

ECOSYSTEM FUNCTION

Relocating species

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Credit: Westend61 / Getty

Animals that are banes in some places can be balms in others. Transporting animals between locations, called translocation, can help rescue declining populations and counteract inbreeding. For some species, translocation can also sustain ecosystem functioning more broadly.

Ronald R. Swaisgood, of the San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research, US, and colleagues translocated 707 California ground squirrels (*Otospermophilus beecheyi*) from areas in southern San Diego County, where they were unwanted, to conserved lands where their burrowing and vegetation alteration would be valued. Burrowing mammals play keystone roles in grasslands, promoting the diversity of other species as well as plant productivity and

water infiltration. Grasslands, in turn, are threatened and declining worldwide. The researchers manipulated the squirrels' new habitat and found, among other insights, that removing the dense invasive grasses was helpful, perhaps mimicking the openness of the squirrel's native habitat. The right soils for building burrows were also important. Translocating enough squirrels into an area with proper soils and managing vegetation, as with mowing, may catalyse the recovery of self-sustaining native grasslands and their vital ecosystem services.

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