

Death of a thousand cuts

The recent extinction of the Southern Brown Bandicoot in the Pines Reserve at Frankston

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Sometime in 2012, the Secretary of the Department of Sustainability (DSE) Greg Wilson advised his Minister Ryan Smith that the Southern Brown Bandicoot is "most likely extinct in the Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve". The Minister has uncritically accepted this advice and has refused to meet with people who beg to differ. The 200-hectare Nature Conservation Reserve is in Frankston North. It is managed for DSE by Parks Victoria.

The Southern Brown Bandicoot breeds all year round. It has one of the shortest recorded gestation periods of any mammal (12 days); gives birth to up to 16 young, (between 2 and 4 survive), has a lactation period of about 60 days, bears a new litter immediately after the pouch is vacated, has 2 to 3 litters a year and can produce up to 30 young in its 3 to 5 year lifespan.

The Pines' unique heath land vegetation offers ideal habitat for Bandicoots and a suite of small marsupials, birds and reptiles that share this space.

The species prospered when the 3 areas of crown land which now forms the largest part of the Reserve was managed separately by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the Keith Turnbull Research Institute and Melbourne Parks and Waterways who managed the original 108 hectare Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve as declared in 1989. All three entities maintained strict control of predators. DSE and Parks Victoria assumed management of the land in the mid 1990's.

In 1999 ecologist Scott Taylor described the Bandicoot population in the Pines as being the largest on the Mornington Peninsula. On a patch of ideal and reserved habitat, it's taken just 14 years of DSE and Parks Victoria oversight for this "possible extinction" scenario to manifest itself.

Fecundity, disease, habitat and food availability are not cited as being the cause of the alleged demise of the species. Scientists familiar with the Reserve have repeatedly cited systemic failure by these entities to control of feral predators as being the critical threat. Forensic zoologist Hand Brunner has confirmed this repeatedly via his analysis of fox, dog and cat scats collected in the Reserve that contained undigested Bandicoot hair.

Parks Victoria's overarching Conservation Reserves Strategy directs that the paramount management objective of a Nature Conservation Reserve is to "Conserve and protect species communities and habitats of indigenous plants, animals and other organisms". The species is afforded special protection by State and Commonwealth legislation.

Yet in the period from 1999 to 2012, foxes, dogs and cats have eaten the Southern Brown Bandicoot to the point where Secretary Greg Wilson advises Minister Smith that the species is "possibly extinct" in the Pines and there is nothing to be done and that further constituent correspondence should be directed to the people at Parks Victoria who directly oversaw its demise.

A web search of the word “extinction” reveals many meanings. One definition is; “The state or process of ceasing or **causing something to cease** to exist”.

It could be argued that Greg Wilson, his predecessor Peter Harris and former CEO of Parks Victoria Mark Stone (then Director of National Parks) have been complicit in “causing something to cease to exist” by virtue of the systemic management failures they have overseen.

Since 2004, experts and local field naturalists have on many occasions and by many means brought the predation problem to the joint and several attention of a plethora of Victorian Government officers ranging from local Parks Victoria ground staff and planners, to regional biodiversity staff and assorted biodiversity and crown land mandarins and deputy mandarins. Similarly, Ministers Thwaites and Jennings and their advisors had direct knowledge of this problem that existed on a piece of crown land recognized by the Victorian Government as a biosite of state significance whose 1993 Draft Management Plan describes it as being “the only example heath land on an extensive dune field left in the Melbourne area.”

Public service semantics has played a large part in the evolution of Greg Wilson’s “most likely extinction” scenario in this Nature Conservation Reserve.

Behind the scenes Parks Victoria has described the Reserve to decision makers as an urban fringe park whose remnant habitat is degraded and fragmented. They say it’s prone to vandalism and deliberately lit fires, has a low diversity of ecological vegetation classes (plant communities) and has been the subject of damage by vehicles (their own since the mid 1990’s) and that its in a growth area that needs more recreational opportunities.

Parks Victoria allocates management resources on the basis of its Levels of Protection Framework. It rates land on an A to E scale. In 2006 it allocated a D rating to the Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve.

The Auditor General and Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability have repeatedly queried the reliability of DSE’s flora and fauna databases. Knowing this, Parks Victoria allocated this service rating without consulting scientists and field ecologists whose knowledge superseded that of the State databases. It allocated this rating in the absence of a flora and fauna survey, which it was funded to undertake the following year when \$700k was allocated for this and other work inclusive of a habitat restoration project.

The flora and fauna survey was subsequently undertaken by the Linking Melbourne Authority in response to State and Commonwealth ministerial directives regarding the scope of the Peninsula Link environmental assessment process. LMA have also spent millions on fauna underpasses for Bandicoots designed by experts to connect the two halves of the expanded reserve and revegetating extensive areas to provide additional habitat. Its unclear how the funds allocated for this urgent work in 2007 have been have been acquitted by Parks Victoria.

Claims of the animal’s extinction are also the basis of the withdrawal of an EPBC Act application to further fragment the reserve by way of the construction of a fenced shared cycle path bisecting the Reserve. Parks Victoria instigated this proposal. The purpose of the proposed fencing was to ensure that dogs being walked in a Reserve known to provide habitat to a species listed as endangered by Victorian and Australian Government authorities don’t interfere with that species in circumstances where roaming dogs (and dogs on leads) are known to do exactly that which is one of the reasons why Commonwealth authorities determined

the path's construction to be a threatening process.

The Reserve's 1993 Draft management plan recommends the exclusion of dogs from the Reserve. Because of the presence of dogs in this Nature Conservation Reserve, the effectiveness of recent and past management actions to control predators has been severely prejudiced and its cost to both the Linking Melbourne Authority and Parks Victoria significantly elevated. Parks Victoria has had since 1996 to deal with this matter. Despite advising Minister Smith that the matter of dogs in the Reserve is under review; it continues to actively promote the practice.

The unique character of this land and its fauna and flora was reiterated by independent experts retained by the Victorian Government in their submissions to the Peninsula Link environmental assessment process in early 2009. They also noted the presence of the Bandicoots and other species cited for protection by State and Commonwealth law.

In consenting to the Peninsula Link project which bisects this Reserve, the Victorian Minister for Planning directed in his comments on the Environment Assessment (June 2009) that "A specific plan for the protection of the Southern Brown Bandicoot (SBB) within The Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve be prepared to the satisfaction of the Secretary DSE before works proceed in this Reserve. " It is unclear as to how this direction was given effect by then Secretary Peter Harris or his successor Greg Wilson who took over in August that year. To many outsiders viewing this matter in retrospect it would appear that from the outset Greg Wilson's department had no intention of complying or indeed that they would they would consent to the construction of a pest proof perimeter fence which was a condition of the Commonwealth Government's authorisation for the project to proceed.

This is the closest location to Melbourne where the Southern Brown Bandicoot is (was) known to occur. Its habitat supports a suite of other species. This land is now (or was) the northern most extent of this species' range in the Gippsland bioregion. 25 years ago that point was Woodlands Golf Course in Mordialloc and Braeside Park in Braeside. The species has also disappeared from Langwarrin Flora and Fauna Reserve which is a State Park. Its Management Plan recommended it's fencing to protect fauna from predation. As a question of discrete policy, this recommendation was never implemented.

On the basis of the best scientific advice available to the Victorian Government of the day, this land was set aside for the people of Victoria by the Victorian Parliament as a Nature Conservation Reserve to ensure that endangered species inhabiting the space would be afforded protection by virtue of the land's reservation and don't become extinct, particularly in circumstances where the such species are also afforded special protection by Commonwealth and State law.

In November 2006 a Parks Victoria representative advised a conference, "the recent funding announcement by the government of an additional \$700 000, is exciting for those of us involved with the reserve. The decline of the Southern Brown Bandicoot has been well-documented in the reserve and adjoining areas. Parks Victoria is committed to halting this decline. Strategies employed to date have been focused on reducing the predatory pressure on the Southern Brown Bandicoot (from cats, in particular)."

Clearly these strategies and the \$700k haven't delivered and this is another of the thousand cuts delivered to biodiversity not just in the Southern Bayside and Northern Peninsula but the Port Phillip Region as a whole.

No offsetting can replace this population. Talk of corridors is specious. If effective resources cannot be allocated and effective predator control on land set aside for conservation can't be implemented then where can effective management be practiced? Obviously not within the footprint of the \$100 million plus Metropolitan Parks Levy we all pay.

The thin green line has again been breached at the urban interface. Via a discreet policy of triage its being pushed back to undefined areas beyond the metropolis by the very bureaucracy charged with its protection. This being the case its time Greg Wilson and his boss of lands Peter Appleford came clean and told us that all we can expect to see in our metropolitan and peri urban conservation reserves is sustainably managed populations of ringtails, rabbits, rats, feral cats and foxes.