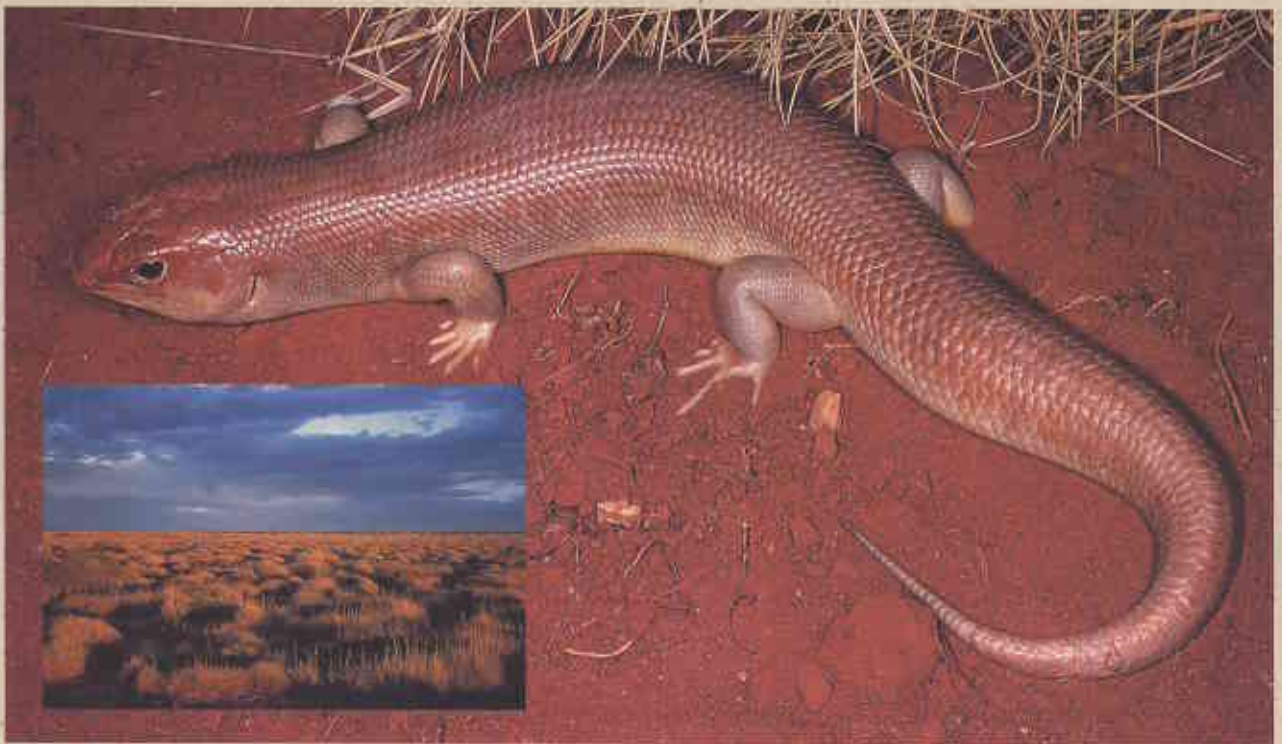




ENDANGERED!



GREAT DESERT SKINK

Looking up from her fire, Pulpuru Davies, a Pintupi lady living in the Gibson Desert, identified the faded Museum specimen in my hand as "tjakurra", the great desert skink (*Egernia kintorei*). "We know them," she confided; "and tomorrow we will find some for you."

By early the next morning I had cradled in my hand one of these vibrant red lizards, last recorded in Western Australia in 1964. That day the Pintupi ladies dug up three and gave me a valuable lesson in the ecology of this remarkable lizard, once a vital component of their diet.

Great desert skinks are about the size of a bobtail (*Tiliqua rugosa*) and live in family groups, typically an adult pair and one or more of their offspring. They excavate a complex burrow system with numerous entrances, venturing down to 1.5 metres below the desert surface. For reasons as yet unknown, they

defecate in a communal toilet site close to the warren, perhaps to signify their ownership, or maybe to attract insects for food.

In the Gibson Desert, great desert skinks tend to favour areas of spinifex (hummock) grassland where there is a diverse fire pattern. Burrows are constructed in unburnt vegetation, the prickly spinifex probably preventing predators from digging up their burrows. However, they venture onto burnt areas to feed on plants that spring up after fire, particularly bush tomatoes (*Solanum* species).

The continuation of regular small-scale burning by Pintupi Aboriginal people is probably the main reason great desert skinks have survived in the area. Research at Uluru has

indicated that dingoes eat the species, while the impact of foxes and feral cats is still unknown. One clear threat to their conservation is large bushfires, which sweep away shelter and food from vast areas.

The great desert skink does not lay eggs, but produces up to six live young, which then shelter in the family burrow. Eventually, they disperse to establish their own home ranges and burrows. The habitats occupied by great desert skinks are also home to several other threatened species such as the mulgara (*Dasyercus cristicauda*) and bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*). Patch burning will benefit all of these species. Steve McAlpin, a consultant based in Alice Springs, is currently preparing a recovery plan for the skink. One of the main tasks in Western Australia will be to locate other populations of this species, which formerly had a wide distribution across inland WA.

by David Pearson
Photo by Brad Marjan
Photo Inset by David Pearson

Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

LANDSCOPE



VOLUME SIXTEEN, NUMBER 2, SUMMER 2000–2001



Botanists rediscover a presumed extinct grass perched on the mountain tops of the Stirling Range National Park. See page 43.



Discover Perth's eight regional parks and their special features and attractions on page 28.



How can we preserve the Leeuwin-Naturaliste caves while catering for increasing visitation? See page 16.



Salinity Strategy surveys are revealing that salinity threatens more than 850 Wheatbelt plant species. How can managers intervene? See page 36.



Learn about the spineless wonders of the marine world and their clever disguises on page 42.

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COVER

More than 160 different bird species use Cape Arid National Park, which lies on the South Coast about 120 kilometres east of Esperance. The red-eared firetail is one of them. This exotic-looking finch is confined to south-western Australia. It is found in areas of dense heath and undergrowth in thick forest, never too far inland. Cape Arid National Park is the eastern limit of its distribution.



Cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky

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 Colour Separation by Colourbox Digital
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Published by
 Department of Conservation and Land Management,
 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia