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abuse exposing and challenging animal neglect, exploitation,

REPORT ON THE POSSUMS IN CARLTON GARDENS, MELBOURNE

During April 2009 our office began receiving a number of calls from concerned members of the public regarding the observed impact of Melbourne City Council's collaring of possum habitat trees in Carlton Gardens.

Observations reported to us included:

- possums with injuries, especially to limbs: deep cuts, limping, broken legs etc.
- possums stranded during the day, no shelter from the sunlight and weather
- possums attempting to cross busy Rathdowne, Nicholson and Victoria Sts in apparent search of habitat
- a number of possum joeys without mums
- a increased level of distress and fighting amongst possums

In response to the urgency and regularity of such reports, a group of Animal Active volunteers and wildlife carers have begun monitoring the situation during the evenings.

Our findings to date are as follows:

a) Possums are trapped in trees unable to access food or water, eventually succumbing to starvation and dehydration. We have observed between 15-20 animals trapped in Carlton Gardens including mothers with young, old possums or very young joeys on their own; this situation is especially evident where excessive collaring of habitat trees has been implemented across entire avenues of mature trees with habitat dens.



b) Possums that do manage to leap over the bands to the ground are subsequently stranded

Outcomes include exclusion from the safety of daytime shelter, an extremely stressful outcome for a nocturnal animal; vulnerability to predation by dogs running off-leash and interference by humans; mother possums becoming

separated from dependent young that are unable to leap the distance, condemning possum joeys to high levels of distress and eventual starvation; in a desperate attempt to obtain some daytime shelter possums have been observed clinging to crevices on the tree trunk below the level of the metal bands (as is evident in the following images) where sunlight prevents rest and birds constantly attack them.



c) An excessive and constantly increasing number of habitat trees have been banded. This has forced surviving possum populations to crowd into any suitable unbanded habitat trees resulting in high levels of stress and fighting for space amongst naturally territorial animals. Council has failed to implement the humane measure of replacing lost dens with wooden possum boxes to accommodate displaced animals.

d) Modified metal bands cause severe injuries

Council contractors have attempted to attach metal bands on gnarled tree trunks by cutting the upper edges of the bands to fit around knots. This has resulted in razor-sharp edges that injure trapped possums as they attempt to manouvre their way out of captivity.



The following image was taken of a “degloved” possum picked up by volunteers in Carlton Gardens and euthanized due to its wound being too advanced to heal; this possum had been carrying around a joey for several weeks, according to reports from members of the public, while gradually losing the use of its injured

foot and leg to the extent that it could no longer climb to safety; her joey, although still too young, had been left to fend for itself.



e) Dogs off - leash

The possums stranded on the ground have their predicament further compounded by dogs running off-leash day and night that cannot be escaped as the metal bands prevent the possums' access to the safety of trees.

f) Rubbish Bins

The bins in the park allow possums access; they are usually brimming with rubbish and have holes on their outer sections that act as possum "step ladders"; we have on a number of occasions found animals inside bins unable to clamber out or chewing on bits of plastic bag smeared with foodstuff; bins may also be providing alternative dark nesting areas for daytime rest, putting displaced possums at considerable risk of further injury from rubbish such as cans and bottles unknowingly tossed on top of them as they sleep.

Again, this situation represents a further outcome of the lack of consideration given to the wildlife displaced and stranded by Council's excessive use of metal collaring in Carlton Gardens.

4. Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986

In general the Council has created an intolerable situation for the resident wildlife in Carlton Gardens. It is hard to see how the levels of suffering generated by both upper-branch and lower-trunk banding of wildlife habitat trees can be reconciled with Section 9.1 (f) of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* under which it is an act of 'Cruelty' for any animal to be knowingly "*confined or otherwise unable to provide for itself*" where the responsible person "*fails to provide the animal with proper and sufficient food, drink and shelter*" or Section 9.1 (c) that further qualifies 'Cruelty' as "*an act with the result that unnecessary, unreasonable or unjustifiable pain and suffering is caused to an animal*".

5. The jury is out on whether possums cause significant or lasting tree damage

Although there is a prevailing orthodoxy amongst council arborists that most tree damage is attributed to the presence of possums, common sense would suggest this is no more than scapegoating. For over a century possums and trees have co-habited in our

parks and open spaces; how is it, if possums are indeed the devouring hordes some characterize them as, that the trees are still standing?

Whilst it is undeniable that many of our trees have struggled to survive in the last ten or so years, perhaps it would be more fruitful to look at other factors directly impacting their health such as drought, the preference for planting exotic flora, Elms and Oaks for instance, not as adaptable to Australian climactic conditions, poor management practices and natural cycles of senescence.

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