

Recovery of the Eastern Barred Bandicoot — From Armchair to Activist

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I am not a biologist, a zoologist, nor am I a member of the Field Naturalist Organisation. I am an armchair conservationist.

You know the type? We sat on the sidelines and cheered those who are young and fit enough to confront those who exploit the environment regardless of the consequences, and occasionally wrote a cheque to the Australian Conservation Foundation. We never dreamt that we would become involved in an attempt to recover a threatened species which just happened to live on our property, or that a biologist would knock on our door and inform us that our assistance, and that of our neighbours, would be crucial to the recovery of that species.

Parameles gunnii, commonly known as the Eastern Barred Bandicoot, occupied some two million hectares of grassland and woody grassland from Melbourne to the south eastern corner of South Australia, where the last specimen was collected in 1893. Today, it occupies an estimated 600 hectares in and around Hamilton.

Chronology

It may be helpful to provide an overview of the status of the animal from 1937 to 1980. From 1937, when concern was first noted regarding the decline of the Eastern Barred Bandicoot, to 1960, several investigations were carried out by various government agencies. However, no serious attempt was made to arrest the decline of the animal until the 1970s when a captive breeding population was established at Serendip Wildlife Research Station. Unfortunately this experiment was unsuccessful; the population apparently dying out in 1978.

In 1980, Dr Peter Brown commenced a detailed study of the Hamilton population. Up to that time he, more than any other, was responsible for raising community awareness of the plight of the animal, drawing attention to the need for habitat extension and predator control. Unfortunately for Hamilton, emphasis was placed on the local tip as the remaining place where bandicoots were to be found, totally ignoring the population in the Chatsworth Road area to the east of Hamilton and the Digby Road area to the west of Hamilton. To this day that image has been difficult to overcome.

To add to our problems, private landowners were forced to work in isolation with no access to expertise, our requests for assistance tending to fall on deaf ears. It was to be another eight years before the community at

large was to become directly involved in a structured program of recovery. However, during those years, the Department of Conservation and Environment, now the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE), in co-operation with Hamilton City Council carried out massive habitat extension work on public land, and further attempts were made to breed the animal in captivity through the State Recovery Team.

Finally, in 1987, a draft management plan was drawn up. It concentrated on four main areas:

1. Scientific and Technical data
This area has been the main focus of activity.
2. Organisational aspects
Analysing and understanding the internal culture of organisations and identifying the differences in organisational characters.
3. Authority/Power Aspects
Looking at power structures and power relations of local communities and organisations. Factors such as land tenure patterns, access and control over resources and traditional authority, all of which exert powerful influences on the decision making process.
4. Socioeconomic Aspects

This includes an assessment of local values and attitudes. It is now recognised, that in the absence of accurate knowledge, local norms and customs play a strong role in shaping attitudes and values. Hence the need for effective public relations campaigns.

The response to the plan was swift and restructuring was completed within two months.

The State Recovery Team was replaced with a Core Decision Group based in Melbourne and included representatives from the Department and the Melbourne Zoo, who, together with Healesville Sanctuary, established breeding colonies. The Hamilton Recovery Team was retained and the Department vacated the chair in favour of an independent member of the community.

Four Working Groups were established:

1. Human Dimensions: their brief was to identify problems in the community and seek appropriate solutions.
2. Community Education (and Public Relations)
3. Captive Breeding Working Group
4. Re-introductions Working Group.

The Core Decision Group was directly responsible for the project but it also relied on input from the community, at the same time making sure that the community is fully informed through the appropriate working group. The system has opened up lines of communication not possible under the previous system.

1988 was a watershed year for those of us who had been working in isolation. Dr. Tim Clark and a team of experts from the United States arrived at Melbourne Zoo on exchange from the Chicago Zoological Society and the Northern Rockies Conservation Co-operative. Dr Clark was given the choice of three threatened species, and, fortunately for us, chose the Eastern Barred Bandicoot.

Within a month of his arrival, population analysis had commenced. With Dr Clark's encouragement, two formal action groups, one in Chatsworth Road east of Hamilton and one in Digby Road to the west of Hamilton, had been formed. DNRE implemented an incentives scheme providing fencing materials to selected land owners to facilitate habitat extension work on private land. With the help of schools, Landcare organisations, Greening Australia and members of the community, a massive revegetation program was carried out. DNRE established a State Recovery Team comprising of a team of experts from the Department. In addition, a local team, the Hamilton Recovery Team,

gave the community an opportunity to have input into the decision making process.

Hamilton Institute of Rural Learning (HIRL), situated on the northern boundary of Hamilton, with the assistance of funds from the Department and other sources, was able to complete a wildlife fence enclosing 100 hectares of pristine grassland. Several breeding pairs were released into a semi-captive breeding facility. (It is worth noting that this is regarded as a wild population but for the purposes of this paper I will refer to it as a semi-captive breeding population).

Outside the fence another 10 hectares of grasslands are in jeopardy. The Public Golf Course are lobbying to extend into this valuable area but to this date have been prevented from doing so. Acts of vandalism have been dealt with promptly, without public comment, and conflicts over land use and opposition from a small and at times vocal minority continue to be addressed.

1991 - Bad News

The November 1991 population monitoring showed that, in spite of our efforts, we had failed to arrest the decline of the bandicoot. It was obvious that a major re-evaluation of the project was urgently required. In consultation with Dr Tim Clark and a new person on the team, Richard Reading from Yale University, restructuring took place, based on a conceptual paradigm developed to deal with the recovery of the Black Footed Ferret in the United States. This consisted of four major interactive dimensions all of which need to be addressed simultaneously in order to effect recovery and re-introduction.

The action groups were wound up and the Friends of the Eastern Barred Bandicoot was formed giving broader appeal with opportunities for individuals in the community to become involved.

There are many reasons for the decline of the Eastern Barred Bandicoot, but there is little argument that loss of habitat played a major role in the decline of the animal. However, there are some other contributing factors.

Problems

Disease

One example is Toxoplasmosis, transmitted by cats; specifically, queens at parturition. Bandicoots display symptoms, eg. appearance during the day, and disorientated behaviour. Autopsies have revealed damage to

the brain and nervous systems but to date funds have not been available to confirm the diagnosis.

Chemical Poisoning

Traces of organophosphates and organochlorines have been found but it is not known to what extent this has contributed to the death of the animal.

Predation

Predator control is never-ending. Foxes and wandering cats account for many bandicoots. In 1992, on our property, one cat accounted for 8 bandicoots, a family of ringtail possums and several birds. Attempts to deal with this particular animal and its owners have been unsuccessful. Abandoned animals are disposed of. Fox shoots have accounted for 700 foxes in and around Hamilton.

Overprotection — The Animal Liberation Organisation

In principle I do not disagree with their attitude to the fur trade but on the other hand, from a conservation point of view, their actions have been disastrous for our wildlife. There has been a population explosion of foxes as hunters have found that their skins are no longer financially viable.

In 1992, the Hamilton City Council put forward a draft proposal to control wandering animals. Claims and counter claims flew through the columns of our local papers where a number of residents prophesied dire consequences for cat owners. Dr Hugh Wirth (RSPCA), weighed into the debate without discussion with council, and so clouded the issue that rational debate become impossible. However, the council declared all public land within its control, no-go zones, which means that those areas can be cleared of predators.

Unfortunately, the Hamilton City Council have failed to persuade the Shire of Dundas to co-operate with a plan to declare the Parklands, which includes HIRL and the semi-captive population area a predator-free zone. In spite of representations and letters, the Shire prefers to sit on its hands and hope the issue will simply go away. Perhaps, as far as the remaining population is concerned, it will. A personal call to the Executive Officer at the Shire outlining our problems with wandering cats was met with an outrageous suggestion: that we acquire a dog, presumably to chase the unwanted cats. This is hardly consistent with the public statement expressing concern about the welfare of cats.

So Where Is The Bandicoot Now?

A telephone survey conducted by Richard Roding in November 1991 showed that the majority of residents in Hamilton supported the recovery of the species, and a recent survey by Deakin University has supported that finding.

A workshop conducted by DNRE attracted representatives from a number of community organisations and, as a result, the Country Fire Authority is now designing a fire protection plan in consultation with the community that takes into consideration the special needs of the remaining wild population. It is hoped that VLine can be persuaded to take an equally sensitive approach to their program of clearing vegetation alongside railway lines.

Efforts to Find Areas for Release.

A massive effort has taken place to recover the species. The good news is that within the captive breeding program and the semi-wild population, we now have many more animals at the end of 1992 than we had at the beginning of that year. While our efforts in Chatsworth Road and Digby Road failed to arrest the decline of the animal in the wild, over the past five years (since 1987), many of the problems associated with breeding the animals in captivity have been solved. It has been so successful that animals are now being transferred to other facilities in South Australia and New South Wales.

It now remains for the Recovery Team and the Reintroductions Working Group to find safe areas for rerelease on the basalt plains. A number of farmers have also expressed their interest in setting aside and developing portions of their properties for rerelease.

More Good News

We now have funds for a facilitator to assist those farmers set up landcare groups and provide safe habitat with predator control.

There is no doubt in my mind that we cannot realistically expect the species to remain with us for much longer in Chatsworth Road. For those of us who have been fortunate enough to have the animal living in close proximity, perhaps we can take some comfort in the knowledge that our efforts have contributed to its survival in the wild for a longer period of time. This gave the Department time to carry out essential field work and to establish protected breeding colonies. We are reconciled to the fact that the bandicoot must move to other areas for its survival.

Finally, I would like to pay a tribute to the officers of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Portland Region for their dedication and commitment to the project, and in particular Barry Wright (Hamilton), Peter Goldstraw (Warrnambool) and Andy Arnold (Assistant Regional Manager, Portland).

1996 Update

The plight of the Eastern Barred Bandicoot was lost during the process of re-structuring of local government. There is no indication from the new council that it will find its way back onto the agenda in the short term. A memo has been forwarded to the council that a clause in its environmental law paper regarding areas of council-owned land, which can be designated special zones, be extended to include other land under its administrative control.

We are hoping this will be seen as an acceptable proposal. However, opportunities to talk to the council are limited. An invitation to speak at one of our meeting was accepted by an employee of the council, then declined after intervention by the Chief Executive Officer. However, we are pleased that there is now a requirement that cats be registered, and that in line with State Government legislation, some mechanisms are now in place to deal with wandering domestic pets.

Locally, the species continues to decline, but happily, it flourishes elsewhere. As I mentioned in my paper, we were reconciled to the fact that areas other than Hamilton would have to be developed to ensure the survival of the species. Over the last four years five areas have been developed for re-release. These include:

- Floating Islands Lagoon Nature Reserve.
- Lake Goldsmith Nature Reserve.
- Gellibrand Hill Park.
- Mooramong, Skipton (free-ranging population).
- Private property SW of Hamilton. (free-ranging population).

The success of the breeding program made it imperative that preparation of these areas be expedited. Bandicoots were released into Gellibrand Hill Park and Mooramong about three years ago. In November 1994, the first release onto private property took place. Rigorous year round predator control is regularly carried out. In particular fox control and feral cats.

We must admit that we are wondering where the current debate on gun ownership is leading us and what the implications are for predator control. Cutbacks to the DNRE budget has meant that in Hamilton, much of the predator control is now carried out by members of the community.

The inadvertent release of the Calicivirus will no doubt be an absolute boon to farmers whose properties have been severely damaged by rabbits. However, the premature release of this virus before adequate fox control strategies were in place may well have serious consequences for wildlife.

The costs of recovering the Eastern Barred Bandicoot have been enormous but it has included provided valuable educational tools in developing techniques and protocols for the recovery of a species. These strategies have the potential to be applied in a cost-effective way to recover other species.

These acquired techniques need to be properly documented and made available to conservation departments and communities throughout Australia, to enable people to work together effectively to ensure the survival of many species currently under threat.