

3. TOWARDS A NATIONAL SYSTEM: THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE

**Ann Stokie
NHT Malleefowl Project Convenor
Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group**

A review of the implications of mound monitoring: detailed discussion of the Natural Heritage Trust Multi-regional Malleefowl project

Where have we been?

The application for funding of a multi-regional Malleefowl project arose directly from the recommendations of the 2004 Mildura National Malleefowl Forum. It is significant and extremely important to be able to bring the outcomes of the project to this Katanning National Malleefowl Forum.

The 2004 Forum recommendations specifically requested a number of actions to bring the monitoring efforts across Australia into some order so data could be adequately assessed and standardised. Actions to be undertaken included:

- The development of a national register of Malleefowl Monitoring programs
- A commitment to a National Monitoring Framework
- The adoption of standard protocols for monitoring
- A review of the adequacy of existing monitoring programs
- The importance of the co-ordinating role of the National Malleefowl Recovery Team

The 2004 Forum considered that the best way to achieve these actions was through a national co-ordinator and recommended the securing of funding for a National co-ordinator to facilitate this fairly ambitious agenda.

The planning for funding for the actions plans and the National co-ordinator was largely undertaken under the direction of the National Recovery Team, coordinated by Julie Kirkwood from WWF who was a Victorian member of the Recovery Team.

The funding application to the Natural Heritage Trust was widely circulated in its formative stages, and supported by a large number of organisations large and small across Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. Significantly, Government and Non Government organisations and volunteer groups were all part of the supporting group, and these groups continued to work together throughout the whole two year project.

The funding application was successful, with the Natural Heritage Trust announcing the outcome in June 2005. The biggest sticking point with the project was that there was no funding for a National co-ordinator to undertake the organisation of the tasks, and insufficient funds for a consultancy firm to take on the job without compromising the scope of the project. The concept of a volunteer organisation taking on the running of the project was canvassed, and the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group was approached. This group has good credentials, having organised the 2004 National Forum, and having managed the Victorian monitoring since 2000. The committee structure and the experience in the group were considered to be more than adequate to manage the project in a professional way. The Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group accepted the challenge and therefore the Natural Heritage Trust Malleefowl Project was managed by a volunteer group.

The funding agreement was signed late in 2005. The Mallee Catchment Management Authority was the lead organisation and the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group undertook to manage the project, to allocate monies for consultancy and to ensure the project goals were met in a timely and professional fashion.

Where are we now?

The last two years have seen an extraordinary movement towards developing a National approach to address the conservation needs for Malleefowl, an agreed National System for the monitoring of Malleefowl, and agreement on National Standards.

What has been particularly striking is the involvement of such a large number of people both land managers and volunteers. The activities have included:

- The collection of historical data
- The entering of data onto the database
- The data analysis
- The use of the data analysis to refine monitoring
- National meetings in Melbourne and Adelaide
- The National Monitoring Manual

The technical and theoretical understandings and findings of these activities are addressed in other places in this forum, particularly in the papers presented by Dr Joe Benshemesh. Whilst the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group has been an integral part of bringing these matters to a satisfactory scientific conclusion, I would like to address in particular the human element provided by volunteers that has made these findings possible.

1) The collection of data

The first task that was required was to find out who was monitoring, who was holding data and how that data was stored. The collection of historical data was sought from holders of such data, requiring them to trust the integrity of the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group. We were asking holders of data very dear to the collectors to allow the national project to have access to and use their data. In many cases the request meant hours of searching, but in the spirit of utmost cooperation the data were generally found and passed on.

It was easy to find out who was monitoring as members of the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group were invited to workshops in both Western Australia and South Australia in the early stages of the project. These workshops covered most geographic areas where monitoring was occurring, and were well attended by the volunteers who were conducting the monitoring. This initial face to face contact was invaluable as the project proceeded, particularly in bringing volunteers together for national meetings and conducting correspondence either by phone or email. We all knew whom we were dealing with, and a friendship and trust across Malleefowl states grew as the project grew.

2) The entering of data onto the database

In many cases historical data was just too difficult or too numerous for individuals to manage in a way that was going to be useful for the national database. In another acceptance of trust, holders of data were prepared to allow experienced Victorian volunteers to deal with this problem. Data from both Western Australia and South Australia were sent to the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group to be entered onto the database. Feedback and assurances that the data were useful helped to build up the spirit of cooperation that was going to be needed for the later tasks of producing a National monitoring protocol and National monitoring manual.

3) The data analysis and the use of the data analysis to refine monitoring

The sharing of findings and the distribution of discussion documents was a necessary step to ensure volunteers had sufficient background and information to assist them to contribute to the development of National monitoring manual. This process relied on the use of emails, in particular, and willingness on everybody's part to read and respond to sometimes difficult and challenging materials.

4) National meetings in Melbourne and Adelaide

The most important aspect of developing a national monitoring manual was the need to gain consensus from all parties involved in monitoring Malleefowl across Australia. Two national meetings, one held in Melbourne and one in Adelaide, were attended by more than 25 people at each, representing mainly volunteers from State volunteer groups, but also representatives of Government Environment Departments and non government environment groups. At these meetings further trust and acceptance developed and the level of contribution was outstanding. These meetings also generated Malleefowl stories from all over the place, all contributing to our understanding of the species. In fact, it confirmed that the more we know about Malleefowl the less we know about them. All points of view and individual comments were recorded and used in the

subsequent development of the National Manual. At the end of both meetings initial drafts of the manual were ratified for further development.

5) The National Monitoring Manual

The National Manual had a long period of input, right from the first meetings at volunteer training sessions, but essentially serious input commenced at the National meetings. However without the use of emails containing the latest drafts moving regularly between volunteers from each state and the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group it would not have been possible to come up with a final consensus driven document. It was important that all those who wanted to contribute had every opportunity to do so, until there was no further need to have these discussions. The end result was a truly consensus document which outlined agreed processes and practices for the future.

An enormous spirit of co-operation has prevailed and now we have a National Malleefowl Monitoring Handbook. It was officially launched at the Katanning Forum. We have commitment from three states to monitor using National standards. We have available data from across Australia gathered and analysed.

We have demonstrated how much we can achieve when we work together. We have demonstrated that we can work across different jurisdictions to achieve a common purpose.

We have made substantial progress in building trust. We know a lot more about Malleefowl populations than we did three years ago. We have successfully managed a multi-regional project and we are in a good position to apply for more funds if we need to.

Malleefowl have even made it onto the main stage by recently being adopted as one of the eight flagship species of WWF- Australia.

Where are we going?

The challenge for this Forum is to decide where we go to from here.

The Forum is a good time to celebrate achievements. We need to reflect, to create recommendations for the future. We need to visit this on the last day of the Forum, but we need to start to think about this now.

I submit the following reflections that arise from my position as the project manager of the Natural Heritage Trust National Project.

- We need to act nationally, so we need to address whether we need a National Co-ordinator? (NB. This was a recommendation from the 2004 Forum)
- There has been untold value arising out of the meetings in Melbourne and Adelaide. Do we need to set up funding and commitment to hold an annual meeting of state representatives, particularly volunteers, to renew national contacts and keep us up to date?
- We need a useable National database which holds data very securely, but which can be accessed at different levels so that Australian as well as State pictures can be obtained
- We need to establish adaptive management strategies so that better management can occur
- We need to continue to develop the National Malleefowl Recovery Team, and investigate its status and funding. Does it need to be more than a body of volunteers who represent each state?
- We need a National website, or do we?
- It would seem appropriate that we consider establishing an Australian Megapodes Group or Association

I look forward to discussing these points and all other relevant points in the plenary session of this Forum.