

Feisty ferrets weasel out of the endangered list



Back on the prowl . . . once the most endangered mammal on the planet, the black-footed ferret is back in its natural environment

By MAGGIE FOX

WASHINGTON: The black-footed ferret, once the rarest mammal in the world, has made an astonishing comeback in the US state of Wyoming after a successful captive breeding program.

An estimated 223 of the weasel-like animals are busy hunting prairie dogs in native environment, researchers said.

The animals are descended from seven ferrets rescued in 1986, the University of Wyoming's Martin Grenier said.

"The thing that is neat about this is it shows there's good potential to recover the species," Mr Grenier said.

"We'd like to be able to eventually remove that species from the endangered species list. It would be a wonderful conservation success story."

Black-footed ferrets were almost driven to extinction by the eradication of their main food source — prairie dogs — by ranchers as well as being devastated by a disease called sylvan plague.

"At one point in time, the black-footed ferret was the most endangered mammal in the world. There were only 18 animals," Mr Grenier said.

These 18 animals were whisked out of Wyoming in 1986 and seven of them were bred at zoos, universities and other centres. Hundreds of the creatures were reintroduced to the wild, but did not survive well.

In 1997, only five could be found.

Now the population of the ferrets, known scientifically as *Mustela nigripes*, is growing at a rate of 35 per cent a year.