



the environment

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Bridging the gap for high-wire critters

ROPE bridges were strung over sections of the Palmerston Highway near Innisfail yesterday to help canopy fauna cross the busy highway and open new territories.

Traffic was halted briefly as Ergon Energy crews attached 50m rope spans to suitable trees on the other side.

The joint project is between James Cook University's Rainforest Co-operative Research Centre and the Queensland Department of Main Roads, with Ergon

Energy providing staff and equipment.

If successful, it could be applied on highways across Australia to protect native species.

Research zoologist Robyn Wilson said it could take up to six months for the fauna to get used to the crossing.

That was the finding from the first trial, where animals now crossed regularly and with confidence.

Dr Wilson has captured, tagged and released three Herbert River possums along

the highway, but the lemuroid species is harder to catch.

She said the possums were leaf-eaters, and had a range of about 150m along the highway, with overlapping territories measuring about a hectare.

"We have got to be able to restore the population because small colonies are less able to cope with adverse conditions like cyclones and disease," Dr Wilson said.

"We will monitor them with their neck radios, spotlights and automatically tripped cameras, and then will be able

to determine if the bridges are effective helping populations increase."

DMR environmental consultant David Rivett said a 7m prototype was strung across a narrow cutting on the scenic route from Millaa Millaa to Ravenshoe two years ago.

It showed canopy dwellers would use spans up to 15m to cross roadways but this was the first stretching up to 50m across a four-lane highway.



Poles apart: An Ergon Energy cherry picker crew hangs the start of a rope bridge over the Palmerston Highway, west of Innisfail, to allow canopy dwellers to cross the busy road in safety.