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Submission into impact of protected Grey-headed Flying Foxes on communities of SE Australia

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Environment East Gippsland has over 6,000 supporters and members and has been involved in the protection of the environment and threatened wildlife in this region for over 30 years. We have more recently focused our campaign work on investigating and challenging responsible authorities' adherence to laws which relate to environmental protection.

Firstly, we are very concerned about the lack of time allocated to public comment, as well as minimal to no notification to the normal stakeholder groups. This gives us little confidence that a balanced outcome will result from this review and it could be used as a 'tick-the-box' exercise.

In East Gippsland we have a maternal camp of Grey-headed Flying Foxes (GHFF) which resides along the Mitchell River along a stretch of walking trail. It is easily accessed, is only two streets from the centre of town and regarded by many locals and travellers as an astonishing natural phenomena which is wonderful to see and experience. It has become an unofficial tourist attraction.

Sadly, a number of residents (not all) whose houses back onto the picnic area and walking track have been demanding action for some years. Other locals have been encouraging the council to investigate options besides destruction of their trees and dispersal. A semi-covered walkway is one suggestion; assistance to properly net backyard fruit trees is another.



Figure 1 - The colony in Bairnsdale is an important maternal breeding colony.

Noise and supposed smell seems to not be a nuisance for some adjoining the colony while others complain long and loud. Some locals enjoy having the colony next door, other claim they are filthy, despicable creatures (fear of bats?) so it seems to be a subjective 'problem'.

Disease has never been an identified issue with this southern colony.

Cumulative impacts on GHFF colonies along the east coast include land clearing, logging, and private landholder destruction (undetected). Should there be a weakening of Commonwealth protection measures it will significantly reduce survival chances of this species.

Climate impacts must also be considered in the mix of new threats.

Terms of reference

- **the circumstances and process by which flying-foxes are listed and delisted as threatened species at both the state and Commonwealth levels;**

There currently appears to be a fairly thorough process of scientific assessment at both levels of government, but more resources could be allocated to monitoring species to inform regular reviews. Updated data must be unavailable to carry out and inform necessary reviews and the outcomes of any current research must be used in this particular review.

The lack of Recovery Plans and Action Statements for the hundreds of listed species shows a deplorable lack of concern for Australia's increasingly under-pressure native wildlife. The current status of the GHFF as Vulnerable is scientifically substantiated and if any change is to be considered it must be made with reliable up to date information and not the price of real estate.

- **the interaction between the state and Commonwealth regulatory frameworks;**

From our experience, both state and Commonwealth application of their respective legislation is non-committal, under resourced and verging on negligent. Weakening protection measures is not the answer. Resourcing the responsible sections of government to look at creative solutions for better protection, monitoring and action is the progressive action needed.

We have found that the state government and local councils will prefer to make an incorrect assumption that a planned action will cause no impact and so no referral has to be made as a controlled action. This is a massive loophole which should be addressed.

In the instance of the local council's response to the GHFF colony in Bairnsdale, it applied to destroy 1/3rd of their roosting site, claiming the old poplar trees were weeds



Figure 2 - The EG shire council plans to destroy the maternal colonies habitat without consideration of replacement sites/trees.

(after 100 years). The other 2/3rds are planned for 'staged clearing' over the next few years. The colony remains all year and young are born at this site. The status of it as a maternal colony appears to have been disregarded in correspondence and decision making. Replacement trees of the same height cannot be re-grown within the short time frame planned for the total destruction of this colony's roosting habitat.

- **strategic approaches to managing species at a regional scale;**

Managing GHFF colonies at a regional level should consider the local situations but also keep in mind the bigger picture of the species as a whole and the environmental services they perform (major pollinators and seed dispersal agents for millennia). Having a maternal breeding colony located at Bairnsdale in East Gippsland is extremely significant to the big picture.

Education of the public in local areas is important. Dispelling unfounded fears based on children's books or Hollywood movies should be overcome by well-presented and referenced information. This would help encourage acceptance, or at worst tolerance of wildlife.

As the GHFF is under increasing pressure from so many threats simply assessing a perceived problem locally with little ecological input is unsophisticated. Using the ideology from the 1800s of shooting, destroying or dispersing can create a much greater problem.

- **the success or otherwise of management actions, such as dispersal of problematic flying-fox camps.**

Dispersal costs can sky-rocket out as it can take continuous effort. This was seen in the Melbourne dispersal attempts to relocate a colony. The question is - who would bear this cost?

[Dr David Westcott](#), principle research scientists for the CSIRO in Qld, was invited to speak in Bairnsdale on July 8th 2014. His message was clear - when you move bats, no one has any idea where they will move to. It could be the local school ground, the hospital gardens or the local park. There is a lack of research on the movement of colonies.

It could cost up to \$20 million to persist with dispersal actions. Who would pay for this? It is not just a single process of dispersal. The colony that was dispersed from the Melbourne Botanic Gardens moved on to the Fitzroy Gardens. The costly dispersal program had to continue until they were finally moved on to the Yarra Bend. However, even now the colony keeps trying to move back to the gardens. This research study called ["The outcomes and costs of relocating flying-fox camps: insights from the case of Maclean, Australia"](#) also gives great insight into the complex issues involved in dispersal.

The healthy colony in East Gippsland is not a disease threat, but when stressed, bats immune systems are also stressed and weakened. This increases their [vulnerability to disease](#).

If the loss of property value can be proven it would be less costly and more effective to shift people, not the bat colony.

- **opportunities to streamline the regulation of flying-fox management;**

Streamlining is often a euphemism for cutting corners and doing away with a considered, sensible approach. Plans to 'streamline' applications to disturb and disperse colonies are extremely concerning. If proper scientific information was used to evaluate each situation it could far better streamline an otherwise ongoing saga of costly, ill-informed decisions and actions. Better informed judgments and resolutions are what is needed, not quick and dirty approvals for destruction or dispersal that suits a small section of uneducated residents.

In conclusion, EEG strongly argues that this recent pressure to deal with GHFF colonies must not be used as a precedent. If it does happen to result in a politically expedient but reckless, unscientific and impulsive decision it could possibly begin a push from certain sectors to demand similar hasty and careless decisions are made.

There is already much public anger and concern that hundreds of species are in decline. They cannot be pushed further towards critically endangered status simply to placate fearful locals, developers' needs or those who profit from habitat destruction.



Jill Redwood
EEG Coordinator

Enchanted by bats

Sir,- I am a visitor from Estonia in Europe and was recently in Bairnsdale as part of my visit to see East Gippsland.

The highlight of the visit was a wander down to the river, just an easy walk from the shops. I was absolutely enchanted by your colony of flying foxes. It was delightful to see these wild creatures so close. Australian wildlife is something I seek out to experience as I travel. Many other overseas travellers I meet share this interest.

Unfortunately, while strolling along the river banks, I heard from some locals that they may be doomed by decisions of the local municipality to cut down many park trees where the bats are roosting.

It would seem logical to publicise this wonderful asset you have so close to the town centre. Local townspeople may take them for granted but it is truly a wonderful sight for visitors and shouldn't be kept such a secret.

Thank you for sharing these beautiful and interesting wild creatures. I will be mentioning this to fellow travellers as I continue my Australian journey.

Yours etc.,
Rainis Toomemaa,
Estonia.

Figure 3 - Letter- 26/2/16 Bairnsdale Advertiser. The potential to use these colonies as income earners for the local town is under-appreciated.