Threatened species of the Northern Territory

Arafura snake-eyed skink

Cryptoblepharus gurrmul

Conservation status

Australia: Endangered
Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Northern Territory: Endangered
Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976

Description

The Arafura Snake-eyed Skink is a small slender, relatively long-limbed, shallow-headed species of snake-eyed skink. It has dark, ovate scales on the palms and heels of the feet, and five digits on each foot and hand. It generally has a grey-brown to blackish colour, with a longitudinally aligned, complex body pattern dominated by a dark, broad vertebral zone and obscure, pale stripes on flanks. The intensity of body pigmentation and patterning is variable, ranging from obscure to prominent[1].

Distribution

The Arafura Snake-eyed Skink is endemic to the Northern Territory (NT), where it is known only from three islands: North Goulburn Island (36 km^2), and two small (about 2 km^2) islands, New Year Island and Oxley Island, north-east of Croker Island. Brief searches on nearby islands have failed to detect the species. The North Goulburn Island population was discovered only in 2006.

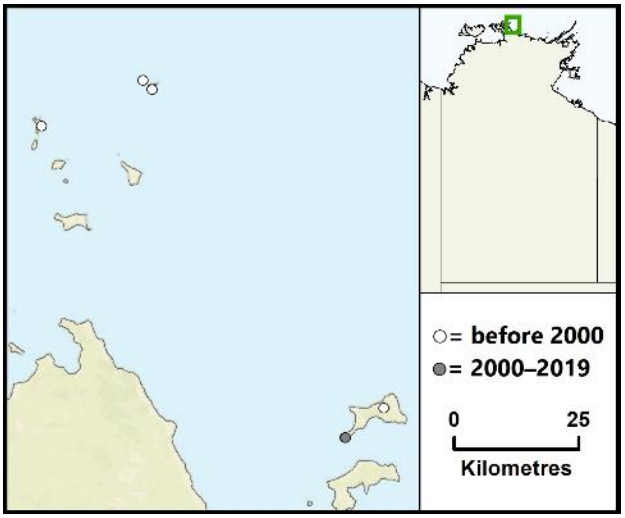
NT conservation reserves where reported: None.

Credit: L. McKay

Ecology and life-history

This agile and fast moving terrestrial species is locally common in littoral habitats, including beach sands, rocks and coral rubble, on the three islands.

Arafura Snake-eyed Skinks forage amongst rocks in the intertidal zone, and retreat to fringing vegetation when confronted by an incoming tide. They feed on both terrestrial and small marine invertebrates, such as amphipods and polychaete worms.



Caption: Known localities of the Arafura Snake-eyed Skink in the NT (nrmaps.nt.gov.au)

Some individuals, when trapped on rocks, surrounded by water, will escape by swimming rapidly to a nearby rock or shore.

Threatening processes

Threats to the Arafura Snake-eyed Skink are poorly understood due to insufficent information on the ecology of the species. Nonethless, its highly restricted distribution presents a substantial risk. The coastline habitat of these islands may be exposed to periodic storm surges associated with cyclones (which may purge much of the terrestrial biota) and will be reduced in size with any rise in sea level: the highest points on Oxley and New Year Islands are about 12 m above sea level, but most of each island is <5 m above sea level.

Conservation objectives and management

The priorities for the Arafura Snake-eyed Skink are to estimate population size and investigate its ecological requirements.

Management priorities for the species are to: i) reduce the possibility of introduction of any new predators to the islands; ii) evaluate the potential impact of climate change and sea-level rise on the species; and iii) consider spreading the risk of extinction by translocation of individuals to other suitable islands or the nearby mainland.

References

[1] Horner, P., 2007. Systematics of the snake-eye skinks, *Cryptoblepharus Wiegmann* (Reptilia: Squamata: Scincide) – an Australian-based review. The Beagle, Records of the Museum and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory, Supplement 3 December 2007.

[2] P. Horner unpublished data