



Mulga miracle

The southern mulga lands, painted vividly in oils and in prose, and whose fragile soils and cloudless skies broke countless settler-graziers, are at crisis point.

The bunny battle

Most of the old trees are nearing the end of their 200 to 300 year lives, and in the southern mulga there have been no replacement trees for the best part of a century.

The reason is rabbits, devouring every new seedling pushed up after rain, destroying native ecosystems and driving more than 30 native animal species to extinction.

The mulga saplings now surviving are the result of rabbits, in these parts, being temporarily beaten.

In 1995, towards the end of an exhaustive research program to measure the potential of rabbit calicivirus under Australian conditions, the virus escaped quarantined research facility on Wardang Island off the South Australian coast.

At the time, rabbits were said to be costing the country more than \$600 million a year in lost agricultural production and a further \$300-400 million a year in environmental damage.

By March 1996 calicivirus was a *fait accompli* on the Australian landscape - to the great pleasure of farmers and conservationists, and to the great displeasure of some animal welfare groups and rabbit product industries.

Saplings signal hope

In 2001, young mulga saplings can be seen in the southern landscape. Although thinly spread and not easy to find, the wonder of these new, young trees is that they are the first to be seen in 100 years.



For Brian Cooke of CSIRO, the mulga saplings are a measure of how devastating the damage has been, and also of the hope that comes with the first regrowth:

"With rabbits gone we are starting to see the landscape the way it always used to be," he says.

"We used to think depressions out in the sandhill country were naturally bare, because no one in living memory has seen it any different. It now turns out they are productive Mitchell Grass ecosystems.

"The return of mulgas, native grasses and other shrubs are giving wildlife researchers some hope that numerous animals on the endangered species list may yet be saved if their ecosystems can be restored."

Words by Brad Collis

More info:

Dr Brian Cooke
CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, Canberra
PH: 02 6242 1517
FX: 02 6242 1555
E: brian.cooke@cse.csiro.au

- Frequently asked questions about Rabbit Calicivirus at:
<http://www.csiro.au/communication/rabbits/rabbits.htm>