

Institute of Foresters of Australia Media Release

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Active forest management is the key to Leadbeater's Possum survival

Recent media coverage claiming that timber harvesting in Victoria is likely to cause the extinction of Leadbeater's Possum has substantially misrepresented the reality of a species that has always been limited in its range and population due to narrow habitat requirements that wax and wane under the influence of fire.

Ecological studies show that Leadbeater's possum is a survivor. Fire typically damages possum populations in the short term, but can also create conditions that eventually allow the population to rebuild as post-fire regrowth develops into suitable habitat several decades later.

For example, eighty-five per cent of its Central Victorian ash forest habitat was burnt by the 1926 and 1939 wildfires, yet the possum was rediscovered in the 1960s amongst post-fire regrowth and still persists today despite the 2009 fires.

Leadbeater's Possum requires a combination of old, often dead, trees for nesting and certain species of relatively short-lived wattle that are a key food source. Thus the possum's preferred habitat is areas of dense regrowth originating from older ash forest burnt by fires 15-50 years earlier, or areas of logging regrowth if it is interspersed with large numbers of old trees, dead or alive. These requirements are well documented in scientific literature.

The possum breeds well and expands its' range into suitable habitat when conditions are right. The population has now begun to decline as large old trees that survived the 1939 fires begin to fall over due to their age and as the short lived wattles also die out.

The good news is that Leadbeater's possum will again have areas of suitable habitat in about 10 years' time where old trees were burnt during the 2009 wildfires. This post-fire landscape of regrowth interspersed with large old trees will eventually provide a plethora of nesting hollows and a smorgasbord of wattle sap for food provided there are no further severe bushfires.

Timber harvesting is limited to areas within about one-third of the ash forests and is typified by 74-year old regrowth which supports few if any possums. Old-growth ash forest is not harvested and has not been for 30 years.

Most of the possum's high-quality habitat is already contained within National Parks, closed water catchments or other reserves where timber harvesting is permanently excluded. Other small patches of high quality habitat which may occur in the wood production zone are identified and excluded from timber harvesting. Accordingly, ceasing timber harvesting will not help the possum.

There are however some further practical management options that can help the possum to flourish and the establishment of a joint chaired Zoos Victoria and Victorian Association of Forest Industries Leadbeater's Possum advisory group is a positive step

The IFA recommends a comprehensive assessment of current and future high-quality habitat to ensure the best areas continue to remain protected. It also recommends a continuation of the captive breeding program, already proved to be successful which will allow re-stocking of areas burnt in 2009 when the habitat becomes suitable with a decade. There is also potential for nest boxes to provide short term homes for possums in the absence of available natural tree hollows.

Landscape modification such as ecological thinning can further speed up the development of nesting trees as can modified timber harvesting that retains sufficient future habitat trees for nesting in identified important parts of the landscape.

The simplistic model of habitat preservation being currently proposed by environmental activists and in the media is largely unhelpful from an economic, social and environmental perspective. Genuine cooperation between academics and forest management practitioners involved in managing the renewable timber resource is a far more effective solution.

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About the Institute of Foresters of Australia (www.forestry.org.au)

Established in 1935, the Institute of Foresters of Australia is a professional body with members engaged in all branches of forest management and conservation in Australia.

The Institute is strongly committed to the principles of sustainable forest management and the processes and practices which translate these principles into outcomes.