

Wombat Protection Society

Bulletin Number 4 – January 2007

Welcome to Bulletin Number Two.

What Is In A Word?

Wombats seem to bring out both the best and worst in human behaviour.

We have members who spend their entire time tracking sick and injured wombats and trying to cure those with mange. We have others who devote themselves full time to rearing and releasing orphaned wombats and others who have expended their life savings and energy on developing sanctuaries and refuges for wombats.

On the other hand, we find the public still calling rescue lines threatening to shoot wombats if they dig holes or visit verandahs or decide to use under the house as a scratching post. We find authorities giving permits to those who complain about wombats to shoot and to poison them. We find sarcoptic mange endemic throughout the wild wombat populations of NSW, Victoria and Tasmania and the lack of options for treatment leading to animal welfare organizations shooting these wombats. We find wombats having less and less viable habitat as native forest is cleared for woodchips and farming and burnt in what are becoming larger and more intense fires.

Protection

It is interesting that against this background that the Society regularly hears people saying that there are plenty of wombats and they don't need protection. "Protection", like "Conservation" is a word that changes its meaning depending on the particular political climate. "Protection" in the sense that Australian Native animals are protected means little. It means those who wish to shoot native animals need a permit. "Conservation" is now used as an adjective in N.S.W. in front of "hunting" and justifies the killing and hunting of animals in state forests.

The Society's use of the word Protection is not a political use of the word. It means what it means. To care for, to look after, to enhance and provide a good quality of life, to ensure needs are met, to advance health and to shield from harm or pain. These are the basic and obvious meanings of the word "Protect" and the sense in which this word is used by the Society. The Society also understands that unless people become educated and interested in wombat welfare, little will change.

A wombat is like no other animal in terms of persistence. They enjoy a challenge and as anyone who has shared time with them will attest, they actually enjoy doing things they are prevented from doing. A young wombat moved away from some object will "play possum" until you move on and then he or she will return immediately to the forbidden object. Their body will be electric with delight when they make it back to the object and they will roll and play and cavort to be allowed to stay near it. This makes sense when you think of the immense persistence it takes to dig a burrow. Coming across a stone or a piece of wood, a wombat might have to dig the object out over days and then spend more days trying to push the object up and out of the burrow. If the animal wasn't hard-wired for enjoying such challenges, it would not cope with its environment. So rather than having wombats branded as destructive and uncontrollable their determination, concentration and persistence should be viewed positively and their dogged determination seen as admirable.

Cruelty as Ignorance

Cruelty to animals is most frequently associated with ignorance and fear. Humans tend not to cope with things they can't control (despite the reality they control very little) and sometimes they behave badly in the face of such challenges. Farmers are the most frequent complainants about wombats, yet few farmers receive any input to help them understand the animal they are concerned about. In addition no specific assistance is available to the farmer who wants to protect wombats and the general attitude in the farming community is that wombats are "vermin" and as such, it is a bad farmer who allows them to be on his or her property. Prejudicial terms like "vermin" and "pest" only add to ignorance and fear and the permit system that allows the slaughter of wombats promotes these attitudes. The attitude that "wombats don't need protection, there are plenty of them" also endangers wombats. That "conservation" and "protection" are only applied to species that humans have almost annihilated is simply wrong. Morally, ethically and scientifically wrong.

Mange

It is as a result of these attitudes that wombats are being allowed to suffer and die protracted and painful deaths through a parasitic infestations called mange. Humans know the same annoying mite as scabies and wombats, just like untreated humans develop huge crusty weeping sores which eventually infect and flyblow and lead to death.

Mange- Our elected Officials' Attitudes

The Society received the following responses from the State Premiers when it wrote to each of them asking them to tell us what they were doing to combat mange in the wild wombat population.

Tasmania as represented by David Llewellyn MHA , Minister For Primary Industries and Water wrote "while I understand mange is present in the wombat populations in Tasmania, wombats remain widespread and locally abundant here" He claims that spotlight surveys suggest an increase in the wombat population over the last 20 years and uses that to conclude mange is having no more than a local impact".

Victoria's response from Sue Jaquinot, the Deputy Secretary for Resources and Regional Services, concluded that while she recognizes mange "can create severe disease leading to a painful and slow death in susceptible individuals" her department concluded that as not many people will come into contact with wombats and because wombats could get reinfested, treatment wasn't an option.

NSW initially replied saying the matter concerned the Attorney General, Minister for the Environment, and Minister for the Arts, the Hon. R.J. Debus who has failed to reply.

HOWEVER, amidst this sad reflection on our elected officials inaction, South Australia's Gail Gago responding for the South Australian Premier was a breath of fresh air. Here we have one state that has only recently realized that mange is spreading and fast. Previously undocumented in the Southern Hairy-Nosed Wombat (who lives primarily in S.A.) there has been a significant infestation with up to 75% of wombats checked suffering from mange in the Murraylands wombat population. As a result a task force, involving Adelaide Zoo, University, the S.A. Department of Environment and Heritage, via a grant from the Wildlife Conservation Fund has been set up. We have contacted all these players and will keep members informed of their progress. So we return to "What's in a Name?"

When "Conservation and Protection" only apply to species so decimated in number that they are unlikely to survive, we have missed the point entirely. It is not enough to say "there are plenty of them, they don't need protection" about any animal species. It breeds indifference to animal suffering and reflects an attitude about the value of our hugely dependant and interrelated eco systems that is just ignorant. These attitudes provide an

excuse for leaving native animals suffering slow and painful deaths from what is, after all a simple parasitic infestation. Sarcoptic Mange is not a disease, it is a parasitic infestation by a mite very similar and in the same class as the sarcoptes mite that gets on humans. Most of us have had a brief meeting with this mite at some point, particularly those who work in institutions where many humans live and sleep. It is very easy to remove and in its early stages there are many proprietary products available to get rid of them (albeit off label usage).

The mange mite is more similar to a spider than to an insect and often “treatments” fail because they fail to recognize what the mite is and how best to remove it. The point is, there are many existing products that get rid of sarcoptes mites and humans have controlled this mite in their own population so have the science to control it in the wombat population. It is more a matter of working out a way to do this that doesn’t involve trapping and injecting or washing thousands of wild wombats. But let’s face it, if that had to be, it could be done. Mange could be stopped.

In the last bulletin the Society announced that it intends to become a Clearing House for information about mange. To this end the Society is actively collecting and collating all published material on mange and asking members to provide any unpublished observations or material. This doesn’t need to be “fine tuned”, you can call us and dictate material to us or send photographs and/ or notes about what you have seen. We also want to begin by initially hearing about where wombats with mange have been observed. Suburb, post code, and approximate date seen will allow the Society to start mapping the distribution of mange throughout Australia.

A mild mange infestation.



Photo from Lenore Taylor NSW

If we are fortunate and enough people care, we will be able to achieve the goal of finding some way to limit the infestations in the wild wombat population and to give carer groups options other than shooting manged wombats. We know this goal can be achieved and believe if it is, it will provide a benchmark for dealing with other wildlife problems in a humane and timely manner.