

Urban possums – the native faces of local heritage

by Rheya Linden

The Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Councillor Robert Doyle, recently indulged in a public invective against possums. Announcing plans for a new kind of blood sport in Melbourne's parks, enlisting the killing power of Powerful Owls against brushtail possums, he declared war on the "exploding" population of "vermin" "They drive me mad," he said. "I know they're protected, [but] to me they're vermin."

Such remarks reflect an intolerance that thrives on a lack of meaningful encounters with possums themselves, and a failure to appreciate their diverse individualism, their awesome capacity to adapt to whatever changes we make to their environment and their fiercely protective parenting skills – and, above all, their capacity to recognise and trust human kindness.

Possums are ready to meet us at the species boundary. We need to prepare for this by dispelling our own misconceptions.

Myth 1: Possums are everywhere, breeding in plague proportions

Response: Brushtail possums have one young each year. Ringtail possums can have up to three. However, the majority of newborns do not survive their first year outside their mothers' protective pouches:

"About 50 per cent of young female possums and 85 per cent of males die in their first year. The high mortality rate is because of a lack of territory – if they can't find an unoccupied patch they often die of stress."

Loss of habitat and our urban lifestyle choices contribute to the diminishing survival chances of possums. Evidence supports the view that by "the time your children have children there may not be any of these animals left". The South Australian government has made it "illegal for householders to kill a possum. It hopes this will halt their decline but it warns only a community effort will save" the brushtail possum. In addition, "New research by Jutta Eymann at Macquarie University's Department of Biological Sciences indicates that there's a very high turnover of animals and the majority being found are four years old or less."

Myth 2: Possums are pests, destroyers of gardens

Response: Possums are native animals protected by wildlife legislation, which have specific dietary needs. If "we have possums in the suburbs we ought to cherish them and, if one does get into your roof and carries on as if he's walking around with hobnailed boots all over your roof, you may not have a possum problem, as people describe it, you may have a maintenance problem".

Possums are nocturnal. Thus, householders can take practical measures such as netting vegetable gardens overnight, fruit tree collaring and fixing roof holes after providing nest boxes on site for evicted possums, which will enhance the experience of living with possums while protecting garden produce from browsing.

Myth 3: Trees and green space for people is our central concern

Response: Possum presence in our parks and gardens is enriching, especially for families with young children, offering a unique encounter with wild animals that have adapted to a changing environment, an experience that is provided neither by captive wild animals in zoos nor by domesticated companion animals.

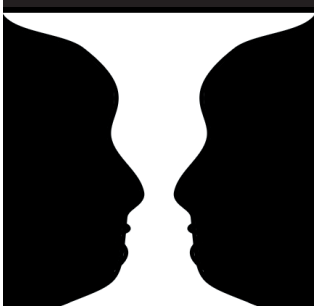
Green space is also wildlife habitat; urban development has significantly impacted wildlife populations and welfare. Brushtail possums are made especially vulnerable by the removal of mature trees that provide



habitat hollows. Ringtail possums, on the other hand, need interconnecting canopy to move along and thick foliage for nest building. Ultimately, looking after possums entails looking after trees.

With imminent plans for development into Melbourne's green wedges, it is urgent that councils be lobbied to adopt policies that reflect the habitat factor in green space and that they take responsibility for creating wildlife-supportive environments. Without such preventive measures, the native animals that we now consider abundant will become the future species that we will be struggling to save. Australia has lost too many species to extinction not to recognise that population tipping points are sudden and relentless.

Points of view



Controversy, conversation, conjectures

The opinions expressed reflect the views of individual contributors, rather than the position of the Australian Greens Victoria.