

Scientists rat on beastly names

Andrew Henry/NATURE focus



False water rat or yirrkoo? This tiny native rodent, known to scientists as *Xeromys myoides*, lives in the mangrove forests and marshes of Arnhem Land and south-eastern Australia. It is one of 60 rodent species whose Aboriginal names are being publicised in an effort to inspire greater support for their conservation.

The yirrkoo could do with a little extra attention. For three decades this tiny mammal, weighing no more than a chicken egg, seemed to be nudging extinction until scientists rediscovered it in a Northern Territory mangrove swamp in 1974.

Today its habits remain little-known. In addition, its habitat – a scattered array of mangrove forests and grassy marshes in Arnhem Land and south-eastern Queensland – is at risk from coastal development.

Yet despite being both rare and 'cute', this sleek, crab-eating creature with the slate-grey back and silky-white underparts suffers from poor public relations. What chance does something known as the false water rat have of evoking public support for conservation and research funding?

Not much, say Drs Dick Braithwaite, Steve Morton and John Calaby of the CSIRO Division of wildlife and Ecology and Dr Andrew Burbridge of Western Australia's Department of Conservation and Land Management, who have compiled a list of Aboriginal names for the nation's rodents.

The four scientists believe that the lot of Australia's 60-odd rodent species – seven of which are already extinct – can only improve by replacing perjorative terms such as 'rat' and 'mouse'.

These words 'generally connote introduced vermin, and bring to mind disease, filth and unscrupulous cunning', the researchers claim in a booklet titled *Australian Names for Australian Rodents*, published by the Australian Nature Conservation Agency.

Morton says the idea of a fresh set of names took hold when he and Braithwaite were members of a World Wildlife Fund scientific

committee. It became apparent that fundraising efforts for research on animals such as the plains rat were unsuccessful because people did not want to be associated with rodents. Braithwaite suggested that by listing the rodents' Aboriginal names, they might engender more public support.

The authors subsequently found that the Aboriginal word for the animal was palyoora. 'You couldn't find a more attractive word: one that's easy to say, is euphonious and it belongs to the land in a much more profound sense,' Morton says.

Like his colleagues, Morton has spent considerable time researching desert rodent species with the help of Aboriginal elders. 'When you hear these native names tripping off their tongues, not just as oddities but as living words, you begin to realise some of the appalling names we've lumbered these beautiful animals with,' he says.

The proposed name changes stand to benefit reconciliation as well as conservation. 'It's a clear recognition of the fact that Aboriginal people in many ways know more about the country than we do,' Morton says.

'All the names deliberately have been chosen to come from somewhere near the centre of the geographic range of the species concerned.'

Morton says the rabbit-eared bandicoot and the rufous hare-wallaby have already won the hearts of a conservationist-minded public as the bilby and the mala respectively.

'Names gradually evolve, but we've attempted to kick-start that process with a group of animals that undeservedly has a poor public profile,' he says.

Certainly, funds for the long-term survival of the djoorri, the djidjiparra, the koota and the noodji sound more likely than for the common rock-rat, the prehensile-tailed rat, the swamp rat and the ash-grey mouse.

But without doubt the false water rat tops the list of names in terms of 'downright ugliness'. As Morton puts it: 'You'd reckon there's a good chance that it will change, wouldn't you?'

Australian names for Australian Rodents costs \$10 plus postage. It is available from the Botanical Bookshop at the Australian National Botanic Gardens, PO Box 351, Jamison, ACT 2614, (06) 257 3302, fax (06) 247 1947.

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