

The wisdom of rewilding the bush with wombats

ABC Radio Sydney, by Luke Wong

A wombat rewilding program in Western Sydney is digging up huge mounds of benefits for the environment and the survival of other native wildlife.

With cute names like Stitch, Mel, Brax, Pudding and Oliver, the orphaned wombats have been reintroduced over the past couple of years at Mulgoa at the foot of the Blue Mountains.

However, finding new homes for the marsupials has been a massive task for all involved.

Peter Ridgeway is a biodiversity officer with Greater Sydney Local Land Services and has been involved with the project from its inception.

"It's been quite an involved process, a lot of science, a lot of time, quite a lot of hard yakka as well," Mr Ridgeway told Wendy Harmer on ABC Radio Sydney. "It's a huge burden of love."



Photo: WIRES volunteers release a wombat back into the wild. (Supplied: Greater Sydney Local Land Services)

The project started when WIRES volunteers rescued and nurtured the orphaned wombats after their parents became road kill.

It took two years to raise each animal to a stage where they could fend for themselves and go back into the wild.

Eleven have been released in the past two years — six females and five males. Mr Ridgeway said the program might also be having some success with increasing the local population.

"[We're] fairly confident we've got two babies now."



A Conservation Volunteers Australia team with a completed artificial wombat burrow.

Respecting the animals

Initially, Mulgoa Valley Landcare Group and Green Army volunteers dug artificial burrows for the wombats but soon enough the animals learned to do it for themselves.

Mr Ridgeway noted. *"It gives you an amazing respect for wombats when you have to dig an artificial burrow — they are huge."*

Students from the University of Western Sydney have been monitoring the animals with surveillance cameras but keeping them in view has proved a challenge.

"It's very difficult for us to track the wombats because they do keep changing, digging new burrows every other week," Mr Ridgeway said.



Other native animals have been monitored using vacant wombat burrows as shelter.

The difference a wombat makes

Peter Ridgeway stated the researchers' observations had exposed the wider benefits of reintroducing wombats to the landscape.

"We got an 80 per cent increase of other wildlife species at the site by putting the wombats in," he said. It was also noticed other animals moved into the vacant burrows, particularly during extreme climatic conditions.

"As soon as it starts raining or we've got a heatwave or a cold snap, it's not just the wombats that go down the burrows," Mr Ridgeway said.

"We've got wallabies, kangaroos, brushtail and ringtail possums, bowerbirds, goannas; these animals going down as soon as there's bad weather."



One of the 11 released wombats in bushland at Mulgoa.

Collaborating with landowners

A vital part of the program is finding a suitable location and approaching landowners to volunteer or set aside their properties for perpetuity under a government-run biodiversity offset scheme.

Lisa Harrold is the president of the Mulgoa Valley Landcare Group, which has been involved in coordinating landowners to participate in the wombat rewilding program. She has volunteered roughly two acres of her property south of Penrith to be part of the collective 50 hectares currently being used.

"Shifting these little guys back onto the Cumberland Plain is quite exciting because they've been absent for many decades."



Wombats are nocturnal marsupials and their burrowing habits make them difficult to monitor.

She said the program highlighted the ongoing challenges of Sydney's growing urban development and empathized that it was a difficult choice for many people to reserve their land for environmental conservation. *"The way property value is in western Sydney, I'm sure it was a difficult decision".*

"Property values out here have gone from the sublime to the ridiculous." Thankfully, Mr Ridgeway said there was no shortage of people wanting to get involved in the rewilding program; in fact, they have had more landowners interested than his team could handle.

"One landowner showed me all the old wombat burrows and said, 'I never thought I'd say this, but I kind of miss them'." For Ms Harrold, the benefit of improving wildlife numbers is something she wants others to ponder when they consider selling up to developers.

"People must start to rethink how they see western Sydney, in terms of whether it's just wall-to-wall houses or whether we can claw back some of the biodiversity that's really special".