

Conservation biology of an endangered
semi-arid marsupial, the sandhill dunnart
(*Sminthopsis psammophila*)



by

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B. Sc (An Sc) Hons

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

School of Biological Sciences
The University of Adelaide
April 2015

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Thesis Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Acknowledgements

PhDs are marathons and there is a huge support team of people, seen and unseen, behind the PhD student who contribute to the final thesis, and so there are many people I need to thank.

Firstly, I would like to thank my three amazing supervisors, Sue Carthew, Melanie Lancaster and Steve Cooper for their endless support, encouragement and guidance during the past five years, without all of you this project would not have been possible. Thank you Sue, for your 'big picture' ideas, your continuance with the project after you left Adelaide (I always knew you were only an email or phone call away) and your help to make this thesis and myself the best we could both be. Thank you Mel, for your kind words of encouragement when I needed them the most, for your continued support after you moved to Melbourne and for helping me realise that I know more than I think I do (thank goodness!). Thank you Steve, for adopting me and my ecological project when Sue and Mel left Adelaide, thank you for sharing some of your vast genetic knowledge with me and for your calm, encouraging and practical approach that has been invaluable in helping me to complete this thesis.

Thank you to Steve Delean for your patience and time in helping me with the habitat modelling section of this thesis. Your support was invaluable and made an-almost-impossible task feel achievable. Thank you also to Jasmin Packer for your endless encouragement and help with vegetation surveys and habitat modelling advice. Also, thank you to my thesis-proof-readers, Laura Fulkenberg, Justine Smith, Duart McLean and Josie McLean.



Thank you to my parents, Duart and Josie, for your unwavering support during this project. Thank you for coming out to the field with me to ‘see what I get up to out there’, it has meant a lot that I can share my love of dunnarts and deserts with both of you. Thank you Mum, for our morning coffee chats about PhD life and non-PhD life, it’s been great to share our PhD experiences together. Thank you Dad, for your enthusiasm for science and field-life, even when the gas stove breaks on Day 1! Thank you also to my sister, Rachel, and brother, James, for your support and understanding during the last few years.

A huge thank you to the amazing group of people I’ve shared this journey with, both my fellow PhD friends, and friends from other walks of life. Thank you to my ‘comrades in arms’ Jasmin Packer, Leah Kemp, Bec West, Casey O’Brien, Emmy Gerlach, You-you Li, Tim Richards, Nik Fuller and Rob Cirocco. Thank you also to the newer additions in the PhD office Grace Hodder, Mel Jensen and Tom Hunt. The journey has been made much more enjoyable by being able to share both the high highs and the low lows of PhD life with you all. Thank you to Laura Fulkenberg for all the many pieces of cake you have eaten with me, in either a celebration of achieving something (no matter how small) or in commiseration of everything going wrong (no matter how big), every piece of cake has helped! Thank you to Noriko Wynn for your friendship and ‘Genie-from-Aladdin-style’ cheering during the final writing up stages of the thesis. Thank you to Megan Hansen and Moni Cations for the many coffees and chats about life during the last five years. Thank you to Jenny Reid and my wonderful pony Two Bit for the many rides that have kept me sane, especially during the final write up stages, I can’t imagine the mess I would have been without both of you. Thank you also to my new found friends at swing dancing for all the dances we have had (and will have) that brought life back into perspective after some crappy days in the office.



Thank you to the following funding bodies for their support of this project; Arrium Mining OneSteel, Australian and Pacific Science Foundation, The Field Naturalist Society of South Australia, the Nature Foundation of South Australia, Holsworth Wildlife Research Endowment, The Sir Mark Mitchell Research Foundation and the South Australian Museum. A special thank you to Mick from IDAM, without your support I never would have gotten all those storm water pipes (aka pitfall traps) and lids up to Whyalla!

Thank you to the following land owners for the use and access to their land, the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (Ironstone Hill CP), Emma and Hayden Butts (Broadview Station), Matt and Anna Braithwaite (Pine Hill), Lourie Jacobs (Blue Plains Station) and Matt and Jane Anderson (Cooyerdoo Station). Thank you to Geoff Mills for his support of the project and for jump starting my car at 5 am! Thank you to John Read and Katherine Moseby for dunnart related chats, BBQ invitations and loans of field equipment.

This project was undertaken with approval from The University of Adelaide's Animal Ethics Committee (S-2010-113D) and the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (Permit No. Y25898).

Finally, a big thank you to the 107 dunnarts that put up with me harassing them every month for two years in order to collect the data needed for this study, without you this project would definitely not have been possible.



The Volunteers

A huge THANK YOU to all my amazing field volunteers, without you I could not have completed this project. Special thanks to all that helped to dig in the 132 pitfall traps during January 2011, when it was stinking hot, you were all amazing. Also a special mention to those that came out on multiple field trips, it made my life so much easier to have experienced people out with me that I could trust to just get on and get the job done. Thank you to Apu for all the chats about life and your friendship. Thank you to Jamie for questioning everything and helping me out with the logistics of field work from cooking to post-hole digging. Thank you to Brian for your ‘can-do’ happy attitude day-in and day-out. Thank you to Lee for filling in at the last minute on multiple occasions and the yummy cakes. Thank you to Tony for the wonderful espresso every morning, it made getting out of my warm bed in the morning much easier, and of course for the gourmet field meals (smoked salmon & capers anyone?).

Volunteers			
Abbie Madden	Duart McLean	Lauren Engledow* [#]	Phillip Morgan
Aparajita Kadam*	Duncan Crichton	Lee Agars* [#]	Rebecca West
Ben Florance	Elinor Hetzel-Bone	Leticia Johnson [#]	Sally Potter
Bianna Rositano	Hayley Lewis	Luis Verde	Sam Clarke
Bonnie Maynard	Jamie Kohler* [#]	Matthew Pearson [#]	Sarah Mantel
Brain Matthews*	Jasmin Packer*	Murray Graetz	Tiffany Miegel
Brett Goodman	Josie McLean	Natilia Diaz	Ting Wu [#]
Brodie Philp	Karen Philp	Nerida Sweet	Tony Dingwall*
Carol Dennis	Kelly Howell	Patrick Taggart	You Li
Casey O'Brien*	Kyle Holland [#]	Paul Fennell* [#]	
Chris Malam	Kyra Evanochko	Peter Hatcliffe	

* Volunteer had been out on two or more field trips

Volunteer help dig in pitfall traps!



Thesis abstract

Australia has one of the highest rates of extinction in the world, particularly for mammals of the arid zone. Arid and semi-arid species are subject to a number of threatening processes, including predation from introduced cats (*Felis catus*) and foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*), land clearance for agriculture, changing fire regimes post-European settlement and, more recently, increased mining activities and climate change. Unfortunately, the biology, life history and population dynamics of many semi-arid zone mammal species are little known, making effective management and conservation problematic, particularly for those that are considered rare and endangered.

One such species is the nationally endangered sandhill dunnart (*Sminthopsis psammophila*). The species is known from only a small number of individuals inhabiting three disjointed populations; two in South Australia and one in Western Australia. In order to conserve this species, ecological knowledge is required to predict how it is likely to respond to current and future threats, and accordingly what type of management actions are needed to ensure its persistence. This study used a combination of ecological and genetic information from a population in a semi-arid environment to investigate: 1) the influence of a variable environment on the life history and population dynamics of *S. psammophila* during a high and low rainfall year; 2) broad- and fine-scale genetic diversity and connectivity across the species' range and within a population and 3) habitat preferences of the species and the influence rainfall and time since fire may have on the habitat preferences.

One core population west of the Middleback Ranges on the Eyre Peninsula, South Australia, was trapped for two years during a capture-mark-recapture study comprising 23,529 trap nights. Eleven sites were established within an area of approximately 24,000 ha. The vegetation in the region consists of open mallee with an understorey of spinifex (*Triodia* spp.) and a diverse range of shrubs. Tissue samples were taken from individuals caught to examine the fine-scale genetic diversity and connectivity within the study area using 16 newly developed microsatellite markers. Additional tissue samples from the remaining two core populations were collected through collaborations to study the historical connectivity across the species' range using a combination of microsatellite markers and mitochondrial control region sequence data.

The broad scale genetic analyses revealed that the three known core populations of *S. psammophila* are genetically differentiated, but do not show evidence of long-term population isolation. Within the core population the fine-scale genetic analyses and capture-mark-recapture data indicated that both males and females are relatively mobile with no significant genetic structure amongst 107 samples evident within the 24,000 ha study area. In addition, no significant sex-biased dispersal was detected, suggesting it is advantageous for both males and females to disperse from their natal areas.

The study found that the presence and abundance of *S. psammophila* at sites was influenced by rainfall events. During the low rainfall year significantly fewer *S. psammophila* were caught and a higher proportion of individuals were transients. The changes in the population were attributed to a decreased survival rate of dispersing juveniles and second year adults, most likely caused by reduced food (invertebrates) availability during the low rainfall year. In addition, the breeding season may have been delayed or reduced in response to fewer food resources during that year. *S. psammophila* was found to be positively associated with the number of logs and vertical habitat complexity and negatively associated with the average height of spinifex (*Triodia* spp.). These associations likely reflect a preference for areas with increased protection from predators and increased foraging opportunities. We did not detect an effect of time since fire on the presence of *S. psammophila*. However, resident females were observed favouring sites with slightly higher spinifex density during the low rainfall year. This may suggest a preference for areas that provide increased foraging opportunities in microsites, such as areas where leaf litter accumulates, during low resource years.

The relatively high mobility in this species appears to be an adaptation to a system with variable food resources; individuals need to be mobile in order to track food pulses created by rainfall through the landscape. Therefore large areas of suitable habitat will need to be protected in order to maintain a viable *S. psammophila* population. The preference of *S. psammophila* for complex understorey suggests that recently burnt vegetation may be unsuitable for the species. Limiting large scale wildfires will be required to protect the species in the future, especially if climate change leads to an increase in the severity and frequencies of wildfires. The findings from this study have been made available to the Sandhill Dunnart Recovery Team and have contributed to the development of an effective conservation management plan for *S. psammophila*, both regionally and nationally.