

Working Together

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Living With Wombats

Southern Hairy-nosed Wombats in the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin

HOW TO LIVE WITH AND MANAGE WOMBATS

The Southern Hairy-nosed Wombat (*Lasiorhynchus latifrons*) is the faunal emblem of South Australia and although once widespread in semi-arid regions of Southern Australia, this species is now restricted to isolated populations.

Wombats with their large warrens and foraging behaviour can inadvertently cause damage to crops, machinery and infrastructure in agricultural areas. In some areas of the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin wombats have become locally abundant and have moved into areas where they have not been observed in recent history, while in other areas their numbers have been dramatically reduced. At a national scale, threats such as habitat destruction and fragmentation have resulted in a significant reduction in wombat numbers and distribution.

Many populations have now become separated from each other and are at risk to further loss of numbers.

We can learn to live with wombats more harmoniously by:

- » understanding wombat behaviour,
- » understanding the need for the species' conservation in South Australia, and
- » implementing an integrated approach to managing the impacts caused by wombats (with a focus on non-lethal methods).

The Southern Hairy-nosed Wombat and Common Wombat (*Vombatus ursinus*) both occur in the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin, however only the Southern Hairy-nosed Wombat occurs in the Rangelands and Murraylands, while the Common Wombat occurs to the south in areas such as the Coorong.



Photography: D. Taggart



Photography: Nicholas Birks



Issues with Wombats

CONFLICTS WITH LANDHOLDERS

Wombat activity in agricultural landscapes can result in a range of impacts. The large and extensive warrens and foraging requirements has seen wombats become an issue on some properties. Examples of impacts include:

- » Erosion
- » Grazing competition
- » Damage to infrastructure and machinery (e.g. roads, fences, dams and tractors)

In recent years, the numbers and distribution of the Southern Hairy-nosed Wombat appear to have changed in some parts of the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin. Wombats have been observed in areas where historically they have not been seen. In some parts of the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin it has been reported that wombat numbers have increased, while in other areas their numbers have reduced. It is not known whether the population is increasing and expanding or if the wombats' distribution is changing.

IS WOMBAT CONTROL THE ANSWER?

The damage caused by wombats can be significant and costly. However, in some situations implementing wombat control activities may not be appropriate because:

- » Wombat numbers have been over-estimated – counting burrows does not provide an accurate estimate of the population size, as an individual may use as many as eight different warrens and ten burrows.
- » Erosion and crop damage may not be caused solely by wombats – other animals such as rabbits, kangaroos or domestic stock may be creating or exacerbating the damage. Past land management practices may also be a factor.
- » The destruction of wombats will not always result in a reduction in impacts – another wombat is often ready to move in to fill the newly created gap.

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The destruction of wombats will not always result in a reduction in impacts.

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Photography: D. Taggart



Photography: D. Taggart

Wombat Management Options

In situations where wombat damage is a significant issue, there are a number of management options available to help reduce impacts.

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE – INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT

An integrated management approach provides non-lethal management options focussed on living with wombats. Management techniques to reduce the impact of wombats may include:

Electric fencing: Two electric wires placed at 15cm and 30cm above the ground approximately 30cm outside of an existing fence can prevent access by wombats. This technique may be appropriate for external boundary fencing or for protecting infrastructure (eg: dams or buildings).

Fence alterations: In cropping areas, where containing stock is not an issue, remove the bottom fencing wire (the wire that is 15cm above the ground) to allow free movement of wombats and to prevent them from digging under the fence.

Wombat gates: Damage to fencing may occur when wombats move between warren and foraging sites. To reduce pressure on fences 'wombat gates' can be installed to allow the animals to move freely through a fence without damaging it.

Warren/burrow marking: To reduce the risk of damage to vehicles and machinery, clearly mark existing warrens (eg: with a post/star dropper or flagging tape) so they can be avoided.

Remove access to harbour sites:

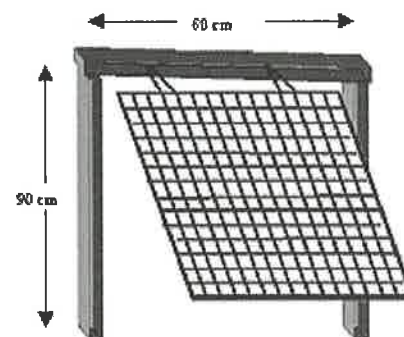
Some wombats may utilise spaces underneath houses or other farm buildings. Access to these areas can be prevented through the installation of heavy gauge mesh or a buried wire apron. This may also reduce foraging impact in surrounding areas.

Further advice regarding integrated management options can be sought from your nearest Department for Environment and Heritage office (see Contacts on front page).

Additional information, including detailed wombat gate design, can also be obtained from the Victorian Department of Primary Industries website:

<http://new.dpi.vic.gov.au/agriculture>

(Follow the links to the Information Notes Series – Flora and Fauna).



Example of a Wombat Gate



Photography: Perer Canty

For further Management Options
turn to back page

Southern Hairy-nosed Wombats

The Southern Hairy-nosed Wombat is the smallest of all the wombat species and is characterised by a broad hairy nose and long ears.

Southern Hairy-nosed Wombats are slow to reproduce usually having only one young every 2-3 years. Young wombats can remain in the pouch for up to nine months and are not sexually mature until the age of three. The length of the breeding season varies each year depending on environmental conditions, with most young born between August and October. Drought has a significant influence on wombat numbers, with at least three good seasons required before any increase in the adult wombat population occurs. In very dry years breeding may stop entirely.

Wombats are solitary animals that may share a warren system but will generally occupy burrows away from each other. In summer, to avoid the heat, wombats are more active from midnight to early morning. In winter they are more active in late afternoon to early evening before the temperature drops. Life expectancy is variable, though some wombats have reached fifteen years of age in the wild.

The Southern Hairy-nosed Wombat is locally common in some areas of its range (e.g. in some parts of the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin) but declining in others (such as the Eyre and Yorke Peninsulas). In South Australia, populations occur on the Nullarbor Plain, Gawler Ranges, Yorke Peninsula, Eyre Peninsula and in the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin.

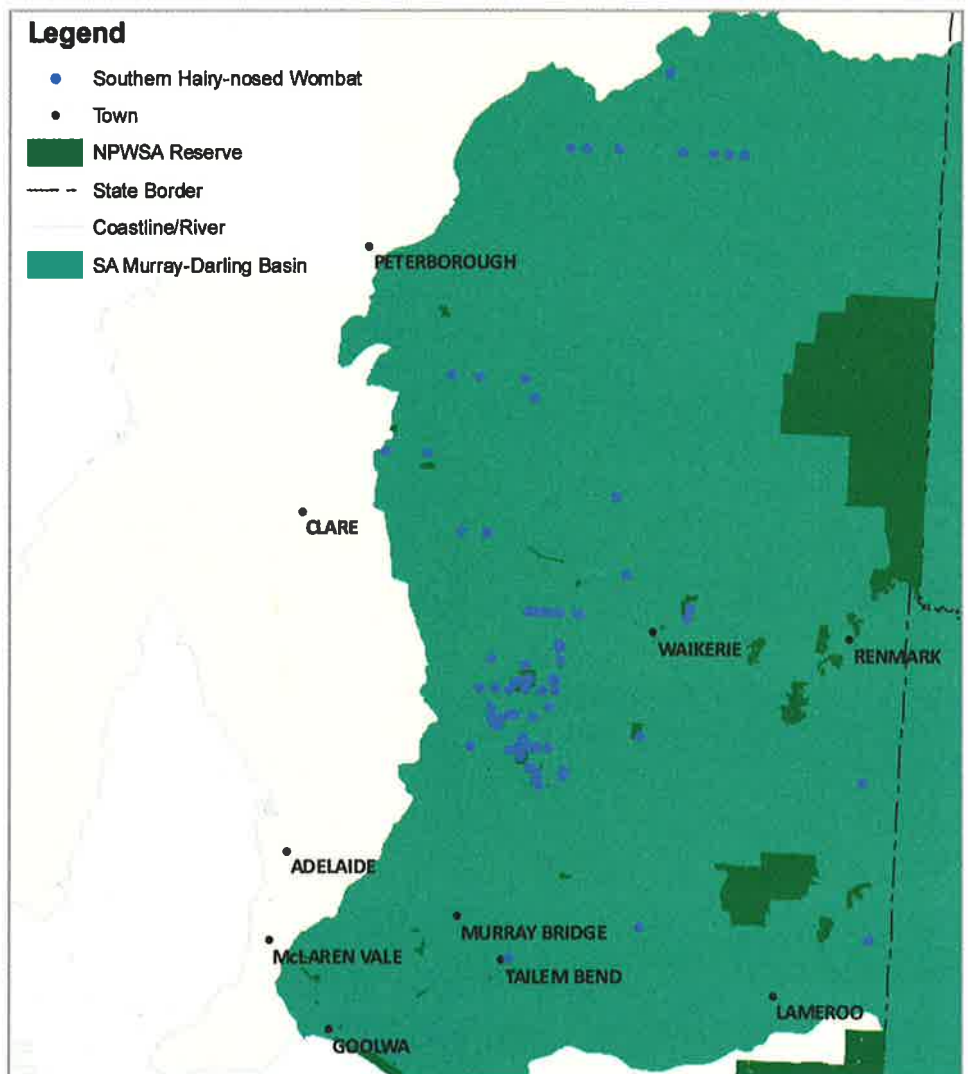
Wombats are solitary animals that may share a warren system.

CONSERVATION STATUS

The Southern Hairy-nosed Wombat is protected under the South Australian *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*. The main threats to wombat survival are habitat destruction and fragmentation, drought, disease, illegal culling and competition with domestic stock and feral animals.

Although Southern Hairy-nosed Wombats are considered common within their patchy distribution, disease outbreaks, such as sarcoptic mange, can quickly decimate small isolated populations.

Distribution map of the Southern Hairy-nosed Wombat



Wombat Management Options

PERMIT TO DESTROY WILDLIFE

Land managers are able to obtain a permit for the destruction of protected wildlife species that are causing environmental or economic damage to property or land, or where there is a risk to public safety. It is important to note that culling wombats may not be an effective management option if used in isolation.

Why is it important to obtain a Permit to Destroy Wildlife?

The use of a regulated permit system ensures a balanced approach to wildlife management decisions in South Australia. This system ensures that environmental, economic and public safety issues are all considered during the decision making process.

Although wombat numbers may be considered high in particular areas of the state, their isolated populations are vulnerable to catastrophic local events such as disease outbreaks and drought. Therefore careful management is required to ensure the future sustainability of the species across the state. Only a small percentage of the remaining wombat distribution is protected within National Parks and Wildlife Reserves.

Assessment process

Factors considered by the Department for Environment and Heritage during the assessment of a Permit to Destroy Wildlife application include:

- » The species and number of animals to be destroyed.
- » Nature of the damage being caused by the animal(s).
- » Non-lethal techniques used to reduce the damage prior to applying for a permit (and their effectiveness).
- » Animal welfare and the proposed method of destruction.
- » Potential impact to the wild population (ensuring that the conservation status of the species is not adversely affected).

// The Southern Hairy-nosed Wombat is a protected species under the South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972. It is illegal to destroy or remove any protected animal without a permit. The maximum penalty is \$2500 or six months imprisonment.



HOW DO I APPLY FOR A PERMIT?

An application form for a Permit to Destroy Wildlife can be obtained from any Department for Environment and Heritage office, or on the website at: www.wildlifep permit.sa.gov.au

Completed application forms should be forwarded to your nearest Department for Environment and Heritage office (see Contacts on page 1). There are no fees associated with obtaining a Permit to Destroy Wildlife.

Animal Welfare and Codes of Practice

The destruction of any animal should aim to minimise suffering to that animal.

The Code of Practice for the humane destruction of wombats by shooting in South Australia describes how to meet animal welfare and legal obligations. The code of practice is available on the Department for Environment and Heritage website.

REMEMBER

- » Wombats are protected by law.
- » Non-lethal methods are available to help reduce the impacts.
- » You need to obtain a Permit to Destroy Wildlife before undertaking wombat destruction activities.
- » A Code of Practice for humane destruction applies.

Native animals are an important part of our environment and are a shared responsibility.



Government of South Australia
Department for Environment
and Heritage

For further information on living with wildlife please visit the Department for Environment and Heritage website at: www.environment.sa.gov.au/biodiversity