NUMBATS

FACTS ABOUT NUMBATS

STATUS:	Rare with a restricted range.
	Total population is less than 2,000.
HABITAT:	Now found only in eucalypt woodland
	in the south-west of Western Australia.
DIET:	Termites. About 20,000 are eaten per day.
BREEDING:	Season – young born in January,
	independent in November.
	Gestation – 14 days.
	Litter size – usually 4.
	Size at birth – 1 cm.
ADULT WEIGHT:	Male – 550g-700g
	Female – 450g-650g.
CLASSIFICATION:	Order – Polyprotodonta
	Family – Myrmecobiidae
	Genus and Species –
	Myrmecobius fasciatus

THE NUMBAT

In a land of extraordinary wildlife, the Numbat stands out as unusual. It is a marsupial but has no pouch so the young have to hold on tight to their mother's teats with their mouths and forepaws. The numbat is one of only two marsupials that is diurnal (active in daylight) and it is the only marsupial to feed exclusively on termites. It is so remarkable that it was declared the mammal emblem of Western Australia in 1973, but tragically it is now extremely rare in the wild. To ensure the long-term survival of the Numbat, the Perth Zoo and the Department of Conservation and Land Management are working together to run a captive-breeding programme for the Numbat. With less than 2,000 left, the world needs more Numbats.

GOING...GOING...

Like so much of Australia's wildlife, the Numbat declined soon after European settlement. As is shown over the page the Numbat occurred across much of southern Australia in 1850 but is now found on less than 1% of its former range. The Numbat was in balance with its environment until European settlement of Australia. People upset that balance in three ways.

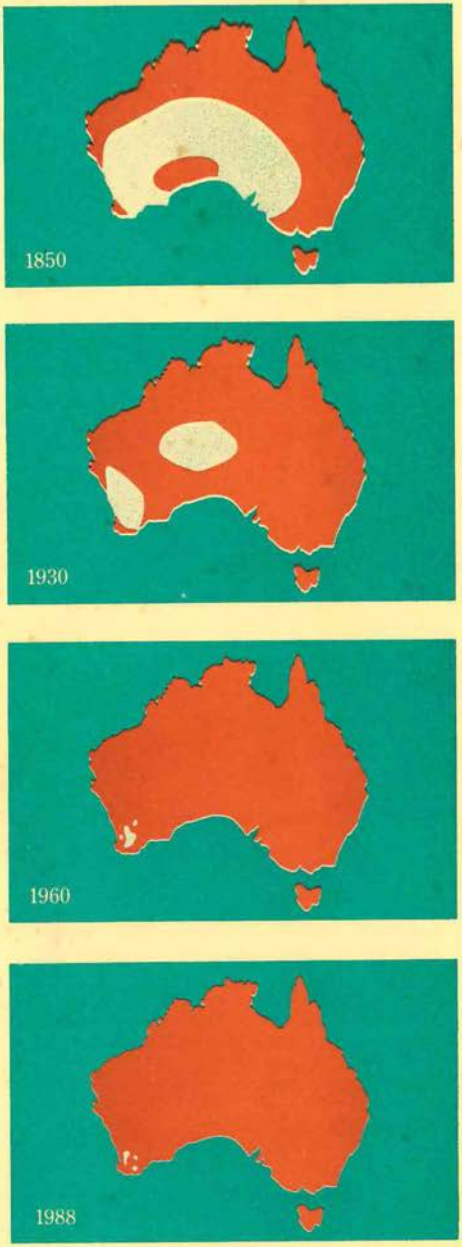
FOXES

The Fox was introduced to Australia for sport. Despite the efforts of the gentleman hunters, however, Foxes spread rapidly. First released near Melbourne in the 1860s, they reached Kalgoorlie in 1917 and Perth only a few years later. The expansion of the Fox proved disastrous for the Numbat because it was an unfamilar and efficient predator. The range of the Numbat contracted as the Fox spread from east to west.

FIRE

Despite the presence of the Fox, the Numbat managed to survive in some desert areas in Western Australia until the 1960s. The Numbat persisted in these areas because of a remarkable relationship with the Aboriginal desert dwellers. Numbats died out when the Aboriginal people settled around missions.

THE DIMINISHING RANGE OF THE NUMBAT



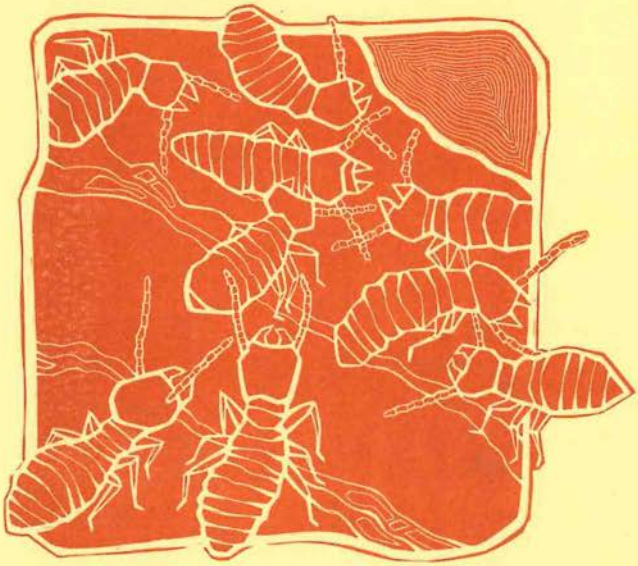
Although the Aboriginal people hunted the Numbat for food, they also helped it to survive by regularly starting small bushfires. This pattern of burning created a patchwork of small, open areas and dense, unburnt vegetation. The small, burnt areas acted as firebreaks to prevent large fires, but all this changed when the Aboriginal people gave up their traditional lifestyle. Fires became less common but each burnt a larger area of land; the old patchwork soon disappeared. If the Numbats survived the big fires, they found themselves faced with endless tracts of burnt countryside where they were more exposed to predators, including Foxes. The Numbat might have survived the change in the frequency of bushfires if the Foxes hadn't been present, but the combination of fires and Foxes was too much. The Numbat was "finished" in the desert.

FARMING

Until the early 1960s, the Numbat was still widespread in the area of Western Australia known as the wheatbelt. This changed with increased clearing for agriculture. Most of the Numbat's habitat was bulldozed and only small areas survived in reserves. The remaining Numbats were isolated in these reserves, and the small colonies were especially vulnerable to that enemy, the Fox. Ironically, some of the areas cleared turned out to be unsuitable for agriculture and are now being reafforested. If the clearing had been planned with the knowledge we have today, there would probably have been space for both farms and Numbats in the wheatbelt.

HELP FOR NUMBATS

Numbats had become so rare by the late 1960s that research was undertaken to identify their needs and their problems. In addition, an insurance policy, in the form of a captive breeding programme, was taken out for the Numbat.



Research was carried out at Dryandra, the last stronghold of the Numbat. Scientists used radio-tracking equipment to pry into the daily lives of Numbats, and learnt much about when and where they feed, where they shelter, how much space each Numbat needs, and so on. They also learnt that, even at Dryandra, Foxes are the bane of the Numbat's life. Identifying the problem, however, is only half the solution.

Numbers of Foxes in Dryandra were controlled by baiting with a poison called 1080. This could be used without risk of poisoning Numbats or any other native animals because Foxes are extremely sensitive to 1080 whereas native animals in these areas are not. A poison very similar to 1080 occurs naturally in

many plants of the south-west and animals that have evolved in the south-west, alongside those plants, are resistant to the poison in the plants and to 1080. Foxes are not. As soon as the baiting of Foxes began, the tide was turned. The number of Numbats in Dryandra increased. The baiting of Foxes even made it possible to reintroduce Numbats to another wheatbelt reserve. For the first time in over a hundred years, Numbats are on the increase. It is sad to have to poison any animal, but when protecting the last Numbats in the world, the decision was clear.

Despite these successes in the wild, Numbats are far from secure and need the insurance of a captive colony. Numbats were first bred in captivity in 1985 by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, with the support of World Wildlife Fund Australia. Earlier efforts had failed because each animal requires up to 20,000 termites per day; that's 100,000 termites per day for a female with four grown young! The breakthrough came with the discovery that Numbats could be maintained on an egg-milk custard sometimes used by zoos to keep Echidnas. For Numbats, vitamins, calcium carbonate, sand and a sprinkling of termites are added to the mixture. The colony was transferred to Perth Zoo in 1986.

THE NUMBAT NEEDS FRIENDS

The Numbat needs all the help it can get and there are many ways in which you can do your bit.

1. Report sightings of Numbats to the Department of Conservation and Land Management. Remember to record where and when.
2. Take care of the Numbat's home when you visit it; prevent bushfires, keep family pets under control and leave logs and rocks where you find them.
3. Don't release unwanted pets into the bush.
4. Observe the Numbat here, at the Zoo, and record your observations for us. See the tear-off Numbat questionnaire for instructions.
5. Assist by donating to the Numbat breeding programme. (See back for information.)

The beauty and genius of a work of art may be reconceived,
'though its first material expression be destroyed;
a vanished harmony may yet again inspire the composer;
but when the last individual of a race of living things breathes no more,
another heaven and another earth must pass
before such a one can be again.

William Beebe (1877-1962)
Naturalist. Director of the American Zoological Society.

Send your tax deductible donation
to assist the Numbat breeding programme to:
Perth Zoo Sponsorship Trust:
Numbat Conservation

PERTH ZOO

Conserving our
Wildlife Heritage

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