

Why do so many consider wombats vermin?



Australia is home to three species of wombat, the Southern Hairy-nosed, Northern Hairy-nosed and the Bare-nosed wombat, all considered vermin until the late 20th century.

Wombat lovers will tell you stories of a generally shy animal that roams at night and quietly grazes across the landscape. So why is there so much animosity towards one of the most iconic mammals of Australia?

Human Persecution

Unfortunately, negativity towards wombats began as early as European settlement. With colonisation came the introduction of rabbits. When rabbit populations increased, widespread damage was caused to farmland and crops. Farmers naturally wanted to protect their livelihood, so they built rabbit-proof fencing. The fencing was eventually damaged by wombats trying to access their home territory in search of food.

The lack of understanding of a wombat's behaviour, meant many farmers considered them vermin. Not just for damaged fencing but for their perceived destruction to farmland. By the 1880s wombats were declared a noxious species in NSW. One reason for this was that a wombat's burrow was thought to provide shelter for rabbits. Due to the impact of rabbits on the land, farmers were legally obliged to control them. This resulted in the destruction of wombats and their burrows in an attempt to control rabbits. This misconception of rabbits seeking shelter led to wrongful persecution of wombats. Many animals will take refuge in a wombat's burrow in a time of danger however, they will not co-exist with wombats in their burrows.

It wasn't just NSW that thought of wombats as vermin. In Victoria, from 1926 to 1966, a bounty system was put in place where an estimated 64,000 wombats were killed between 1950 and 1966. A one-dollar bounty was put on each wombat head seeing wombats trapped, poisoned, shot and scalped. This practice virtually wiped out the entire Bare-nosed wombat population from the western parts of Victoria.

Although the bounty hunting ended in 1966, wombats still faced persecution in large parts of Victoria. These landowners were exempt from legislation protecting wombats due to the fact that they were still classified as a noxious species. After many years of lobbying and as a result of mass habitat loss due to bushfires, the Wildlife Act of 1975 (Vic) was amended on 6 February 2020. All wombats across Victoria now receive the same protection as other native Australian animals.

Perceptions

Today, concerns still remain that wombats create mass destruction to land. Crop loss, soil erosion and pasture damage can be cause for concern. However, these concerns should be tempered by a survey conducted by NSW Parks and Wildlife in 1971. The survey looked at the damage caused by wombats and recognised wombats were not as destructive as previously thought, with other species determined as far more destructive. We should also consider the benefits wombats and other burrowing mammals have on our environment such as soil turnover, increased nutrient cycling and water absorption. All necessary functions in the harsh Australian environment.

We know it's difficult to change public perception, especially after so many years of misinformation. A study conducted in Victoria showed that nearly half of the 141 respondents from the general public viewed wombats as pests, another study in NSW showed 23% of respondents felt the same.

What next?

We understand opinions are slowly changing due to generational differences but until the unnecessary persecution of wombats is eradicated, WPSA would like to see a more controlled effort in issuing permits. Licenses to destroy wombats and other native animals on private properties are provided by the state department. We believe stricter guidelines and tighter supervision are critical in protecting our native species.

References:

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www.australiangeographic.com.au

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