Species haven in peril

Scientists predict mining will wipe out precious wildlife

Brian Williams
ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

A HABITAT so new to science its creatures are still being discovered, is at risk of being wiped out by a mining proposal, scientists say.

The first comprehensive studies of the 135,000ha Steve Irwin Reserve on Cape York have turned up a treasure trove of species.

Scientists have found highly acidic bauxite springs support 151 vertebrate species, some threatened, with more expected to be found.

But Cape Alumina, which proposes to strip-mine 12,300ha within the reserve, says the springs are relatively common and mining will occur without harming them.

The finds have prompted scientists to write to Premier Anna Bligh, appealing to her to save the springs from mining.

Cape Alumina chief executive Paul Messenger said the most comprehensive work on the springs was being done by scientists writing his company’s environmental impact study.

“It’s based on misinformation and factual errors and Professor Craig Franklin is funded by Mrs Irwin.”

Prof Franklin, from the University of Queensland and a signatory to the letter, said he was friends with the Irwins but not paid by them.

“I’ve organised for independent scientists to go there,” Prof Franklin said. “They have all gone of their own free will and have not been paid . . . but they are pretty excited about what they are finding.”

Springs of life

WHAT scientists have found* at the Steve Irwin Reserve springs:

157 native bird species
43 reptiles
19 amphibians
20 mammals
43 freshwater fish species
86 plant species at springs, including endangered pitcher plant

* Scientific work not complete
TREASURES: Found in the Steve Irwin Reserve (above), the hoskin litoria rubella (far left), and a white-lipped tree frog.

Pictures: Conrad Hoskin, Megan Higgie
Cooktown.
Cairns.