Conservation & Protection of ACT's Wombats

Response to the Draft Technical Report to the Conservator for Flora and Fauna - Managing Wombats: A Review of Current Practice, Issues and Challenges to Inform Wombat Management in the ACT

Submission to the City and Environment Directorate

About the Conservation Council ACT Region

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak body for environment and climate groups in the ACT Region. We represent close to 50 member groups, bringing together a united voice on environment and climate issues to Government, business and community.

Since 1981 we have been at the centre of the region's most important wins for wildlife, bushland, climate and communities. As a hub for the ACT Region's environment and climate movement and a not-for-profit, non government organisation, we run campaigns, promote and upskill local groups, undertake research, advocate passionately, and engage and inform our community.

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Summary

This submission presents the position of the Conservation Council ACT Region (the Council) regarding the management of Bare-nosed Wombats (Common Wombat) in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). This submission is developed in response to the *DRAFT Technical Report to the Conservator for Flora and Fauna: Managing Wombats: A review of current practice, issues and challenges to inform wombat management in the ACT (The Technical Report)*.

The Council recognizes that wombat burrowing activity, habitat use, and disease outbreaks can generate legitimate concerns for private landholders, infrastructure companies, and the broader community. However, the use of lethal control measures in the absence of robust, long-term ecological data is not supported by current scientific evidence. The Council therefore advocates for an evidence-based and non-lethal management framework, grounded in comprehensive monitoring, stakeholder collaboration, and adaptive management principles. We also reject the need for the creation of a Controlled Native Species Management Plan for wombats as we do not have enough data to justify the creation of such a plan.

Introduction

The Bare-nosed Wombat is the only wombat species present in the ACT. Nationally classified as “Least Concern” by the IUCN, local population trends suggest that region-specific monitoring is required to accurately assess the species’ ecological status.[1] Wombats are nocturnal, burrow-dependent, herbivorous marsupials, with slow metabolic rates and low reproductive output. Females are unable to conceive while lactating, and lactation may extend up to twelve months, meaning that reproductive output is limited to approximately one offspring every two to four years.[2] As such, claims of rapid population expansion are not supported by empirical data.

Linley’s study concluded that ecologically, wombats act as ‘ecosystem engineers.’ Their burrow systems enhance soil aeration, water infiltration, and nutrient cycling, while providing refuge for a variety of other species, including reptiles, small mammals, and

[1] Thorley, R.K. & Old, J.M. (2020). *Distribution, abundance and threats to bare-nosed wombats (Vombatus ursinus).* Australian Mammalogy, 42(3), pp.249–256.

[2] David Elrdige Protection Society of Australia. *Wombat Myths* WOMBAT MYTHS

invertebrates.[3] Burrows also provide shelter during extreme environmental events such as bushfires, floods, or periods of drought, illustrating their broader role in maintaining habitat resilience and biodiversity.

The species is highly adapted to the ACT's environment. Bare-nosed wombats are capable of enduring hot and dry conditions due to their low water requirements and efficient energy metabolism. Their nocturnal habits, coupled with their burrow reliance, make direct population monitoring challenging, necessitating the use of innovative monitoring technologies to inform management strategies accurately.

Burrowing Behavior, Landholder Impacts, and Erosion Considerations

Bare-nosed wombats rely heavily on burrows for shelter, thermoregulation, and protection from predators. Burrow systems can range in depth from 0.4 to 2.8 meters, with multiple entrances and interconnecting tunnels.[9] These structures serve as essential refuges for wombats, particularly during periods of extreme heat or environmental disturbance, and also provide shelter for a range of cohabiting species, including reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals.[3] While burrowing is ecologically beneficial, it can occasionally create conflicts with land use, particularly in agricultural areas or near infrastructure.

A small number of landholders have complained of damage to pastures, fences, and machinery where burrows intersect with grazing paddocks or farm tracks. The landholders state the damage has caused significant financial impact to them. However, *The Technical Report* does not provide evidence supporting these claims such as individual landholder, or total landholders financial analysis, nor does it provide evidence of stated damage. *The Technical Report* also states that only three landholders out of 381 were consulted during the writing of the review, this is less than 1% of the stakeholder group - yet their views are taken to represent the entire landholder group throughout the report.

Given only 1% of landholders were consulted, it is unclear if these issues are widespread through the majority of landholders or if it is an isolated experience to the small number making the complaints. Prior to implementation of further wombat control measures these claims need to be assessed quantitatively and rigorously rather than

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[3] Linley, G.D. et al. (2024). *Wombat burrows are hotspots for small vertebrates in a landscape subject to gigafire.* Journal of Mammalogy, 105(4), pp.752–764.

relying solely on a sample size too small to be representative, and with anecdotal evidence rather than scientific and evidence-based data. Peer-reviewed studies demonstrate that the impact of wombat burrowing on soil erosion and land degradation is often overestimated, as other land-use factors such as livestock trampling, historical clearing, and riverbank destabilization contribute substantially to observed erosion patterns.[2] As evidenced by the extensive ACT government management activities, such as aerial culling, it is well known that feral goats, deer and pigs are causing significant damage to dams, land, and erosion along river and creek beds across our environment. Consequently, policy decisions that rely on unverified anecdotal reports risk overemphasizing wombat impacts and could lead to disproportionate management responses of the species, including lethal control.

In addition, ecological research suggests that wombat burrows provide ecosystem services that indirectly benefit agricultural landscapes. For example, burrow systems increase soil aeration and water infiltration, which can enhance pasture productivity and reduce surface runoff.[4] These ecosystem services should be considered when evaluating landholder concerns and designing mitigation measures.

To minimize landholder conflicts without resorting to lethal methods, several non-lethal strategies have been trialed successfully. Exclusion fencing around sensitive areas, wombat gates to allow passage without property damage, and targeted habitat management to direct wombats away from high-conflict zones have all demonstrated effectiveness in reducing human-wombat interactions.[5] Implementing such measures as part of a structured pilot program across private lands can help demonstrate cost-effective, non-lethal management solutions while maintaining ecological integrity.

Disease Management – Mange and Other Health Risks

One of the primary conservation and welfare challenges facing Bare-nosed Wombats in the ACT is sarcoptic mange, caused by the mite Sarcoptes scabiei var. wombati. Mange is a contagious parasitic disease that affects the skin and fur of wombats, causing hair loss, scabbing, secondary infections, and in severe cases, mortality. Infected wombats

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[4] Gallagher, R.V. et al. (2021). *A guide to using species trait data in conservation.* One Earth Perspectives.

[5] Borchard, P., & Wright, I. A. (2010). Bulldozers and blueberries: managing fence damage by bare-nosed wombats at the agricultural–riparian interface. *Human-Wildlife Interactions*, *4*(2), 247–256. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24868844

often exhibit abnormal daytime activity, leaving the safety of their burrows, which increases exposure to predators and vehicles and alters natural behavior patterns.[6]

Mange prevalence in wild populations is influenced not only by wombat density but also by environmental factors, the presence of other host species (such as foxes and rabbits), and habitat connectivity. Cooke's research on declining numbers of wombats using several hypotheses indicated that mange has less contribution in significant population declines, underscoring the need for targeted intervention strategies.[2]

Effective management of mange relies on non-lethal, evidence-based approaches. Peer-reviewed research demonstrates that Cydectin treatment, delivered via direct injection or through burrow flap systems, can successfully reduce mite loads and restore health in affected wombats.[7] Burrow flap systems are particularly valuable as they allow repeated medication delivery without the stress associated with capture, ensuring welfare compliance and practicality across wild populations. Implementing these systems requires careful site selection, monitoring, and ongoing maintenance to ensure effectiveness.

The Council recognizes that mange management requires significant resource investment. Funding equipment, veterinary oversight, and monitoring is essential, as is collaboration between government agencies, wildlife rescue organizations (Wombat Rescue NSW/ACT), ecologists, and private landholders. For example, infrastructure and utility providers impacted by wombat burrows could contribute to mitigation funding, as targeted mange control can reduce potential damage to water and sewage infrastructure while also improving animal welfare outcomes.

In addition to managing active infections, disease control strategies must include long-term population monitoring to evaluate treatment efficacy and detect emerging outbreaks. Techniques such as camera traps, GPS tagging, and usage of new technologies like drones can provide more accurate data to form a feasible management strategy.[8] The Council advocates for increased investment in these monitoring programs to ensure that management strategies are based on robust, site-specific data rather than anecdotal reports or limited observations.

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[6] Skerratt, L.F. (2003). *Clinical Response of Captive Common Wombats (Vombatus ursinus) Infected with Sarcoptes scabiei var. Wombati.*

[7] Mange Management. *Treating Mange – Direct Application and Burrow Flap Methods.* Available at: https://mangemanagement.org.au/treating-mange/#directapplication

[8] Old, J.M., Lin, S.H. & Franklin, M.J.M. (2019). *Mapping out bare-nosed wombat (Vombatus ursinus) burrows with the use of a drone.* BMC Ecology, 19(1), Article 39.

Finally, public engagement and education are critical for effective disease management. Landholders, recreational users, and the general public need to understand the importance of non-lethal management, reporting disease sightings responsibly, and supporting collaborative initiatives. Pilot programs that demonstrate practical treatment methods and positive outcomes can foster broader community acceptance and compliance.

Data Collection, Monitoring, and Evidence-Based Policy Design

Robust data collection is the cornerstone of effective wildlife management. For Bare-nosed Wombats in the ACT, current monitoring programs are limited in scope, often relying on citizen reports, opportunistic observations, and volunteer-led surveys. While these efforts provide useful information, they are insufficient to inform comprehensive management strategies, particularly decisions involving lethal control or habitat modification.[9]

Accurate population estimates are critical to understanding the true distribution and density of wombats, the number of active burrows, and the prevalence of disease such as mange. Studies show that traditional survey methods, including walking transects and incidental sightings, underestimate populations due to the nocturnal and burrow-dependent nature of the species.[1] Consequently, relying solely on these data risks forming policies based on incomplete or biased information.

Emerging technologies can greatly enhance monitoring accuracy. Camera traps, drone-based aerial surveys, and automated motion detection systems allow researchers to capture more reliable activity data while minimizing disturbance to the animals.[9] Additionally, GPS collars or RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) tagging of select individuals provides insight into movement patterns, habitat use, and social interactions, which is particularly paramount for planning non-lethal mitigation strategies on private land. While more resource-intensive, these approaches produce data that can support adaptive management frameworks, enabling policy adjustments based on observed outcomes rather than assumptions or limited evidence.

Understanding species traits such as reproductive rates, burrow fidelity, and foraging behavior is also essential. Trait-based data can inform predictive models of population dynamics, habitat use, and disease spread, allowing policymakers to anticipate potential

[9] ACT Government, Office of Nature Conservation. (2025). *Managing wombats: A review of current practice, issues and challenges to inform wombat management in the ACT.* Draft Technical Report

conflicts and implement targeted interventions before problems escalate.[4] Integrating ecological trait data with spatial mapping provides a stronger foundation for management decisions and cross-species comparisons, which can enhance conservation planning for other burrowing mammals in the ACT.

The Council strongly recommends that data collection programs prioritize consistency, transparency, and collaboration. Investment in hiring skilled ecologists, establishing long-term monitoring stations, and coordinating wildlife rescue and rehabilitation organisations will ensure that management decisions are evidence-based, defensible, and effective. Additionally, private stakeholders, including utility and water authorities (ICON Water), should be engaged to support data collection and mitigation research, particularly where wombat activity intersects with infrastructure.

Data should not only inform population control decisions but also provide a baseline to evaluate the effectiveness of non-lethal mitigation measures. By systematically documenting outcomes from burrow flap treatments, fencing, and pilot programs on private land, the ACT Government can adjust policy in response to empirical results, avoiding unintended ecological consequences while addressing landholder concerns.

The Technical Report acknowledges there are ‘currently no reliable estimates of abundance for Bare-nosed Wombats in the ACT’ and openly states it is relying on anecdotal evidence to support the claim there has been an increase in wombats in the ACT. It is relying on reports from 51 years ago, in 1975, as further support to the claim. However, this is not a counterbalanced comparison to the ongoing and sprawling urban expansion over the past 51 years in the ACT - which inevitably encroaches and destroys wombat habitats - enveloping and pushing the wombats further into suburbs and the Canberra Nature Park.

The Technical Report states that ‘one of the critical aspects of species management is understanding population dynamics’. As The Technical Report itself acknowledges - the ACT does not currently have this understanding - yet recommendations include exploring a Controlled Native Species Management Plan — a mechanism used when populations require active management. Recommending a population management framework, while simultaneously acknowledging the ACT does not have a population baseline, is a significant logical gap.

Stakeholder Engagement, Pilot Programs, and Non-Lethal Management

Effective wombat policy in the ACT requires collaboration between government bodies, private landholders, community groups, universities, and wildlife care organizations to ensure policies are informed by evidence and reflect the interests of all stakeholders.

The scope of the of The Technical Report was claimed to encompass stakeholder views (pg. 6), yet has the following significant consultation limitations:

- Only 1% of landholders (three out of 381) were consulted.
- Community members were not consulted and their opinions remain unknown.
- No developers were consulted (pg. 31, 37), despite a whole section on development impacts.
- No Traditional Custodians were consulted (pg 28).

The claim that the “approach aims to protect wombats and their health while also reducing damage to infrastructure and rural properties and reflecting community values” therefore cannot be achieved when said damage is not quantified by developers and rural landholders. Nor can it reflect community values when the community, in particular the First Nations community, has not been consulted.

The Council acknowledges and continues to support the ACT government’s efforts in establishing and convening the Wombat Stakeholder Working Group that includes rural leaseholder representatives, wildlife care groups, university researchers, and government staff, demonstrating an established collaborative framework for addressing wombat issues such as mange and habitat interactions. [10]

Pilot programs play a crucial role in advancing non-lethal management by testing practical methods and gathering data on their effectiveness. In an 2025 initiative undertaken by Ms. Yolandi Vermaak of Wombat Rescue NSW/ACT, community volunteers in the Canberra region participated in a pilot mange treatment initiative, installing “burrow flaps” that deliver anti-parasite medication as wombats enter their burrows, combining community engagement with targeted health intervention. [11] This example illustrates how structured, place-based pilot efforts can empower local

[10] Brawata R 2021 Wombat Mange ACT EPSDD 21_112871-Documents.pdf

[11] Groves, E. (2025, August 30). *Wombat Rescue launches pilot program in the ACT to fight mange.* ABC New Wombat Rescue launches pilot program in the ACT to fight mange - ABC News

landholders, volunteers, and carers to contribute to management outcomes while building capacity and generating actionable data.

Although these community-led initiatives are commendable, targeted support from the government, whether financial, technical, or logistical, is necessary to enhance their effectiveness, strengthen public engagement, and improve knowledge sharing. This support would not only help counter narratives favoring lethal control but also facilitate evidence-based management and contribute to maintaining a healthy wombat population, thereby supporting the broader goal of preserving local biodiversity in the ACT.

Non-lethal mitigation tools developed in other jurisdictions such as marking burrows to reduce vehicle strikes, installing wombat-friendly gates in fencing, and using strategic exclusion measures provide additional options landholders can adopt to reduce conflict without harming animals. For example, wombat gates in fence lines allow wombats to move through a property without causing damage to agricultural infrastructure, reducing the incentive for lethal control.[12]

Engaging private landholders early and meaningfully is essential to program credibility and long-term success. Participatory planning and inclusive consultation can enhance mutual understanding between stakeholders with different priorities and increase the likelihood that management strategies are adopted voluntarily and consistently. Studies on wildlife conflict management more broadly show that stakeholder participation contributes to greater ownership of outcomes and more sustainable practices, even when direct research on wombat stakeholder dynamics is limited. [9]

By combining government-led strategy development with community-driven pilot programs and adaptive governance structures, the ACT can advance coexistence methods that address landholder concerns while respecting the ecological and cultural value of wombats.

Policy Recommendations

The Conservation Council of the ACT Region recommends a holistic, evidence-based management framework for bare-nosed wombats that balances ecological, social, and land-use considerations. We recommend the Government does not develop a Controlled Native Species Management Plan for wombats - a mechanism used when populations require active management. We believe that such a need for active

[12] Common Wombat Wildlife Management methods Common Wombat wildlife management methods | vic.gov.au

management has not been demonstrated, and therefore a Controlled Native Species Management Plan does not need to be developed, at least until a greater, quantitative, understanding of wombat populations and impacts on properties is established.

Instead, we recommend the ACT Government adopt:

- Non-lethal management: Private landholders should be encouraged and supported to adopt non-lethal interventions, including burrow flaps, wombat gates, and fencing, to reduce property conflict while maintaining ecological integrity. [12] [11] The use of lethal methods for wombat management should not be endorsed or used in the absence of robust, long-term ecological data.
- Expansion of pilot programs: Expansion of pilot initiatives involving farmers, wildlife carers, and community volunteers can provide practical training, strengthen local knowledge, and generate reliable data to inform adaptive management.[10] These programs should be supported by government resources, including financial, technical, and logistical assistance, to improve participation and outcomes.

- Data-driven decision making: Comprehensive population monitoring, habitat mapping, and behavioral studies are critical to avoid policy decisions based on anecdotal reports. Investment in ecological surveys and monitoring by qualified scientists ensures that management strategies are guided by accurate, actionable evidence. [9]
- Public education and awareness: Building community understanding of wombat ecology, reproductive cycles, and the consequence of lethal control reduces conflicts and promotes conservation-aligned behavior. Awareness campaigns should be integrated into landholder training and public correspondence.

Conclusion

Effective wombat management in the ACT requires coordinated action across government, private landholders, and conservation groups. By prioritizing non-lethal management, evidence-based decision making, and stakeholder collaboration, the ACT can maintain healthy wombat populations, mitigate land-use conflicts, and preserve biodiversity. Implementing these recommendations will help ensure that wombats continue to contribute to the ecological balance of the ACT, while addressing the legitimate concerns of landholders in a fair and scientifically grounded manner.

Notes and Disclosures

Note: the Northern Hairy-nosed Wombat is listed as critically endangered under the Nature Conservation Act 1999 and not endangered as stated on page 8 of the report.

Disclosure of AI: During the preparation of this work we incorporated some use of open AI such as ChatGPT and Grammarly to improve readability and grammar.

References

[1] Thorley, R.K. & Old, J.M. (2020). Distribution, abundance and threats to bare-nosed wombats (Vombatus ursinus). Australian Mammalogy, 42(3), pp.249–256.

[2] David Elrdige Protection Society of Australia. Wombat Myths

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[4] Gallagher, R.V. et al. (2021). A guide to using species trait data in conservation. One Earth Perspectives.

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[6] Skerratt, L.F. (2003). Clinical Response of Captive Common Wombats (Vombatus ursinus) Infected with Sarcoptes scabiei var. Wombati.

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[10] Brawata R 2021 Wombat Mange ACT EPSDD 21_112871-Documents.pdf

[11] Groves, E. (2025, August 30). Wombat Rescue launches pilot program in the ACT to fight mange. ABC New Wombat Rescue launches pilot program in the ACT to fight mange - ABC News

[12] Common Wombat Wildlife Management methods [Common Wombat wildlife management methods | vic.gov.au]