

POSSUMS



MYTHS&FACTS

“Merri, Hand-raised Orphan”

Photographer Lee-Anne Shepherd Prize Winner, Wildspace Wildlife Exhibition 2009

[://www.itsawildlife.com.au/index.php?page=wildspace-2009](http://www.itsawildlife.com.au/index.php?page=wildspace-2009)

When it comes to the humble possum, those who try to protect its welfare find themselves on the back foot. It must be recognised that all possums are native Australian animals, marsupials, legally protected in Victoria by the Wildlife Act 1975 (Vic)

Now turn the page and let us dispel some common but false attitudes that only serve to reduce the status of possums as unique native wildlife deserving of protection...

1. “Possums are everywhere, breeding in plague proportions”

FALSE Evidence recently presented on ABC’s *Stateline* program strongly supports the view that by “the time your children have children there may not be any of these animals left” ¹ Many have **reported noticing** “the decline in numbers as developments destroy trees and possums become unwelcome guests in homes”. The South Australian Government has made it “illegal for householders to kill a possum. It hopes this will halt their decline but it warns only a community effort will save” the Brushtail Possum. Possums everywhere, including Victoria, are under similar population stress due to the same factors identified in South Australia.

2. “Trees and green space for people is our central concern”

Green space, such as parks and riverbanks, are also habitat; uncurbed development results in fragmentation and depletion of habitat and tree canopy for wildlife leading to their displacement and endangering their lives. Brushtail Possums are made especially vulnerable by the removal of mature trees that provide habitat hollows; Ringtail Possums on the other hand need interconnecting canopy to move along and thick foliage for nest building. Councils must adopt policies that reflect awareness of the habitat factor in green space and introduce appropriate trees, creating wildlife-supportive environments.

Ultimately looking after possums entails looking after trees; the unnecessary removal of trees results not only in the loss of the trees themselves but also in dwindling possum habitat leading to a decline in urban wildlife populations. Thus, adopting wildlife-protective policies such as the planting of indigenous flora in our parks, will enhance green space for the benefit of all users, both human and non-human.

3. “Possums are pests”

FALSE Possums are unique native animals. If “we have possums in the suburbs we ought to cherish them and, if one does get into your roof and carries on as if he’s walking around with hobnailed boots all over your roof, you may not have a possum problem, as people describe it, you may have a maintenance problem” ²

4. Possum presence in our parks, green spaces and gardens is enriching, especially for families with young children, offering the sensitizing experience of “getting up close and personal” with wild animals that have adapted to our changing environment, an experience neither provided by captive wild animals in zoos nor domesticated companion animals.

5. Healthy protected possums in our parks serve as a litmus test on how well councils and other authorities are doing in managing open space for present and future generations in terms of conservation, biodiversity and species survival.



How does your local council shape up in its treatment of local wildlife? Let us know.
For information on how you can support urban wildlife visit our website at www.animalactive.org
Contact Animal Active! phone: **03 9380 2252** or mail to: animalactive@inet.net.au

¹ (“Why are possums disappearing?” ABC *Stateline* SA, Broadcast 10/06/2005 Reporter: Paul McCarthy. URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/stateline/sa/content/2005/s1391874.htm>)

² *ibid*