

To Keiran McNamara
Director of Nature Conservation

THE LIBRARY
DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION
& LAND MANAGEMENT
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Woylies at Port Kennedy: Conclusions from a survey.

Background

On hearing a report that a woylie had been caught at Port Kennedy in mid March by members of the LCDC that manages the area, I arranged for a consultant to investigate the possibility that a natural population had persisted there. I acted in accordance with the National Woylie Recovery Plan and with some urgency because of well-progressed proposals to develop the area. The consultant, Ms. Cathy Lambert, has concluded her survey. I attach her report and detail my conclusions here.

Chronology

1992-March 11 1995. The LCDC members have conducted a trapping program (licensed by CALM) of more than 8718 trap-nights to document the mammal fauna of the area. They have caught numerous southern brown bandicoots but no woylies prior to March 12 this year although their report to CALM for 1993-94 noted sightings of a small hopping animal.

14 March 1995. Jeff Anderton, Chair of the LCDC, reported to CALM that a woylie had been caught at Port Kennedy. It was allegedly found dead in a trap on 12.3.95 and delivered to the WA Museum for identification by Joan Payne of the Conservation Council of WA on Monday 13.3.95. An inconclusive post-mortem was conducted by a pathologist at the Department of Agriculture.

23 March 1995. Ms. Lambert was contracted by me to determine the status of woylies at Port Kennedy.

24 March 1995. Jeff Anderton phoned me at 10.30 about the survey and reported capturing a second woylie (male, weighing 1.2kg) near the site the first had been trapped. It had been photographed and released. He did not mention media presence but Channel 10, the West Australian and a local paper had been present at the release. Channel 10 news that night showed Bob Holze (LCDC, in charge of trapping) measuring and releasing a woylie.

1-13 April 1995. Ms Lambert (assisted daily by volunteers including Mr. Holze) surveyed the area. She used 100 cage traps to effect 1024 trap-nights. From 1-4 April she trapped (her trap-line "L") near the site where the woylie was caught on 24 March and caught the same animal each night. It was ear-tagged and weighed (0.97kg) on 1 April. Thereafter she located her traps elsewhere. Mr. Holze confirmed it was the one he had caught on 24 March.

During the survey the decomposing carcass of a third woylie was found in the same area. No other woylies were found.

12 April 1995. About 5pm Ms Lambert returned to trap-line "L" to complete documentation on habitat and found the woylie she had previously ear-tagged dead in a trap that had been stolen from another site some days previously. I collected it from her at about 7.30pm. It had been dead for some time, probably all day. An inconclusive post-mortem was conducted by a pathologist at the Department of Agriculture.

Pertinent detail

- We have three woylie carcasses from Port Kennedy; all obtained between March 12 and April 12 1995. Two of the animals died (or were found) in traps not set by CALM or our consultants and one was found dead; its state of decomposition suggests it died at about the time the first one was found dead in a trap.
- The LCDC told Ms. Lambert that they caught and released a fourth, young one. This was not reported to CALM and is unsubstantiated.
- In recent years CALM scientists have caught more than 1000 woylies and have translocated many to several new locations without having any deaths occur in traps.
- Woylies commonly incur abrasion damage to the skin on their noses while trying to escape from traps. This heals quickly but often as un-furred, pigmented scar tissue. The Channel 10 footage of the second woylie being handled prior to release clearly shows an extensive area of black unfurred skin on the nose and a small area of red, recent abrasion at its posterior margin. This is consistent with the carcass which I handled. It suggests that the animal had been trapped or kept in captivity previously.
- No detail is available on the other two carcasses.
- Woylies readily enter traps. At Dryandra up to 70% of traps catch woylies each night; elsewhere (where populations are lower) up to 10% of traps catch woylies each night. At Port Kennedy the one live woylie encountered by Ms Lambert was trapped on each of four nights she had traps in the area it lived and it was trapped on two other occasions. Yet over 8700 trap-nights by LCDC trappers and 1000 trap-nights by Ms. Lambert in an area of less than 500ha failed to catch any others except one found dead in a trap on 12 March 1995 (and ? an unsubstantiated report of one other since then).
- Since the time woylies vanished from most of their range the Port Kennedy area has experienced fire, invasion by foxes, cats, rabbits and has been grazed by domestic stock and had human habitation on and near by. All these factors would have adversely affected chances of woylie survival.
- The weight of the second woylie declined by 30% between its capture by the LCDC and its death.

DATE	CAPTURE	WEIGHT
24 March	LCDL	1200g
01 April	LAMBERT	970g
13 April	Illegal	810g*

* at post mortem

- There is irrefutable evidence of illegal and obstructive interference in the conduct of the survey and the status of woylies at Port Kennedy by unknown persons. A number of incidents have been reported to the Wildlife Branch of CALM to aid investigation. An obvious example is the theft of a trap that was subsequently set, presumably by the thief, where the one known live animal lived. It caught that animal which was left to die in the trap on the penultimate day of the survey, The

only plausible interpretation I can see is an attempt to discredit the survey and perhaps CALM.

Conclusion

There is a remote possibility that woylies have survived in the Port Kennedy area but:

- the history of land use and invasion of feral animals particularly foxes and feral cats coupled to the pattern of woylie decline across Australia
- the ready trapability of woylies coupled to the co-incident discovery of three woylies in a month (now all dead) but none before March 1995 despite an intensive trap effort since 1992
- the progressive loss of weight (and thus condition, suggesting the habitat was not suitable) of the one animal caught repeatedly over a month
- the occurrence of illegal and obstructive interference in the conduct of the survey and
- evidence from scar tissue on its nose that at least one of the animals had been captured or kept in captivity previously

strongly suggests that woylies have recently been imported to the area, and that there is not a viable population of woylies at Port Kennedy.

Dr. A.N. Start
Chair, National Woylie Recovery Team
Acting Head, Bio-conservation Group, SID, CALM