Suburban dugites and bobtails come under the microscope

July 24 2014, by Lizzie Thelwell

Ms Wolfe will conduct behavioural analyses, measuring the flight distance and movements of bobtails and dugites when they are approached by a person. Credit: Ashleigh Wolfe

A Curtin University researcher is embarking on a new study that will examine behavioural and ecological differences between reptiles in Perth and rural areas to identify key impacts of urbanisation.

"I am investigating the pros and cons of city living for these reptiles, to find out how we can successfully co-exist," PhD candidate Ashleigh Wolfe says.

Ms Wolfe has chosen to study WA's iconic dugites (Pseudonaja affinis) and bobtails (Tiliqua rugosa).

"Even with Perth's urban expansion, dugites and bobtails are still abundant in the city, so they must use some strategies for surviving in urban environments that most other species don't," she says.

"They are also quite different; the dugite is a highly venomous elapid snake responsible for human deaths, and the bobtail is an omnivorous, inoffensive skink."

Ms Wolfe will work across Perth in suburbs and councils with spaces of natural land scattered amongst human development.

She says she is interested in working in areas with recently cleared land to investigate how it affects these animals and will also compare the urban reptiles against those living in rural areas.

Ms Wolfe has started diet analysis by observing stomach contents of WA Museum specimens, and will collect road kill in the city and rural areas.

She will collect dugites and bobtails with traps and attach GPS dataloggers to map their habitat ranges and spatial use.

A bobtail lizard (tiliqua rugosa). Credit: Ashleigh Wolfe

"It will be really interesting to track these reptiles around the city to see how their ranges are restricted or aided by urban development," Ms Wolfe says.

"I'm also going to catch some dugites in people's backyards and translocate them with loggers on them.

"Moving snakes out of their home ranges negatively affects their movements and chances of survival, yet hundreds of snakes get moved every spring and summer because people aren't comfortable knowing there's a snake in their garden."

Ms Wolfe will conduct behavioural analyses, measuring the flight distance and movements of bobtails and dugites when they are approached by a person.

She will also study people's responses to reptile encounters and reptiles

on roads.

"I'm also delving into the psychology of how humans respond to them and why," Ms Wolfe says.

"Many people find bobtails endearing, but are afraid of dugites—I think mostly due to bad publicity."

"It's important to respect the snakes and leave them alone when possible."

Provided by Science Network WA

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