

1. AIMS OF THE NATIONAL MALLEEFOWL FORUM

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On behalf of the National Malleefowl Recovery Team, I would like to welcome everyone to the second National Malleefowl Forum.

Malleefowl are a unique species from a number of perspectives:

- Their unique mound building behaviour
- Their capacity to survive European settlement whereas a number of other ground-dwelling birds and mammals have disappeared from our mallee regions
- The groundswell of community support that this 'icon species' attracts. It has a public following like perhaps no other species from our southern inland

Why is this? Is it because:

- Their nests provide conspicuous evidence of their ongoing presence?
- Their value as indicators of the broader health of our mallee environments?
- Their non-aggressive behaviour?
- Their protestant work ethic?
- Their poor parenting skills?

Whatever it is, the formation of community groups to promote the conservation of this species from Victoria to Western Australia (Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group, Malleefowl Preservation Group etc.) is clear evidence of the appeal of Malleefowl. But, once formed, what can these groups do of a concrete nature to help secure the future for this species? They can:

- Promote the cause of Malleefowl in the wider community such that landholders defer on actions such as grazing or clearing of remnant mallee, or government agencies play a greater role in managing the ongoing risks to Malleefowl within parks and reserves, e.g. from fox predation and inappropriate fire regimes. We don't need to look much further than nearby Ongerup to see a very good example of regional promotion of Malleefowl conservation
- Collect long term data on the status of the species within local / regional / multi-regional areas to understand the nature and level of risks to the species. Monitoring and research are critically important to the conservation of the species at a national level. As Julie Kirkwood said at our last forum; 'lack of data is an important impediment to species recovery'
- Get involved in regional planning undertaken by catchment management authorities. These plans tend to be important in influencing government spending on conservation activities

It is a very big ask for volunteer groups to perform all of these tasks across the full range of the species. Hence we need to give consideration to where our skills lie, what is most achievable at a local level, and what might make a significant contribution at a national level.

Monitoring is a function which has not generally been well-performed by government agencies. This is often because the impetus to monitor relies upon key personnel who may have moved on, or the cost cannot be justified in the short term. Volunteer groups have a number of advantages over government agencies in performing this function.

- There is often longevity of involvement by key personnel in the group providing continuity of corporate knowledge and support for newcomers
- Volunteers obviously can conduct monitoring for a much lower cost than can a paid government workforce. In Victoria, it is estimated that the use of volunteers to monitor has

resulted in a 90% reduction in the cost

- The quality of data collected tends to be high because the volunteers have a keen interest in the subject matter

Where volunteers need backup tends to be in the area of analysis of information collected and interpretation of those data at a regional and national level. This is where the National Malleefowl Recovery Team can play a role, and is, of course, what is being achieved through the multi-regional project. More about that later from Joe and Ann.

The National Recovery Team has approx. 4 representatives from each of the 4 states over which the Malleefowl ranges. Community groups and state government agencies are represented. Malleefowl are a nationally listed species under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, but the recovery team receives no funding except that state agencies allow time for their staff to be involved. The Commonwealth has supported a number of Malleefowl initiatives such as the Natural Heritage Trust funded project the 'Malleefowl Monitoring, Population Assessment & Conservation Project'. The Department of Environment and Water Resources has supported Malleefowl work through the WWF in Western Australia.

The Commonwealth has also funded (through the South Australian Department of Environment & Heritage) a recent review of the national recovery plan. A key objective of the National Recovery Team is to promote and support the implementation of the recovery plan. The recovery plan is one that recognises the role of community.

So who actually implements the plan? This is really a collaboration between communities and the land management agencies in each state. Volunteers can play a role by, if you like, keeping the agencies honest. This could involve holding meetings with land managers at a local or regional level to ascertain whether certain actions required of the agencies have been implemented.

To be effective in this role, volunteers need to be armed with the best available information. Have Malleefowl numbers declined in your area? What is the evidence for this decline? What does research or monitoring locally or from other regions tell us about the current risks to Malleefowl? Armed with this sort of information, volunteers are in a stronger position to influence positive outcomes.

I would encourage everyone to take the opportunity of this forum to absorb the most recent information on Malleefowl presented at this forum so that we can all apply it to good effect on our return home.

I would also like to thank Stephen Davies and the Steering Committee for organising our second National Malleefowl (and first WA Megapode) Forum. They have developed a very comprehensive program which offers something for everyone with an interest in this intriguing species and family.

Aims

At our last national forum, Denis Saunders spoke about the significance of fragmentation of habitat within semi-arid Australia and of the likelihood of species 'relaxation' within isolated remnants. If we look at the national situation with regard to mallee habitats, we see that the situation varies considerably from state to state. In Western Australia and South Australia, the clearing of mallee tended to be more extensive than in Victoria and New South Wales. However, in these latter two states, remnant mallee has been routinely leased for stock grazing. This has changed relatively recently when there has been an increase in the level of reservation of mallee vegetation with an associated reduction in stock grazing.

The remaining habitat for Malleefowl can hence be categorised as being:

- In those areas where mallee vegetation was most extensively cleared, Malleefowl survive in relatively isolated remnants that may or may not have a history of stock grazing, or in vegetation on the fringes of the mallee belt that was considered unsuitable for agriculture. These marginal habitats may now be managed for pastoralism, mining, or be under

- In those states where mallee vegetation was not as extensively cleared, larger remnant blocks remain on soils that were marginal for agriculture, e.g. lowan sands in Victoria, or perhaps where clearing did not take place for other reasons, e.g. western division of New South Wales. These areas were generally subjected to prolonged stock grazing which may have ceased in recent years to allow them to be managed for conservation, as has been the case with the Victorian Mallee parks declared in 1991

The National Recovery Team suggested to the Forum Steering Committee that conservation of Malleefowl in these contrasting circumstances (i.e. small remnants of better habitat and larger blocks of marginal habitat) would provide a good basis for the discussion sessions on Monday. One, or perhaps both, of these circumstances will be relevant to everyone in this room.

So what are the broader aims of the National Forum? From my perspective they are primarily about renewing our collective enthusiasm for Malleefowl conservation. The Forum should allow us to focus our efforts to best effect armed with new information and a new understanding. This time round there is also the opportunity to hear about research into other megapodes from northern Australia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Secondly, the Forum provides the ideal opportunity to socialise with those from other regions and compare notes and celebrate the progress made since our last National Forum in Mildura in 2004. And there have been a number of achievements when we reflect back on the checklist from Mildura.

- We now have a documented national monitoring framework thanks to the work of Ann, Joe and others. This work formed part of the Natural Heritage Trust-funded 'Malleefowl Monitoring, Population Assessment & Conservation Project'. Thanks need to go to the Mallee Catchment Management Authority in Victoria for their work in initiating and coordinating this project
- Following a meeting earlier this year in Adelaide, there are positive steps towards development of a national database
- The approach of adaptive management advocated in the recovery plan will provide the basis for development of a broader understanding of the steps we need to take collectively to conserve this species
- How this will be coordinated remains unclear, and it seems unlikely that we will have funding for a position of national coordinator
- Communication between groups is as good as it has ever been thanks mainly to the multi-regional project and to the re-emergence of 'Around the Mounds'

I believe that this forum will build on the achievements since 2004 and further strengthen our national coordination and communication. By the time of the next forum I expect that we will be in a position to clarify the status of Malleefowl at a national level based on rigorous ongoing data collection. A lack of data will no longer be an impediment to Malleefowl recovery.