

Rabbits Invade Haleakala NP

Even though oceanic islands are known to be highly vulnerable to biological invasions, conventional wisdom has held that escape or release of domestic rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) poses no significant threat to native Hawaiian ecosystems or local agriculture. This assumption is now obsolete.

Haleakala NP initiated rabbit removal and monitoring in July 1990, following discovery of a reproducing population covering about 25 ha in high elevation (2070-2140 m) native shrubland. Because of the perceived threat of an established rabbit population, rabbit eradication was placed as the #1 park priority.

Through a complex series of inquiries, it has been learned from the person who released the apparently colonizing animals that six rabbits were released in October of 1989. This date coincides with the month of the first record of a rabbit in Haleakala NP – an injured animal which appeared to have been attacked by an Hawaiian short-eared owl. In spite of possible predation by owls, mongooses, and feral cats (7 mongooses and 6 cats trapped within 2 km during January-October 1990) and winter weather (1186 mm or 47 inches of rain fell in the area during November-March), the cage-reared animals managed to persist and reproduce.

As of Oct. 24, 1990, 79 rabbits had been removed, through snaring (45), shooting (24), and trapping (10). Fencing has been used to separate control efforts from an active campground. Monitoring of transects (assessment of rabbit pellet presence/absence, age, and abundance), suggests that areal expansion of the population since its discovery has been minimal and that control is significantly reducing the population. Simple calculations suggest the conclusion that without prompt eradication efforts, rabbits would have numbered in the millions within five years of their introduction.

Meanwhile, the park is faced with the awesome responsibility of attaining complete eradication.

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