

in poor conditions – and can range as far as three kilometres in a single night.

Wombat numbers assessed by burrow activity can be improved by the use of some visual device, e.g. a camera at burrow entrances. Although tracks are then obvious this method cannot indicate if three sets going in indicate one wombat entering the burrow three times or three wombats doing this. In addition assessors regularly make errors interpreting footprints of other animals as wombats.

Burrow entrance counting doesn't work because one wombat may have six or more burrows and some burrows have one or two entrances. A single wombat may 'own' a generational burrow that over the years has been added to by other wombats.

The most effective way is to use tape across burrow entrances to obtain hair samples. A length of tape approximately 50 cm long is suspended at a height of 20–30 cm across a burrow runway or where a hole had been forced under a fence. This type of count would be able to indicate how many of the local wombats are genetically related and how many are 'imports'. This would assist determining whether any increases were localised or to do with action in other areas, e.g. land clearing or removing another population's habitat.



Wombat Control

Damage to fences by wombats can be avoided by installing wombat gates. Wombat gates have been found to be effective at 400 metre intervals and up to 800 metres apart.

South Australian farmers developed a negative attitude to wombats when the dog proof fence – meant to protect their lambs from dog attacks – was built across wombat tracks and trails. As a result of this, the fence was regularly undermined by wombats digging through. In 1982 the fence was breached 2370 times. The use of electric fencing decreased this to 15 breaches per annum and this has remained constant.

There are many ways to live with wombats – shooting them is unnecessary.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION REFER TO
LIVING WITH WOMATS BROCHURE**



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Shooting Wombats

A PEOPLE PROBLEM



Shooting Wombats

In dealing with people's problems with wildlife, the conclusion is that the issue is a 'people problem' rather than a 'wildlife problem'. One of the aims of the Wombat Protection Society of Australia is to provide education and advice about wombats.

The Law



Native animals are protected in Australia and killing them is illegal. Wombats are protected wildlife and as such require a specific permit to remove or destroy

them if they are deemed a nuisance. Heavy penalties can be incurred if killed without approval. However, in Victoria there are 193 parishes where it is not protected at all. In most other areas a farmer simply has to apply to the relevant local Government Department to cull the wombats. Unfortunately in many areas farmers still cull wombats without a permit. Therefore the wombat remains one of the poorest protected native animals.

FALSE: There are plagues of wombats and shooting controls numbers.

FACT: Shooting wombats or removing resident wombats is the least effective method of controlling wombat numbers or burrows.

Breeding

Wombats breed after they are two or three years old, every one to three years and only produce one joey, although on very rare occasions two may be born. They take up to two years to raise their young so may only have three or four joeys in a 10 to 15 year life span. Destruction or removal of young

wombats leads directly to an increase in young born in a particular period.

Research shows that wombats have young in a 50:50 ratio hence of all young born and successfully reared in any period 50% will be male. The young females take two years to reach sexual maturity and are unlikely to breed until they have established a large enough territory, i.e. have access to a range of burrows not being used by other breeding females. Hence, most females will not breed until their third year.

A wombat cannot become pregnant while she is lactating so while there is a joey in the pouch or a suckling young at foot, the wombat will not reproduce.

A pair of wombats can only produce the equivalent of one female every two to four years so it is not possible to have a population 'explosion' of wombats.

If it is true that population numbers have increased then reasons other than the usual breeding cycle of the current local resident wombats are involved.

Such explanations could include:

- incorrect methods used to estimate wombat populations
- indiscriminate culling leading to established animals losing their territory and other younger animals being prepared to 'divvy' up the territory (*however, even under this scenario while a slight increase in population might be detected it wouldn't be 'explosive'*)
- the loss of habitat in local environs resulting in a movement of non-local wombats into an area
- the removal of rabbits in an area increasing both wombat and kangaroo numbers
- lowering of water tables causing wombats to expand territory towards coastal areas.

Wombat Competition

Wombats do not compete with grazing stock. They have the lowest metabolic rate and known food intake of all Australian marsupials and by preference they eat hard native perennial grasses – such as Poa grass leaves and roots – that stock cannot tolerate. It takes 12 wombats to eat about the same amount of grass as one sheep. Wombats are relatively territorial and a local wombat will work hard to ensure that recruitment from wombats elsewhere does not occur. It periodically uses four or five burrows distributed over its five hectare range, and sometimes these burrows may be shared for short periods. Often wombats pass through another area in search of by water or native grass. If local wombats have been culled new wombats will move in from surrounding areas. These newcomers, often younger animals hunted out of existing territories, will often create new burrows or renovate and extend existing burrows. So burrows are not a good way to estimate wombat numbers.

Wombat Counting

Wombat numbers are extremely difficult to estimate by visual counts.

The most ineffective way to establish wombat numbers is to try and count them or their burrows, and the next least effective method is burrow activity assessments which includes scat counting. Not understanding the behaviour of wombats accounts for why most methods of counting are seriously flawed.

Wombat activity assessed by counting scats can be confused because a single wombat can produce 80–100 square shaped scat pellets a night. Wombats also have a wide home range – five hectares in good conditions and up to 23 hectares