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Cats' days are numbered as island returns to the call of the wild

EXCLUSIVE

PAIGE TAYLOR

Bax the Belgian shepherd is leading a forensic and ambitious attempt to take rugged Dirk Hartog Island back in time.

Returning the West Australian island to the way it might have looked when Dutch explorer Captain Dirk Hartog scrambled ashore in 1616 is the largest attempt to return an island to its natural state.

The objective is to reintroduce small and endangered native mammals such as woylies and chuditches, which once thrived there, and even two tiny wallabies that need a safe haven from mainland predators such as foxes and cats.

For the past month, Bax and five other detective dogs have

patrolled mapped grids with Tasmanian zoologist Sue Robinson and her partner Mark Holdsworth to hunt down the last of the island's feral cats.

The dogs — so highly trained that they cost between \$10,000 and \$20,000 each — are sniffing out fresh faeces.

Bax, the fastest worker, finds a sample that could be as recent as a month old. It means at least one cat in the area survived a baiting blitz in May, so traps will be laid to catch possibly the last cat in the southern zone using a potent lure of cat urine and more faeces.

"I do not hate cats at all," says Dr Robinson, who trains her dogs daily with cat scent and rewards them with toys. "Cats can be wonderful companions and bring people a lot of joy, but when they get away they are a problem."

On Dirk Hartog Island, cats that were pets or boat stowaways

have wiped out 10 of the 13 native species thought to have been there when Hartog arrived at the island's northernmost tip onboard the Eendracht on October 25, 1616. The historic plate he left behind — long since removed to a museum — records the earliest

known European landing on the western side of the continent.

The island was later a sheep station and in recent years 7500 feral goats ate their way through five to six kilograms of vegetation each every day, leaving an almost bald landscape.

Unwittingly, the goats gave each other up. The West Australian Department of Parks and Wildlife fitted radio trackers to several "Judas goats" and those animals, naturally social in nature, led helicopters directly to the herds. They were shot from the air.

Introduced pests and predators have been successfully eradicated from much smaller islands around the world, notably the sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island, but the challenge on Dirk Hartog is massive.

Feral animals were spread across 640sq km and, as might be expected on a harsh hot island, survivors were highly adapted.

Project leader Mike Johnston learned in 2009 that local feral cats had discovered endangered loggerhead turtle hatchlings as a food source.

Feral cats are generally lean but these cats grew so fat on the hatchlings that it was almost impossible for Dr Johnston and his colleagues to read the tracking signals from chips placed under the animals' skins only weeks earlier. Eventually, even the most elusive cats were traced and shot.

The overall project is not cheap — a budget of \$16.7 million over seven years includes a contribution from resource giant Chevron through the Gorgon Barrow Island Net Conservation Benefits Fund.

The Barnett government says it is well worth it. The island has been a blight inside the Shark Bay World Heritage Area on the mid-northwest coast, but turning the island into a national park in 2009 was the beginning of a world-class ecological restoration project.

There is a sense of optimism about the work dubbed "Return to

1616". Next year's 400th anniversary of Hartog's landing will also be a celebration of the conservation milestones reached so far.

The Barnett government hopes the island can become an eco-tourism destination; so far, an old homestead offers accommodation for visitors who want to explore the beaches and go fishing.





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COLIN MURTY

The island's goat eradication officer Shane Heriot



Zoologist and dog handler Sue Robinson with Bax, one of her dogs she uses to hunt for signs of feral cats on Dirk Hartog Island: "I do not hate cats at all, but when they get away they are a problem"

COLIN MURTY