

We The People

Program 154

The Catastrophe of Feral Cats (Rev 1)



I am always heartened by the environmental stand, federal Victorian MP Kelvin Thompson takes and at times in contrast to his colleagues. He is a man well equipped to represent his constituents in a contemporary world. He understands the importance of biodiversity and the health of the planet and the significant role human population plays. I acknowledge his contribution in today's narrative.

Australian mammalian fauna is the most distinctive in the world and 86 per cent of our land mammal species are found nowhere else. A landmark CSIRO-published study found that Australian extinctions were much higher than previously thought. Twenty-nine Australian land mammals have become extinct while 63 species are threatened and require urgent conservation action. This is a third of our surviving land mammals. These losses and potential losses represent over a third of the 315 species present at the time of European settlement.

Since the 1840s we have lost mammals at the rate of one species per decade. On current trends, there will be many more extinctions of Australian mammals in the next couple of generations and the decline in our fauna over the last 15 years has been severe. The Australian Wildlife Conservancy, known as the AWC, noted in their publication, *Wildlife Matters*, that the Bilby and Numbat have declined, with the Numbat population now less than 1,000 mature adults. Additionally the Brush-Tailed Bettong has suffered a catastrophic decline from over 200,000 animals to an estimated population of around 10,000. The plight of the Golden-Backed Tree Rat highlights the severe declines in Northern Australia. On the mainland it has disappeared from the Northern Territory, including Kakadu National Park, and survives only in a thin strip along the Kimberley coast.

Lesser known species such as the Fawn Antechinus are also in steep decline while other species are so rarely detected that they could disappear without us even knowing. Even iconic species are vanishing while the Koala and the Tasmanian Devil are nationally threatened and the once-common Platypus is in peril. Most Australians know of and regret the extinction of the Tasmanian Tiger or Thylacine, but also important are the other 28 mammal species now extinct. These animals played important and irreplaceable roles in our country's ecology and these species were part of the fabric of this country. Australia has the worst rate of mammal extinction in the world, and the situation is not improving thanks to feral predators such as feral cats which have been identified as a major cause of native population decline. Federal and state governments are spending more than \$1 billion per year on biodiversity conservation but the return on this investment in terms of success is marginal. Only 4 of the 63 threatened mammal species have materially improved their conservation standing during the last 15 years while the rest have declined or, at best, maintained their precarious position over the same period.

We need a new model in conjunction with research into a safe and targeted form of biological control to address the issue of feral cats. It's a truly frightening statistic that **75 million native animals** are killed by feral cats **each night** and this includes not only mammals but also birds and reptiles as well. The CSIRO estimates there are 15 million feral cats in Australia, with each killing an average of five animals a night. The AWC is conducting the largest feral cat research program in Australian history in an attempt to unlock the secrets to effective cat control. It manages 23 sanctuaries covering over 3 million hectares which facilitates effective conservation of Australian animal species and the habitats in which they live. A centrepiece of their model in southern and Central Australia is the establishment of large feral-free areas, or mainland islands—a model they are looking to extend to Northern Australia. Thirty-two nationally threatened mammals, including bats, are found in their sanctuaries. The work of the AWC represents a new model for conservation and it should be front and centre on our national agenda as Australians. Without healthy natural Australian country we will not survive and each creature tends our land far better than we can. You can help by **bell your cat** and keeping your moggy in at night to reduce the kill rate of our Australian wild life. Stand up for the indigenous creatures we all admire and which are an integral part of Australia.....the trouble is, they have no voice.

Until next time this is Kent Bayley