‘ Affordable housing ’ for reptiles

10 February 2014

University of Queensland researchers have found that naturally regrowing woodlands in the subtropics can help to reduce declines in Australia ’ s reptiles.

Research at the National Environmental Research Program ’ s (NERP) Environmental Decisions Hub has found that woodlands in the Australian subtropics can be restored as a haven for native reptiles if cleared areas are left to regrow.

UQ ’ s Professor Clive McAlpine said reptiles such as skinks, dragons, and geckos could in turn help restore the woodland ecosystems by providing links in the food chain.

“ Regrowth can deliver major environmental benefits to subtropical areas in New South Wales, Victoria and the Northern Territory, as well as international regions such as South America, ” Professor Clive McAlpine said.

“ But, in Australia, Queensland has the best opportunity to restore its biodiversity because it has 700,000 hectares of land suitable for regrowth. ”

UQ researcher Melissa Bruton said by the year 2000, nearly half of Queensland ’ s regional ecosystems had lost more than 70 per cent of their original area due to 150 years of extensive land clearing .

In 2004 the State established laws that significantly reduced clearing activities to protect threatened ecosystems.

“ Subtropical areas that were previously cleared have since been abandoned and left to regrow, ” Ms Bruton said.

To find out if regrowth woodlands could help restore biodiversity, the NERP project researchers surveyed and compared reptile communities in cleared, regrowth and intact – uncultivated – woodlands in Queensland ’ s Brigalow Belt Bioregion.

“ We found that reptile communities in the regrowth woodlands were indistinguishable from their corresponding communities in intact woodlands, ” she said.

“ There was no difference in reptile diversity, species dominance and the composition of reptile communities in regrowth and intact woodlands.

“ We were surprised by the results because of how ‘ young ’ these regrowth woodlands were.

“ They were between 10 and 23 years old, with the trees only half the height of those in the remnant/intact woodlands.

“ This means regrowth doesn ’ t have to be ‘ old ’ to provide high quality habitat for reptiles. ”

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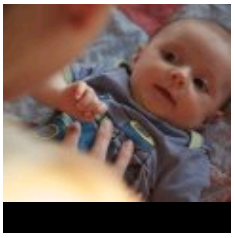

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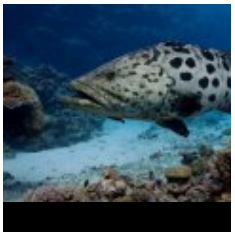

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Professor McAlpine said the rapid re-colonisation was caused by the woodlands ' native plants – eucalypts (gum trees) and acacias (wattles).

" These plants dominate the regrowth areas and, because they naturally send up shoots from roots left in the ground, the cleared sites quickly regrow and become homes for the reptiles, " he said.

" This shows that we don ' t have to spend millions of dollars on replanting trees to restore biodiversity. "

" For subtropical woodlands, simply leaving cleared lands to regrow offers quick, cost-effective and large scale opportunities to reduce the biodiversity declines caused by the over-enthusiastic clearing of vegetation in the past.

Ms Bruton said the study showed that regrowth areas adjacent to remnant woodlands should be prioritised for protection because they provide high quality habitat for reptiles.

" However, conservation of existing woodlands must always be considered a higher priority, " she said.

The study, " Regrowth woodlands are valuable habitat for reptile communities ", by Melissa J. Bruton, Clive A. McAlpine and Martine Maron is published in " Biological Conservation ". http://bit.ly/LISFSu

The Australian Government funds the National Environmental Research Program (NERP) to inform evidence-based policy and sustainable management of the Australian environment.

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