



Wombat Forestcare Newsletter

Autumn is here and our migratory summer birds are on their way to other habitats. It has been the hottest summer on record for Australia with below average rainfall for Victoria. What will this mean for our fungi season in the Wombat? Is it an explanation for some unusual bird sightings? As always, we encourage our readers to explore our wonderful forest.

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Hope and conservation – environmental engagement in the Wombat

By Alison Pouliot

It is indeed a tough time to be fighting for the Wombat. For those who value the forest for its biodiversity and the myriad reasons it enriches our lives, the State government's attempts to unravel decades of conservation through suggestions to re-introduce



Hope is about recognising future possibilities.
Photography © Alison Pouliot

timber extraction while defunding biodiversity officer positions are both incomprehensible and disheartening. However, such actions are all the more reason to fight harder than ever for the Wombat.

Conservation efforts to protect the forest from exploitation are usually driven largely, if not wholly, by the pluck and mettle of volunteers. Such folk proceed with incredible determination to conserve the integrity of this valuable island of biodiversity for the benefit of all. However, they are also seriously at risk of burnout. When years of tireless work to protect vital habitat can be overturned by the fatuous junk science follies of the State government's recently skedaddled leader, or under the misnomers of 'development' or 'under-utilisation', possibilities for feeling disillusioned and hopeless can easily prevail. In these challenging times we need to rekindle an often overlooked factor in biodiversity conservation - the importance of hope.

We rarely hear about the importance of hope in conservation, especially in how it relates to engagement and pro-environmental behaviour. Hope as a concept can be rather hard to grasp. It has been variously defined as an emotion, a cognitive attitude, a particular disposition, a process or a unifying and grounding force of human agency.¹ Hope emanates from both head and heart. Vaclav Havel differentiates hope as a state of mind, not a state of the world; an orientation of the spirit and heart that transcends the world that is immediately experienced.² He asserts that the more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper it becomes. Despite the State government's convenient amnesia regarding its legal obligations under state, national and global agreements

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to manage Victoria's biodiversity, we must not get disheartened. It is more critical than ever to hang on to hope.

In the early 1990's while working as a government scientist, I remember feeling utterly disillusioned with the government's handling of environmental issues and consequently my capacity to genuinely contribute to conservation. Fortunately I crossed paths with the inspirational environmentalist, Leonarda Camacho, also known as the 'Queen of Garbage' for her incredible work in transforming the rubbish problem in Manila. While discussing the enormous challenges of tackling environmental problems, she paused and sagely said, "But to be disillusioned is a cop-out". The words of this insightful luminary were so germane in reminding me that hope very much underpins conservation.

The importance of hope in fuelling conservation efforts is well documented. Given the conflicting interests in the Wombat along with the predicted impacts of climate change, conservation requires the collective effort of the public to catalyse hope. Cooperative effort can foster feelings of agency in the value of individual contributions. In turn these evoke satisfaction in the achievement of smaller milestones on the way toward a larger goal. Thinking positively, approaching problems with hope, in turn reinforces engagement. People with high levels of hope have a greater capacity to not only comprehend information, but also to constructively transfer it into action. They are also less likely to succumb to disillusionment. Through the ability to deal with a situation despite uncertainties and unknowns, hopeful people are more likely to achieve conservation goals. While recognising that artificial hope can also stem from denial or wishful thinking, when coupled with a proper understanding of the issues, hope is a powerful motivational force.

For many people, the media are the main source of



Hope is about persevering despite adversity.
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information on environmental issues. However, through the media's effort to increase the 'news-worthiness' of environmental stories, it is often the more catastrophic environmental events that receive attention. While it is vital to convey the magnitude and severity of environmental issues, such grim reportage can also be counterproductive to conservation by perpetuating a sense of despondency in our ability to overcome them. A typical defence mechanism for dealing with the scale and pervasiveness of environmental issues is denial or suppression, which in turn magnify the problem. But it is not all bleak. The more connected we are with 'natural' environments, the greater the possibility for genuine understanding of the

issues, but also for hope and meaningful contribution to conservation. Furthermore, we can provide compelling narratives and imagery to the media that insert hope into the portrayal of environmental issues.

Effective biodiversity conservation relies on knowing what species exist, where they exist and what processes compromise their existence. Hence, species inventories are a major conservation tool. However, conservation is also about managing the interaction between people and the environment. This includes convincing people of the value of conserving biodiversity. While increasing public knowledge about the importance of biodiversity and the implications of its loss are essential to conservation, we need to question whether knowledge alone is enough. According to various sociological studies, education on its own does not necessarily lead to increased awareness that automatically flows on to pro-environmental behaviour.³ In addition to knowledge, environmental empathy that involves personal feelings toward the environment is fundamental to developing an environmental ethic. This means reconnecting people with the Wombat through direct sensate experience. While this is common sense and hardly surprising,

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we sometimes forget the value and joy of a forest wander and engaging with 'nature'. It is through in situ experience, when 'knowing' moves from a disconnected

intellectual entity, to a more connected and insightful way of 'knowing', that environmental hope can truly flourish.



Hope is about navigating an unseen path.
Photography © Alison Pouliot

Those striving to protect the Wombat have achieved tremendous conservation successes. These need to be kept firmly in sight. Resolving conflicts about how the Wombat is valued is exceedingly difficult given the often entrenched positions of stakeholders compounded by the lack of transparency and scientific integrity in the State government's attempts to dilute environmental policy. This is all the more reason to keep hope at the fore in the ongoing battle to conserve the Wombat. Certainly keep the outrage, but also maintain the hope.

As Emily Dickinson reminds us, *Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all.*⁴ ■

Words and images www.alisonpouliot.com

References

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2. Havel, Vaclav (1990). *Disturbing the Peace*. Vintage. USA. p.181
3. For example, Hungerford., H. and Volk, T. (1990). Changing learning behaviour through environmental education. *The Journal of Environmental Education* 21: 8-21.
4. Dickinson, Emily (1960). *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Little, Brown & Co. Boston. p.254

Black Rock Skink (*Egernia saxatilis intermedia*)

A beautiful large, robust lizard with well developed limbs and digits, which grows to about 20cm and prefers rock formations for sheltering in crevices. Photographed near Glenlyon.



Photography © Gayle Osborne