

Wessel and English Company island groups

Location and Description

The neighbouring continental island groups of the Wessel and English Company Islands are located off north-eastern Arnhem Land, about 600 km east-north-east of Darwin. The island chains stretch for up to 100 km from the mainland and represent remnants of a land connection between Australia and New Guinea many thousands of years ago. Both island groups are dominated by rugged sandstone plateaus and hills and this contrasts sharply with the relatively flat and featureless Elcho–Drysdale Island group (to the west) and adjacent mainland. Most of the islands have a cover of low vegetation, including grasslands, heathlands, coastal thickets and eucalypt woodlands, with smaller areas of paperbark forest and mangroves.

Tenure and Land Use

The Wessel and English Company Island Groups are Aboriginal freehold land held by the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Land Trust. The land mainly supports Indigenous uses. Other uses include conservation, recreation, tourism and commercial fisheries. The island groups are part of the proposed Marthakal Indigenous Protected Area, which covers a broader area including the Elcho–Drysdale Island group and the adjoining mainland areas of north east Arnhem Land.

Significance Rating

International Significance

Ecological Values

The Wessel and English Company Island groups are significant due to their isolation and the protection they offer from threatening processes affecting mainland biota. The islands harbour ten threatened species, including the only known recent occurrence in the Northern Territory of the Golden Bandicoot. They also provide an important refuge area for local threatened species, including translocated populations of the Northern Quoll. Island beaches support nesting activity of four species of marine turtle, but are especially significant for the threatened Hawksbill Turtle. Large aggregations of colonial seabirds also use island habitats within this Site for nesting. European influence on the islands has been minimal and extensive areas of the native vegetation remain intact.

Management Issues

While European influence on the island groups has been minimal to date, the disruption of traditional Aboriginal fire management will have implications for vegetation patterning over time. Weeds and feral animals are largely



absent from the islands, but without active management, these issues could become more problematic in the future.

Condition

Less than 3% of the known flora on the islands is of introduced species, which is relatively low in both a regional and national context. The environments of these island groups are in good to near-pristine condition.

Current Conservation Initiatives

A draft sea and land management plan was developed in 2003 for the island groups, the neighbouring Elcho–Drysdale Island group, and the adjoining mainland areas of north east Arnhem Land, to identify important natural resource management issues and future priorities. The island groups also form part of the proposed Marthakal Indigenous Protected Area and Commonwealth funding has been granted to progress this proposal. Indigenous rangers based at Galiwin'ku, on Elcho Island, are working collaboratively with NT Parks and Wildlife staff on Golden Bandicoot and Northern Quoll translocation and population monitoring programs on the islands, and have had recent involvement in a baiting program for wild dogs on Wigram and Marchinbar Islands.