quoll, *Dasyurus hallucatus*, is the smallest of all Australian quolls (300–1200g) and is restricted to five regional populations across Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, both on the mainland and offshore islands. The species appears to have declined in number and distribution over the last 50 years with a number of threats either directly or in combination with each other, contributing to the species decline. Threats include mortality caused by poisoning from cane toads, introduced predators, inappropriate fire regimes (predation after fire) and the removal, degradation and fragmentation of habitat as a result of development actions, mining activities and pastoralism. The northern quoll is listed as a threatened ('Endangered') species under the Commonwealth's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

The Pilbara northern quoll survey and monitoring project commenced in 2012 and is being conducted over 10 years with the aim of improving our understanding of northern quoll population distribution, ecology, abundance and demographics in the region. The project aims to provide information to environmental regulators, biological consultants, resource development companies and other land managers that will allow appropriate management to ensure the persistence of resident northern quoll populations in the Pilbara region.

1.3 Objectives of the northern quoll project

1. To better map the northern quoll distribution in the Pilbara (including updating NatureMap records), and inform and enhance our understanding of processes influencing distribution.
2. To better understand northern quoll abundance throughout the Pilbara and how this changes temporarily and spatially
3. To improve understanding of northern quoll ecology other demographic parameters in the Pilbara and allow comparison with studies in the Kimberley, Northern Territory and Queensland.
4. To inform management for the conservation of northern quoll populations in and around mining sites and other developments in the Pilbara.
5. To clarify the taxonomic and conservation status of the Pilbara northern quoll population

1.3.1 Desktop review

A desktop review of northern quoll distribution was undertaken in 2010 in order to update NatureMap records (Objective 1) and identify suitable quoll habitat areas for further survey (Objectives 2 & 3). Records included landholder sightings, museum specimens and capture records by environmental consultants and Parks and Wildlife staff. The review helped to inform placement of long-term monitoring sites. This report and the associated data will be available on the NatureMap Pilbara Threatened Fauna portal located at:

www.naturemap.dpaw.wa.gov.au/threatenedfauna

1.3.2 Presence survey and distribution modelling

To inform species distribution modelling (Objectives 1 & 4), Parks and Wildlife has commenced a survey of quoll presence at 100 sites throughout the Pilbara. At each site, staff will undertake scat searches and deploy transects of baited remote motion sensor cameras in rocky areas to detect quoll presence. Habitat characteristics of each site are recorded according to Appendix A. Additional presence records and habitat data from environmental consultants, pastoralists and mine site environmental staff will be used to build and validate models of distribution.

1.3.3 Long term monitoring sites

Parks and Wildlife is also undertaking annual trapping at 10 sites throughout the Pilbara in order to achieve more detailed information on population demographics and abundance (Objectives 2 & 3). Those selected include Indee Station, Millstream Chichester National Park, Mt Florance Station, Karratha environs, De Grey Station, Mardie Station, Yarrie Station, Red Hill Station, Dolphin Island Nature Reserve,

Karijini National Parl. The land tenure and security of the site has been taken into consideration, as these sites will need to remain free of mining and / or major pastoral disturbance for the duration of the project. Because of anticipated low capture rates and seasonal fluctuations in quoll population abundance it will be necessary to monitor sites over a long period (10 years) to detect significant changes or trends in abundance and other demographic parameters.

We anticipate that there will be opportunities for ecological research projects such as examining den and feeding habitat use, movements across the landscape, impact of introduced predators, interactions with mine-sites and characteristics of natural den sites in order to inform artificial habitat creation. Collaborations with Murdoch University, University of Queensland and Edith Cowan University are underway.

1.4 Methods

1.4.1 Trapping

These protocols outline the methods for regular monitoring of a known population of northern quolls, in order to answer questions about abundance, survivorship and breeding demographics. Proponents undertaking initial quoll searches (e.g. targeted conservation significant species surveys) should use methodologies appropriate to the site, their conditions and expertise. More information on surveying for threatened mammals can be found here:

<http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/b1c6b237-12d9-4071-a26e-ee816caa2b39/files/survey-guidelines-mammals.pdf>

Once a relevant quoll population has been identified, the following methods should be used for ongoing monitoring in order for the data to be comparable to the regional survey.

In general, northern quoll trapping should be conducted from 1 April to 30 September to avoid times when females have large or denned pouch young.

As northern quolls frequently live in linear, rocky habitats, population monitoring will be undertaken using trapping transects rather than grids. Transects will be configured to achieve optimal cover of the sites. Ideally, two parallel lines of 25 traps each should be laid across a broader habitat types such as breakaways or granite outcrops.

Specific quoll trapping methods:

- Wire cage traps covered with hessian or similar (e.g. small Sheffield traps: 45 cm x 17 cm x 17 cm, Sheffield Wire co, Welshpool WA)
- 50 traps spaced at least 30 m (ideally 50 m) apart, in two lines of 25 traps
- 50 m between each transect
- Individual trap locations are fixed and marked (GPS) for the duration of the monitoring program. Permanent markers such as metal site tags may also be useful.
- Traps opened for four consecutive nights at each site (200 trap nights)
- Traps checked and closed within three hours of sunrise, rebaited and opened in the late afternoon
- Universal bait (peanut butter, oats) with sardines
- To verify a zero-capture record, personnel should also undertake a total of 10 person-hours of scat searches per site, and use at least five remote cameras at the site/surrounding area during the four nights of trapping.

Data collected:

Morphometric, survivorship, dietary, breeding and genetic information will be compared with populations of northern quolls in the Pilbara and across Australia.

- All captured quolls implanted with a subcutaneous microchip (PIT) for individual identification.
- Standard measurements of all captured quolls (body weight, short pes length, head length, age class, sex and reproductive condition) (see example datasheet in Appendix B)
- A small amount of ear tissue collected from all individuals at initial capture for genetic analysis (stored in 70% ethanol, to be lodged with Department of Parks and Wildlife).
- A sample of scats is collected where possible for dietary analysis (stored in a paper envelope, lodged with Department of Parks and Wildlife).
- An estimation of fox/cat/dog/dingo activity at each site will be derived using visual signs and remote cameras.
- Habitat data sheets (Appendix A) should be completed for each trapping site and submitted to the Department of Parks and Wildlife.

When GPS transmitters small enough for use on for northern quolls (<25 g weight) can be sourced, field trials to assess performance, wearability and durability will be undertaken. This technology will allow more accurate information on habitat use, home range, movements and denning sites to be obtained than is currently available with VHF technology.

1.4.2 Camera trapping

Remote cameras can be useful to supplement trapping, for initial area searches to detect quolls and to assess quoll presence and activity in an area. Unlike traps, cameras can be used at any time of year. Duration of camera trapping will depend on the circumstances and goals of the individual project, but more information is obviously collected from a longer set time. In general, camera traps should not be baited with food rewards for longer than five consecutive nights, to prevent impacts on normal animal behaviour (See Parks and Wildlife standard operating procedure 5.2 available from <http://www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/plants-and-animals/96-monitoring/standards/99-standard-operating-procedures>). Scent lures with no associated food reward may be useful, for example burley oil.

For our presence survey (Objective 1), standard methods are as follows;

- Transects of baited remote motion sensor cameras spaced 50 -100 m for 4 nights
- A minimum of 20 cameras should be set simultaneously for each site. These may include several disjunctive transects in small areas of suitable habitat.
- 10 person hours of scat searches in rocky areas
- Habitat data sheet (Appendix A) completed

It is important to note that this does not confirm absence, and proponents managing species-specific surveys will need to undertake more extensive searches.

1.4.3 Habitat monitoring and distribution modelling:

Habitat attributes will be recorded at all sites (including camera survey and monitoring sites) and will be analysed to help predict the spatial distribution of suitable habitat and the probability of quolls occupying locations based on environmental attributes. Fire history and other disturbances such as livestock impact will also be assessed and monitored. Photo points and digital rain gauges will be established at all long-term monitoring sites. Site characteristics will be correlated with quoll presence or likely absence in order to inform predictive models. Standard data sheets used to record habitat attributes are in Appendix A.

1.5 Reporting

Much of the survey and monitoring data collected will be suitable for comparison with studies for quolls in the Kimberley, Northern Territory and Queensland. An annual report on population and habitat monitoring will be prepared, and peer reviewed papers prepared throughout the duration of the project.

All presence records, including those from the grey literature review and historical record, will be uploaded to NatureMap. Environmental consultants, mine-site environmental staff and others encountering Pilbara priority species (northern quoll, bilby, mulgara, Pilbara leaf-nosed bat and Pilbara olive python) are also encouraged to add records to NatureMap, via the Pilbara Threatened Fauna theme

www.naturemap.dpaw.wa.gov.au/threatenedfauna .

Appendices

Appendix 1 Habitat data sheet

Appendix 2 Example trapping data sheet

PILBARA NORTHERN QUOLL DATA SHEET – Habitat Survey

Site name:		Recorder/s:
Date:	Time:	Contact email:
GPS datum:		GPS Accuracy:
Coordinates:		

Please consider a 50m x 50m patch for all questions.

1. LANDFORM ELEMENT

Morphological type				13
C	Crest	F	Flat	
U	Upper slope	V	Open depression (vale)	
M	Mid slope	D	Closed depression	
L	Lower slope	H	Hillock	
S	Simple slope	R	Ridge	

2. ROCK OUTCROP

TYPE (e.g. granite)				
Abundance				101
0	No bedrock exposed			
1	Very slightly rocky	<2%		
2	Slightly rocky	2-10%		
3	Rocky	10-20%		
4	Very rocky	20-50%		
5	Rockland	>50%		

3. SOIL

Colour				
R	Red	Y	Yellow	
O	Orange	G	Grey	
B	Brown	D	Dark	
Type				116
1	Clay	5	Coarse sand	
2	Fine silt	6	Fine gravel	
3	Coarse silt	7	Coarse gravel	
4	Fine sand	8	None; rock only	

4. GROUND COVER

% Cover Leaf Litter
% Cover Bare Ground (including litter, rock cover and bare soil, excluding live vegetation)

5. COARSE FRAGMENTS ON THE SURFACE

Rock Abundance			97
0	No coarse fragments	0	
1	Very slightly; very few	<2%	
2	Slightly; few	2%-10%	
3	No qualifier; common	10%-20%	
4	Moderately; many	20%-50%	
5	Very; abundant	50%-90%	
6	Extremely; very abundant	>90%	

Rock Size			99
3	Gravelly	>60 mm	
4	Cobbly; or cobbles	60-200 mm	
5	Stony; stones	200-600 mm	
6	Bouldery; or boulders	600 mm-2 m	
7	Large boulders	>2 m	

6. LAND SURFACE

Disturbance of site		88
0	No effective disturbance	
1	No effective disturbance except grazing by hoofed animals	
2	Limited clearing	
3	Extensive clearing	
8	Highly disturbed, e.g. mining, urban	

7. EVIDENCE OF RECENT FIRE

Frequency		Intensity	
0	Long unburnt	0	No damage
1	Several years since burn	1	Minor
2	Burnt before last rainfall	2	Some defoliated
3	Burnt after last rainfall	3	Most defoliated
		4	Unknown

Distance to nearest unburnt patch (>5 ha)			
1	<100 m	2	100-500 m
3	500m – 1 km	4	>1 km

Patchiness, % of area burnt:

8. NEARBY WATER BODIES

1	Permanent	R	River
2	Seasonal	S	Soak/spring
3	Ephemeral	C	Creek
		P	Pool
		B	Bore / windmill / dam

Distance (m):

9. EVIDENCE OF FERAL / INTRODUCED SPECIES (please list)

Please collect any cat, dingo or quoll scats

Place into an envelope (not plastic), label with collector's name, date, species, GPS location and lodge with DPaW for dietary analysis.

10. SITE PHOTOS (please attach)

Photo number:

Direction facing:

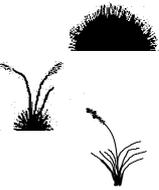
11. VEGETATIVE GROWTH STAGE

1	Early regeneration
2	Advanced regeneration
3	Mature vegetation
4	Senescent phase

12. NATIVE FIG (FICUS) PRESENCE

0	Absent
1	1-10 plants
2	> 10 plants

12. VEGETATION

Please tick 1 box in each row, and record dominant species where known		Absent	Isolated <2%	Very sparse 2-10%	Sparse 10-30%	Mid-Dense 30-70%	Dense 70-100%
TREES	Dominant species						
	> 30 m						
	10-30 m						
	<10 m						
MALLEES	Dominant species						
	Over 8 m						
	Under 8m						
SHRUBS	Dominant species						
	Over 2 m						
	1-2 m						
	Under 1 m						
HERBS & SEDGES	Dominant species						
							
GRASSES	Dominant species						
	Hummock						
	Tussock						
	Bunch						

SITE MAP

Showing relevant landforms, vegetation types, creeks, landmarks etc as well as an indication of trap/camera placement

