



Southern cassowary

THE endangered southern cassowary is quite a creature.

"It's an animal that captures our imagination," says Dr David Westcott, a principal research scientist with CSIRO.

"When people in Australia and all around the world think about the Wet Tropics, one of the first things that comes to their mind is the cassowary, because it's just weird."

It's big, flightless, brightly coloured and can kill people but, says Westcott, it also plays an important role in our forests.

"They play a unique role in dispersing fruits in the forest in a way other animals can't do. They have cultural significance to the indigenous owners of this area and also represent a unique slice of evolutionary history."

Which is why it is worth protecting. But the cassowary perches on the edge of extinction, with perhaps as few as 1000 remaining in the tropical rainforests of far north Queensland, according to WWF.

Species die out at a rapid rate

Habitat clearing and mortality due to cars, pigs, dogs, hunting and disease have threatened the cassowary's survival, although Westcott says there has been little research into monitoring cassowary populations.

"The technologies and methodologies for doing that haven't existed," he says. "We now have the technologies and the methodologies but there hasn't been the opportunity to apply those on a broad-scale survey as yet. We're hoping to do detailed population studies when and if we get the funding."

As a nation, we have a responsibility to protect such a unique and important animal in Australia's history, Westcott says.

"We have decided as a community that we value biodiversity and we have all sorts of legislation where we've said we value biodiversity and species like cassowaries are part of that category, so we have a requirement to protect them."