

DR MARISA PATERSON MLA SPEECH

May 2021

Wombat Mange

I wish to bring to the attention of this Assembly the challenges faced by our wombat population in the ACT. In particular, the issue of mange, which presents a major threat.

We're lucky, living in the bush capital, to have frequent encounters with many of Australia's unique and iconic native fauna, of which the Kangaroo is undoubtedly our most common.

Less frequently, but occasionally, we're reminded of our wombat population. Because we don't see wombats all that often, the issues they face are often invisible to us.

Mange is perhaps the single largest issue facing the wombat population in the ACT and surrounding areas. Sarcoptic mange is a highly infectious disease that transfers between many kinds of animals, including humans. The disease was first introduced to wombats by early European settlers and their domestic animals. The female mite burrows her way through the skin of wombats and leaves behind a trail of eggs to which the host has an allergic reaction.

The allergic reaction causes the wombat to scratch, resulting in open wounds on the wombat's skin which often become infected – particularly in the warmer months. As time passes, a thick skin plaque grows across the wombats' body like a crust. The crust will often grow over the eyes and ears of the wombat causing blindness and deafness.

Once a wombat has mange, it is dying.

In Canberra and beyond there are organisations doing fantastic work to help our furry friends. I had the pleasure of catching up recently with Yolandi Vermaak, the founder of Wombat Rescue.

Yolandi is tackling the issue by raising greater public awareness and through mange treatment programs. If the community isn't aware of the issue, then wombats with mange will go unreported and untreated.

The second part of the battle that Yolandi is tackling is treatment. Late last year in an interview with ABC Radio, Yolandi reported that an estimated 70% of the bare-nosed wombat population across the ACT and NSW have been impacted. Trying to treat such a significant proportion of the population is tough.

The treatment for mange is long-term (a year or longer), and labour and resource-intensive. After finding the burrows of wombats, a flap is installed at the entrance. When a wombat walks through the flap, the treatment is directly distributed onto the animal and begins taking effect.

So, what can we, as members of the community, do to help our wombats fight off this disease?

There are a few options: If you see a wombat that looks infected or unwell, you can contact Wombat Rescue or ACT Wildlife to inform them of the location and health of the animal. You can even send a photo from your phone with a pin dropped at the location you saw her or him. If nobody knows that there is a wombat suffering, no one can do anything about it.

If you own a rural property, providing access to your land to find and treat wombats is welcomed.

Another option is engaging in the treatment process itself. Both Wombat Rescue and ACT Wildlife have excellent programs that members of the community can join, whereby the organisation will provide you with the method of treatment and necessary resources.

Members of our community can also donate to these organisations. This is a great option for those who want to help out but don't necessarily come across wombats very often, if at all. A big part of the battle for Wombat Rescue and ACT Wildlife is getting the resources they need to continue their work and help as many wombats as they possibly can.

Treating mange in our wombat populations is a tough battle but, as a community, we can all work together to help combat it, and support the efforts of volunteers who are working hard to ensure a healthy wombat population in the ACT.

Thank you.