

SUBMISSION TO SENATE COMMITTEE
The effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities'
protection in Australia

BACKGROUND

I write as a retired environmental scientist who worked in forest education in the Central Highlands of Victoria. My particular interest was, and is, the endangered Leadbeater's possum (LBP).

The continued decline in numbers of this delightful possum and Victoria's faunal emblem is cause for grave concern.

This marsupial and its survival needs have been scientifically studied for 30 continuous years. The data is in. We know what is required for the survival of this species. While governments procrastinate and are inactive, possum numbers continue to decline.

The 2009 bushfires considerably reduced total possum numbers to less than 1000 and destroyed 43% of the possum's habitat. Clearfell logging continues unabated in Leadbeater territory at pre fire rates. No adjustment has been made for the loss of forest to fire. This is further reducing LBP habitat.

We know that LBP is fire sensitive and is not found near areas that are fire damaged. The possum has a complex social structure and complex food requirements. It requires multiple hollow-bearing trees over 150 years of age. This fact does not dovetail with current logging practices in Victoria.

Prior to 2009 there were three areas of LBP - Lake Mountain alpine, Central Highlands mountain ash, Yellingbo lowlands.

The Lake Mountain population was decimated by the fires. The two surviving possums are now in Healesville Sanctuary as part of a captive breeding program. The Yellingbo population is in decline with a 40% population loss over 8 years due mainly to insufficient habitat, and predation. Clearfell logging continues to threaten the viability of mountain ash populations.

It is abundantly clear that LBP is going the way of the Tasmanian tiger. The tiger's extinction is an inditement on human self centredness and lethargy. Unless there is informed and drastic action very very soon, Victoria's endemic possum will be extinct within our lifetime.

The current measures to save the possum are not long term solutions. Nestboxes at best are only a bandaid solution and are not really effective for LBP. Captive breeding, which has begun, is an absolute last resort and again does not offer a stable survival population. The present LBP habitat Reserve is inadequate to mitigate against the threats to the possum's survival.

SAVING LEADBEATER'S POSSUM AND OTHER THREATENED SPECIES

Governments need to act now and act decisively if Australia is to retain its unique range of native wildlife.

There is an urgent need for informed action to establish sustainable populations of all native species, rather than just paying lip service to conservation.

Politicians have an obligation, to present and future generations, to ensure the comfortable survival of all creatures great and small. Teetering on the edge is not good enough!

Unfortunately governments are unduly swayed by perceived human needs and demands. Often these demands from unduly influential sections of society represent extravagances rather than essentials. These human extravagances often occur at the expense of the very survival of other creatures that are not in a position to influence governments.

Governments (and the population) need an attitudinal change. Biodiversity protection must be wholeheartedly embraced, not just espoused.

There is insufficient data on the state of play of our native wildlife. (although not so for LBP). More survey data is required to establish population numbers, stability, variability causes, and habitat requirements.

If governments are serious about protecting native wildlife there needs to be a more effective and efficient process of establishing threatened species listings. Currently not all endangered and threatened species are listed under Victorian and Federal legislative acts and therefore not all our precious native wildlife are protected.

It is vital that once the need for recuperative measures is established that appropriate action is implemented as a priority. At present Action Statements and Recovery Plans are haphazard, delayed and ineffective. Governments merely make token efforts. There is no accountability, no review and therefore negligible positive outcomes.

While governments fiddle our natural heritage disappears, never to return. The shame of all this is that governments have the knowledge, the opportunity and the power to save Leadbeater's possum and other distinctive Australian wildlife, but the window of opportunity is closing fast.

It is farcical to think that in the future, scientists and governments might have to resort to DNA samples in an endeavor to resurrect extinct native wildlife as has been the case with the Tasmanian tiger.

Ian Whitford