

Wombat rewilding project lifts numbers but hotter weather and traffic has them staying put



Photo: The wombat rewilding program began in early 2015. (Supplied: Greater Sydney Local Land Services)

A wombat rewilding program is showing an increase in population numbers, but weather trends, weeds and road dangers are hindering their movement.

What began in 2015 with 13 orphaned wombats placed back into the wild at a biobank site at Mulgoa in Western Sydney, has grown to an estimated 19 animals.

"To have a nice little population established and doing well and settled is quite exciting really," said Peter Ridgeway, a biodiversity land officer with the Greater Sydney Local Land Services.

The adult marsupials were initially homed at artificial burrows, but since the project's inception they have dug around 30 wild burrows of their own.

Wildlife cameras have recorded their movements and volunteers have been sorting through the images and data.

"We've had 106,000 photos taken on site, so it's a huge amount of information that we've collected," Mr Ridgeway said.



Photo: Wombats feed at night but tend to stay inside burrows if evening temperatures stay above 30C. (Supplied: Greater Sydney Local Land Services)

Animals feeling the heat

When using temperature sensitive cameras, a worrying trend has been discovered.

"Over 30C the wombats here at Mulgoa simply don't leave the burrow at all," Mr Ridgeway said. "We've had quite long periods where the nights didn't drop under 30C and so the wombats simply don't come out to feed."

FACT: Wombats spend two thirds of their life underground and don't tolerate temperatures much above 23 degrees Celsius. The temperature in the burrow remains under 20 degrees.

Mr Ridgeway referred to Bureau of Meteorology records that showed since 1970 the number of days above 35C in Western Sydney have more than doubled. *"So, we are quite concerned that the wombats are suffering with urban heat island effect in Western Sydney."*



Photo: Wallaroos have used vacant wombat burrows to train joeys to take their first hops. (Supplied: Greater Sydney Local Land Services)

Weeding out problems

Ecologist Linda Brown is part of the Cumberland Land Conservancy, which manages two properties close to the biobank site where the wombats were rewilded. She said wombats from the Blue Mountains National Park had started to appear at one site and the wombats from the biobank had been seen entering the other. Now she's witnessing the benefits they're having on the surrounding environment.



Photo: There has been an 80 per cent increase of other wildlife around wombat burrow sites. (Supplied: Greater Sydney Local Land Services)

Wombats are herbivores, eating mainly grass and bark. This keeps their feeding areas open and free from weed species. *"They create an area which is called a green pick, which has really good nutritious grass and other herbivore species profit from that."*

Mulgoa Valley Landcare volunteers have been removing weeds including lantana, privet and African olive, which then restores the ground feed and accessibility for the animals.

Ms Brown said more needs to be done to preserve what's left of the natural landscape from farming and urban development to improve the natural habitat.

"Sadly, there is only 5 per cent left of the Cumberland Plain Woodland and a lot of those areas don't have wombats in them because there's no connectivity."



Photo: One of the wombats has discovered a drainage culvert to safely travel beneath a major road. (Supplied: Greater Sydney Local Land Services)

Bypassing road dangers

One of the hazards inhibiting the wombats' migration is the traffic along nearby major roads.

Ms Brown said the current dry conditions, due to drought, are forcing many animals to the roadside to find feed with sadly, several dead wombats found the Cumberland Plain Woodland. However, one resourceful wombat has discovered a drainage culvert and is using it to access greener pastures on the other side of the road, Mr Ridgeway explained.

"It's quite exciting and it shows what we can do to try and reduce road kill. We've started to map all the road kill across a few sites across Western Sydney and then having a look at what solutions we might be able to retro fit onto these roads to reduce that risk."