

Australian islanders disagree about plan to save wildlife by poisoning rats

By Michael Slezak, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.24.16

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This Dec. 9, 2006, photo shows Mount Lidgbird and Mount Gower on Lord Howe Island in Australia. Photo: Fanny Schertzer/Wikimedia Commons

Lord Howe Island is a beautiful island in Australia. Underground volcanoes formed the island. Hundreds of different kinds of plants and animals live there. They are found nowhere else in the world. About 350 people live on the island.

There is trouble, though. Rats have invaded.

The island's government has a plan to kill all the rats. It wants to drop poisoned cereal on the island. Rats would eat the cereal and die.

Last year, the government asked what people thought. Nearly half of them voted against it.

Until about 1860, Lord Howe Island was free of mice and rats. Somehow mice got on the island. They began to eat insects and plants.

Rats Found Cozy Home After Shipwreck

The SS Makambo was a ship carrying fruit and vegetables. In 1918, it ran aground. The ship was repaired and sent out to sea. While it was on the island, black rats scurried off the ship. They found a new home on the island.

The rats ate birds and small animals. Five kinds of birds and 13 types of animals died out.

Today rats may kill off more birds and reptiles.

People thought the rats killed off the Lord Howe Island stick insect. It is the largest stick insect in the world. The stick insect was a good meal for hungry rats.

But in 2001, scientists found 24 stick insects. They took them to the zoo in Melbourne, the capital of Australia. Now there are many more stick insects.

Not everyone cares about the insect's survival.

Worried About Effect Of Poison

Rob Rathgeber lives on the island. He does not like the plan. He says the stick insects get into people's homes. They eat crops. They are ugly and scary. He worries the poison will hurt people and animals.

Penny Holloway is the head of the island's government. She says the poison will not hurt people.

Ian Hutton lives on the island. He says the "no" voters do not want the government to tell them what to do.

Learning To Talk To Islanders

Experts need to know how to talk to people on small islands, he says. So far, they have not done a good job.

The rat killing plan could begin as early as January 2017.

Gregory Andrews is an Australian official. Last year, he traveled to the island. Experts cannot just think about saving animals, he says.

They have to work with the islanders. Together, they will save the wildlife, he says.