

The INSTITUTE of FORESTERS of AUSTRALIA

Leadbeater's Possum, timber harvesting, and a proposed new national park



The Institute of Foresters of Australia does not believe that creating a new National Park is the answer to saving Leadbeaters Possum from extinction. The greatest danger to Leadbeaters possum is fire and this was proven in the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires where significant areas of its habitat in National Parks were destroyed and in some instances this habitat had never been harvested and nor was it ever going to be harvested. However a serious social impact of a new National Park would be to largely close the state's valuable hardwood timber industry.

The proposed new park would encompass around 525,000 hectares of forest in Victoria's Central Highlands region approximately bounded by Eildon and Rawson in the east, the Moodarra Reservoir and Nar Nar Goon North in the south, Broadford in the west, and Yea and Alexandra in the north.

Some Leadbeater's Possum facts:

- Its preferred habitat is tall ash-type mountain forest with large old live or dead nesting trees standing amidst a dense understorey of regenerating eucalypt and wattle, but it also occurs in some low woodlands.
- *Its most suitable forest structure naturally arises 10 to 30 years after a major bushfire where there are numbers of remaining nest trees, alive or dead, with a dense regenerating understorey.*
- Within the next decade the area of suitable Leadbeater's Possum habitat should increase as old growth forests burnt in the 2009 'Black Saturday' bushfires develop a dense understorey of eucalypt and wattle regrowth.
- *These areas of recently burnt old growth, as well as the remaining unburnt old growth forests are all contained in conservation reserves.*
- Despite being officially listed as 'critically endangered', the Victorian Government's 2013 estimate of the Leadbeater's Possum population is between 4,000 and 11,000 individuals scattered across a range of approximately 5600 square kilometres. More recent surveying suggests this may be an underestimate, and includes records of the possum in harvested regrowth and areas regenerating after the 2009 bushfires.

Q: Isn't timber harvesting the greatest threat to the survival of Leadbeater's Possum? NO

- Most of the ash-type forests (around 69%) preferred by Leadbeater's Possum is already contained in conservation reserves or water supply catchments where timber harvesting does not occur.
- *In the 31% of the ash-type forest where timber harvesting is permitted, the harvested trees are predominately 76-year old advanced regrowth in which Leadbeater's Possum does not nest. Where groups or individual older trees suitable for nesting do occur in these harvestable areas, they are identified during pre harvest planning and retained for their habitat value.*
- Stands of older trees with hollows suitable for Leadbeaters Possum nesting are not harvested – there has been no old growth forest harvesting in this region for approximately 30-years.
- *The smallest and perhaps most vulnerable colonies of Leadbeater's Possum occur in sub-alpine snow gum woodlands (eg. Lake Mountain) and lowland swampy woodland (at Yellingbo) which has never been subject to timber harvesting.*

Q: Isn't timber harvesting responsible for the current lack of old trees with suitable nesting hollows?

NO

- The lack of old eucalypts with nesting hollows in the Central Highlands forests is primarily due to severe bushfires in 1926 and 1939 which, in combination, burnt an estimated 85% of their area, killing most old growth forest and replacing it with regrowth which is now 76 – 89 years old.
- *Old trees (including standing dead trees known as stags) that had survived the 1939 and 1926 fires and had provided possum nesting hollows since then, have been collapsing in significant numbers over the past 20-years.*

- More recently, the 2009 ‘Black Saturday’ bushfires killed much of the remaining old growth forest which had been surviving in Melbourne’s water supply catchments.
- *Timber harvesting of the 1926 and 1939 fire regrowth forests since the mid-1980s has created areas of younger regrowth that is now from 1 to 30 years old. Even if these areas hadn’t been harvested, they would now be 76 – 89 years old, which is still over 100-years from becoming old trees with suitable nesting hollows.*

Q: Wouldn’t no logging and a Great Forest National Park save Leadbeater’s Possum? NO

- Recent conservation advice which led to the possum being listed as ‘critically endangered’ says that it takes around 190 years for trees growing in the ash-type forests to develop hollows suitable for nesting by Leadbeater’s Possum.
- *Trees in these forests that are being harvested for wood products are mostly 76 years old. Even if they are left to grow on in a new national park, it would take more than another 100 years for them to develop hollows suitable for Leadbeater’s Possum nesting.*
- The conservation advice also said that Leadbeater’s Possum will have largely disappeared in 15 to 20 years unless immediate steps are taken to increase suitable habitat. If this is true, stopping timber harvesting to reserve forests that the possum won’t be able to nest in for another 100 years will not help.

- Our National Parks organisations are in our opinion seriously underfunded and adding a new Park for them to manage without a significant increase in funding will not ensure that there is any measureable increase in the ‘in forest’ conservation management of Leadbeaters Possum, beyond what is occurring now.

Q: But wouldn’t a Great Forest National Park benefit Victoria and the local community? NO

- A new National Park would close a significant forestry, timber, and wood manufacturing industry which employs several thousand people in regional Victoria and suburban Melbourne. Past experience suggests that most of these lost jobs are not replaced by new jobs in national park management or tourism. Therefore a new National Park in our opinion would have a significant social impact that could well go beyond the cost of any redundancy payment.
- *It would add little or nothing to regional tourism which is already vibrant, has successfully co-existed with the timber industry for decades, and is heavily reliant on the forestry road network.*
- It would effectively remove the forestry and timber industry personnel and their equipment which are the forest’s front-line firefighters, and would result in much of the forest road network falling into disrepair. This would only make the Leadbeater’s Possum and the region’s other conservation values more vulnerable to its greatest threat, which is severe fire.

Q: Without the new national park, can anything be done to save Leadbeater’s Possum? YES

- The best strategies to conserve Leadbeater’s Possum don’t require a new national park but are rarely mentioned. They include nest boxes and captive breeding to provide insurance populations and a source of animals for potential relocation.
- *The only way to avoid the predicted habitat shortage is to strategically install nest boxes, including a program of maintenance and replacement. Nest boxes can be used in any suitable forest type, irrespective of whether it is State forest, national park, or water catchment. In the longer term, programs to artificially create nesting hollows in young trees and to modify timber harvesting practices are already being developed.*
- A substantial area of ideal future Leadbeater’s Possum habitat is developing as burnt forests continue to recover from the 2009 ‘Black Saturday’ bushfires in parts of Melbourne’s water supply catchments.
- *Areas of ash-type forests regenerating after the 1983 bushfires are currently amongst the best Leadbeater’s Possum habitat.*
- A comprehensive set of actions recommended by the Leadbeater’s Possum Advisory Group in January 2014 should give confidence that this species can be successfully conserved and managed while maintaining the socio-economic value of a substantial and sustainable local timber industry. Their report can be accessed at:

http://www.depi.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/258214/Leadbeaters-Possum-Advisory-Group-Recommendations-Report_UV.pdf

For more information - contact the Institute of Foresters of Australia: admin@forestry.org.au

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