

The Common Wombat, *Vombatus ursinus*.- A Marsupial on the Move?

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There aren't any wombats in Anglesea. Surprisingly though, a number of sightings are occurring in areas around the Otways that aren't known for wombats. A friend's acquaintance saw one at Skenes Creek near Apollo Bay! Importantly, these highly dubious anecdotal sightings are occasionally backed up by direct evidence, with burrows and a roadkill specimen at Kawarrin 90 km west of Anglesea (between Barongarook and Gellibrand), and at least two road kills along the Hamilton Highway. This suggests that wombats are already inhabiting areas previously not considered inside their home range. They are now accepted as present in the Brisbane Ranges, but in low numbers. It is at least plausible that wombats could eventually meander their way here.

Wombats are a characteristic Australian animal. These incredibly strong (and surprisingly fast) marsupials are entirely herbivorous, with fresh new grass shoots their first choice of forage. Moss, fungi, shrubs, leaves, bark, roots and tubers also make up their diet which they consume for between three to eight hours each night. They have been much maligned in the past, with a bounty awarded for their pelts up until the 1940s due to their status as a pest that wrecks fence lines and creates dangerous burrows for stock. Wombats are solitary with just one animal occupying a given burrow; however, there may be a number of 20 metre-long burrows within a home range. As a student at Timbertop (near Mansfield) James Woodford regularly crept out and crawled down wombat burrows. Despite this being every teacher's worst nightmare his exploits are an interesting read! (See reference below).



Common Wombat

Illustration by Kaye Traynor

There are so many tricky questions. For instance, if wombats were to establish here, what ecological impact would they have on the Otway region and the environment surrounding Anglesea - such as our sensitive heathland? Maybe they wouldn't find orchid tubers particularly palatable? Would they even choose to live there? If we look at areas associated with the Common Wombat, such as Wilson's Prom, our local habitat does bear some similarities. In fact it is quite a biological puzzle why this area doesn't have wombats in the first place.

For me, these questions continue to snowball into many more questions, including big issues that managers of natural resources must consider. What exactly is 'natural'? Is this a change happening 'naturally' or is there a human caused reason for any wombat migration (such as a change in climate conditions)? Importantly, if grazing pressure from wombats was found to pose a threat and could transform a biodiverse heathland into something else, should we do something about it? What exactly would that something be?

There is, as yet, no call for alarm. During all my conversations no one considered the march of the wombat a problem. More study will be needed to know for sure if their numbers are increasing throughout areas outside their current range, and to answer the other questions here. Native Australian plants such as Bluebell Creeper and Coast Tea-tree remain much more significant threats to our heathland. Hopefully it is a while before we start to class our native mammals in that category!

References (personal communications with)

Andy Gray (Central Otway Landcare Network)

Trevor Pescott (Geelong Field Naturalists Society)

Colin Cook (Monitor Cameras - Friends of Brisbane Ranges)

Desley Whisson (Biologist, Deakin University)

Atlas of Living Australia website.

The Secret Life of Wombats. James Woodford. Penguin.

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