

Epping Forest National Park – Care-taking the Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat

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ABSTRACT: Earlier this year I lived a dream of helping the world – in my little way – to save one of its most endangered animals – the Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat.

Epping Forest, a remote forest in outback Queensland, is the only place on this earth where Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombats live and for one hot, challenging and exhausting month I lived an otherworldly life caring for wombats.

My job as Epping Forest Caretaker was to ensure that these majestic and mystical animals were fed and watered, that valuable video surveillance was collected each day, and to help build important “wombat infrastructure” in the park.

Among the hard work were moments I will always treasure, like the laughs I shared with my dear friend who accompanied me on the trip, the evening sing-alongs with Dr Alan Horsup around the camp fire, the new friends that I made – a meeting with one particular “friend” has changed my life forever – her name was Audrey. You too can have this experience – and I’m going to tell you how!

This story will illustrate the tenacity and strength of our Australian native animals. You will hear how HOPELESSNESS can turn to hope.

Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, my name is Shirley Lack. I’m a wildlife rehabilitator from the south coast of NSW and have had a love affair with Australian wildlife for the past 25 years.

I fell in love with possums and gliders in the early eighties. This love progressed to a passion with macropods and has now developed into a full-blown obsession with the very wonderful world of Bare-Nosed Wombats. What has fed this obsession beyond all comprehension was my recent mid-life crisis.

In February this year my friend June and I had the life-changing opportunity to be caretakers for the highly endangered Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat at Epping Forest National Park deep in central Queensland.


I would like to share this experience with you.

Crisis? What crisis?

June and I have been the best of wildlife friends for many years. When I first mentioned the possibility of “doing time at Epping” we were both very aware of the consequences of our decisions. It could end a wonderful friendship, or it could be the start of something even stronger.

We are both married to wonderful husbands (for June -35 years and me 43) who do all the “men’s work”. How could we ever live without their help and protection?

After much soul-searching we decided that we were both overdue for a well earned mid-life crisis and started to plan our 6 week “great escape” to the Deep North.



As the date got closer the anticipation grew to fever pitch until finally Sunday 28th January arrived.

After fare-welling family and with the radio blasting and feeling a bit like Thelma and Louise, we hit the highway. Hopefully we were NOT heading for a cliff! The trip to Epping Forest took us 3 days with a few stops for some retail therapy.

We arrived at Epping on a wet 1st of February. The previous caretakers showed us around quickly as they were keen to leave before being flooded in.

So there we were...

Epping From the Air

Once widespread throughout Australia's eastern states, the Northern Hairy- Nosed Wombat is now restricted to a single small population of only 115 individuals in Epping Forest National Park (scientific) in central Queensland.


Largest of the three wombat species, the Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat is one of the world's most endangered mammals. It may have been uncommon even before European settlement, but has declined rapidly as a result of loss of habitat caused by unfriendly pastoral practices: cattle and sheep grazing in particular, especially during droughts.

Recovery Program

The Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat lives in a harsh, semi-arid environment where temperatures can reach 45c. To survive in these conditions, the heavy, short-limbed animals are almost totally nocturnal, burrowing in isolated patches of deep sandy soil where they sleep for up to 18 hours a day.

Help from Other Agencies

To help the Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat, a team of people from government agencies, wildlife- friendly local graziers, universities, zoos and conservation groups is overseeing a recovery plan for the species by....

1. Protecting the population at Epping Forest National Park (scientific) by controlling dingoes and monitoring eastern graykangaroo numbers.
 2. Improving the quality of their feed by manipulation of habitat.
 3. Researching their behaviour, reproductive biology and general ecology
 4. Developing techniques by researching the closely- related Southern Hairy-Nosed Wombat.
 5. Breeding and researching captive animals.
 6. Establishing a second wild population through translocation.
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Base Camp at Epping

The camp site at Epping is very basic. Hopefully electricity will be connected by the end of this year. It is also hoped that new “dongers” will be erected early next year. You know someone’s been to Queensland if they call a site shed a “donger”!!!

At the moment electricity can only be obtained by a generator and solar power.

While we were at Epping the large generator stopped working and we had to wait until a smaller one was purchased.

The worse part of having no power is there is no pump to run the shower so June and I opted to shower outside under the tap on the tank. That worked well until the level of the water in the tank fell too low then the tap did not work, but we still managed. We stank but we managed!

Because the roof area of the “dongers” is very limited water shortage is a problem but one that will also be solved when the new dongers are built as the roof area of the new buildings will be much larger.

It’s Not Five Star!

Base camp is not “five star”: Probably not even 1 star. Is there such a rating as No Star? There is NOW!

It is very basic with a gas cook-top and a gas fridge that only just keeps the food cool. The small freezer on the fridge did work and kept the dozens of water ice blocks frozen. These ice blocks were a god-send and we used them as a reward whenever we finished a hot hard day.


Our first 4 days were very wet. However, this turned out to work to our advantage as it gave us enough time to find our feet and get to learn the ropes before Alan and the crew arrived.

The Arrival of Alan and the Team

Most caretakers at Epping are by themselves for the whole month. The only contact with the outside world is the phone. Families are welcome to call and every Monday and Thursday we had to phone Queensland National Parks at Emerald to report all was OK.

Caretakers may go to Clemont, a small town about two and half hours drive from Epping. We did go once to purchase more supplies but it is such a long drive on a dirt road, once was enough for us. Also, if it rains, Mistake Creek (which is a creek that you have to drive through to get to Clemont) floods and we would be unable to get back to Epping.

To have five extra people staying with us for a week was something we looked at with mixed feelings. Our routine would be interrupted but we would have a variety of people to talk to and to learn from. The team consisted of, Alan undoubtedly the King of Epping (Alan’s real title is Senior Conservation Officer) Paul the Translocation Project manager, Andrea a Vet with a passion for wildlife, Rinna a student & Terry another volunteer, Terry also manages a wildlife park in north Queensland. June recognized Andrea as a Vet that worked in our area about 15 years ago. It just shows what a small world it is.



Our Aims for the Week

Our aims within the week that Alan and the team were with us were

1. Trap Audrey and Zena and remove tracking collars.
2. Remove old feeders and replace with new ones
3. Build a kangaroo trap yard.

The fence was erected in 2002 after a pack of dingoes invaded Epping and killed an unknown number of wombats (at least 10). The fence is about 20 kilometres long & encircles Epping Forest.

Trapping Audrey and Zena

Two traps were set on Wednesday and on Wednesday night, Zena was trapped and her tracking collar removed. June and I were unable to go with the team that night as other visitors from NPWS had arrived during the day and there was no room.

Thursday was a hard, hot day as we removed a lot of old feeders from the feeding stations and were in the process of replacing them with the new model. With dinner over, we sat around on the small verandah while Alan played the guitar and we tried to sing (interrupted by much laughter).


It was after 11 p.m. before we all went to bed; we were just dozing when Alan called to say that they had something in the trap.

We loaded up 2 cars with all the necessary gear and set off. Alan, Andréa and Paul walked the 1 kilometre into the burrow area to make sure it was a wombat in the trap and not a wallaby or some other animal. We got a call on the 2 way that it was indeed Audrey and to come in and bring the cage loaded with all the gear (boy was it heavy!!)

We walked through “Harry Potter scale” spider webs, were attacked by giant mosquitoes, and tripped over logs and branches, but arrived about 15 minutes after the call.

When we arrived at the burrow, Audrey had already been tranquilized and was ready for the removal of her tracking collar. After all the medical work was carried out on Audrey, Alan asked if June and I would like to hold her. Holding Audrey was one of the most emotional experiences of our lives. Both June and I had tears in our eyes as we each took our turn to nurse this most majestic wombat.

We were both so nervous that we could hardly hold this creature. One of only a handful of these wonderful of creatures.



The Day after Trapping Audrey

The next day it was all hands on deck.

We were all on a high after having such a successful night but had to front up bright and early the next morning to start building the kangaroo feed station.

The idea of this yard was to encourage eastern grey kangaroos in, and then release them outside the national park; this hopefully would keep the numbers down.

Since the erection of the dingo fence, kangaroo and wallabies that are inside the fenced area have bred to large numbers and are now competing with wombats for food and water.

I did think while building the yard that 'roos would never go through the one way gate system, but within the first few days of monitoring the finished compound with the Bushnell cameras we found that the kangaroos were coming in to eat the feed that June and I had left out for them.

Alan has since advised me that they have indeed released 25 kangaroos out into surrounding areas. Relocating kangaroos certainly worked there and is definitely possible in other "captive population" situations. An update from Alan has informed me that the trap yards have been so successful they are building another one.

Alan Keeps His Promise

Alan did promise that if the temperature got to 45 degrees we would be able to go for a swim. He did not tell us that we would have to jump the dingo fence and sneak into the dam next door!

After getting into the murkiest water I have ever been in and being bitten by lord knows what, we all agreed that it had been worth the effort.

Terry and Paul had left Epping so it was up to us girls (with a bit of help from Alan) to finish the kangaroo feed station.


Then came the hard part; putting up the wire. For people that have never been involved in fencing, believe me, compound wire has a life of its own!!
It is also very heavy!

While building the compound our days started around 5.30 a.m. we tried to get back to camp between 12.30-1 to hopefully miss the hottest part of the day, we then went back out about 4 p.m. and returned about 7 p.m.

One night after we returned to camp Alan went to fill up the small generator with fuel so we could all have a shower, he returned a few minutes later to inform us that he had been bitten on the finger by a red back spider. Andrea turned from being a vet into becoming a doctor.

After phoning Clermont hospital and getting advice from the real doctor we decided that he would not die that night.

Clermont was too far and as Alan only got bitten because it was his turn to cook dinner, he would just have to suffer until the next day. (I must admit that we did all fuss over him that night, cutting his meal up and making sure he had plenty of nice cold fluid.)



Alan and Andrea did go into Clermont the next day to pick up the rest of the new feeders and Andrea did take him to the hospital where he got the all clear.

Alan did go back to work with us the next day and we all put in another big 10 hours.

I think we all had at least 1 dummy spit while building the trap yard but all spits were ignored and gotten over within a very short time.

Mission Accomplished

We did get the compound finished within the time frame we had hoped. (About 5 days)

Back to Work.

We continued removing the old feeders and replacing them with a new model. Still working long hot days we had to replace 15 feed stations. The old feed cages were very heavy and had to be loaded onto the trailer and taken back and stored at basecamp.

The feeders were being replaced because the swamp wallabies were getting into them and eating the food left for the wombats, as a matter of fact every evening when we went to do the feeds the wallabies would be waiting and would get into the feeders as soon as we left.


The new feeders were better designed and had swinging trapdoors. It was assumed that as wombats are smarter than wallabies they would learn to use the trap doors to access the food.

I was very apprehensive about this working and did not see any evidence of wombats using the feeders while we were at Epping. However upon our return Alan sent me 2 photos showing the wombats using the feeders.

Why Supplementary Feeding?

Buffel grass was introduced into Australia in 1860 from South Africa. Graziers in central Queensland embraced the grass as it adapted well to sandy soil, and survived well during drought.

In Epping Forest the amount of buffel grass has increased from 17 % in the early 1970's to 54% today. Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombats feed on at least 12 species of grass but since the introduction of buffel a lot of their natural diet has disappeared. Buffel is also very prone to wildfires. Supplement feeding has been introduced to give the Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombats a choice of food in case wildfires do happen.



Other Duties - Caretaking

As well as doing all the building June and I still had to do all of the caretaking duties. Filling the feeders and checking the water every day, slashing the buffel, & riding the quad around the perimeter of the dingo fence checking for holes.

We Did Have Some Light Moments

Hair colouring for June to keep up appearances and singing with Alan.

New Skills

June and I had to learn lots of new skills; driving quad bikes and learning to drive slashers are just two examples. Even a simple thing like filling machinery with fuel can become very involved and time consuming.

Never Enough Hours

After the crew left, June and I had so many jobs lined up, we found that we never had enough hours in the day.

While doing a big clean up around the camp site we encountered a snake just near the tool shed. We then decided that it's probably not a good idea to go looking under too many things!

Sharing Epping

The diversity of Epping was something that June and I wondered at every day: birds we had never seen before, the day we stumbled upon a bower birds bower, the day I was slashing along the dingo fence and disturbed some fat tailed Dunnarts. Brolgas, emus, masses of butterflies, unbelievable variety of little wrens, reptiles... Epping has it all.


We felt like Alice in Wonderland discovering something new every day.

Epping has a large reference library that we took advantage of. Never a day went past that did not find us with our noses in a book.

Bloody Bushnell's

The 15 Bushnell cameras were the bane of my life. Some cameras were fitted with D cell batteries and some were fitted with rechargeable batteries. Neither system seemed to work too well.

Every evening I would try to set at least 1 camera on every feed station or burrow. I seemed to be forever charging and replacing the batteries and replacing the memory chips in the cameras. Every morning I left camp at about 7am to remove the chips from the cameras, come back to base camp, download the pictures to the antiquated computer and see what exciting events had happened overnight. All photos then had to be saved to a file. This very important work is time-consuming and frustrating to the Max... but it must be done as it is the only way you get to see what's really happening at Epping. It is a vital aspect of the science of the whole project to maintain faultless records.



Our Little Epping Adventure

During our last week at Epping we had a little adventure...

We were on our way to the kangaroo trap yard, we had the trailer attached to the quad bike and the trailer was full of water and feed. June and I decided to take a different road didn't we!!

What we found on this little journey was a very wet boggy area. We had become quite confident on the 'Quaddy' by this time... perhaps a little too confident and game. Cocky even! Now, who can guess the outcome?

Yes, we tried to drive through that area. It was just on dusk and we were about 9 kilometres from base camp and, yes, we got the bike and trailer bogged.

After unhooking the trailer from the bike and with June pushing and me driving and peals of laughter we got the bike out, left the trailer in the bog and managed a muddy return to base camp that night.

Do you think we learned our lesson??? The next day we brought my four wheel drive and the bike back to try to retrieve the trailer. After we managed to get the car bogged....June, once again, had to push but this time it was the car!

After being bitten by the biggest ants I have ever seen, being covered in mud, laughing so hard we could hardly stand, we did manage (after many hours of hard work) to get the car, the bike and the trailer all to dry ground.

Sh sh sh sh sh sh (secret wombat business) (don't tell Alan!!!)

Leaving

It seemed no time at all and our month was over and we were packing up and showing the new caretakers the ropes.

Leaving was so very difficult. We both wanted to go and both wanted to stay. Words like "torn" just don't quite sum up how we felt- in fact I don't think there are any words which describe it. Perhaps it is enough to say it was very, very hard to do.

So, we reminded each other that we could always come back. Having been outside the square there was other important work for us to do back inside the "square". We made a difference at Epping and we can continue to make a difference back home, caring for our orphaned Bare-nosed wombats.

So off we went.



Stop Off At Rocky

We had arranged to meet Alan and Rinna at the Rockhampton Zoo to look at the breeding program set up for the Southern Hairy- Nosed Wombats.

Alan introduced us to Tina and Peter who work at the zoo. They also have a lot to do with the breeding program.

We were also introduced to Wiggles, a Southern Hairy- Nosed Wombat raised by Tina and, again, we were given the opportunity to cuddle a great big lovely Wombie, this time a Southern. We are blessed to be among a handful of people to have cuddled a Northern and a Southern AND a Bare- Nosed Wombat all in the same month.

The Breeding program

It is well known that breeding wombats in captivity is extremely difficult. A breeding program was set up at Rockhampton Zoo in 2001 to try & breed the Southern Hairy-nosed. So far 7 babies have been born at the zoo & if the same technique is applied to the Northern Hairy-nosed wombats it is hoped that they may also one day breed in captivity.

Going to see the Flashjacks.

We had a great day and were invited to go back to Tina and Peter's place (just up the road) to spend the night with them. We had a wonderful time, learning about how they are starting a breeding program for Flashjacks or the endangered Bridled nailtail wallabies.

"Just up the road" in Queensland of course means: after traveling for well over an hour we finally arrived. This extremely hard-working dedicated couple made us feel so welcome and showed us all their plans and dreams for the Flashjacks... But that's another story for another time.

Is What They are Doing at Epping Forest Working?


In a word, Yes.

The number of individuals is increasing slowly but surely, however there is a very long way to go. Habitat needs to be expanded- the whole "safe area" needs to be expanded, the research program needs to be expanded, more funding needs to be applied to the whole program.

Just recently (on July the 8th actually) Alan and many others were featured in an "Animal Planet" documentary on American pay television entitled "War of the Wombats" which explored his work and the work of some others around the country who are trying to save our wombats, Hairy and Bare- nosed alike. While there is still widespread apathy and even some hostility in some parts of our own country towards our native species, perhaps some international funding might be forthcoming from documentaries such as that one. Let's hope so.

Conclusion: Would We Do It Again? In An Instant!?

Our Epping Forest experience has changed our lives forever. We stepped outside the square for just 4 weeks and stepped back into our old squares more self-confident and totally different people. We feel that no challenge will ever be too big, no mountain too high, no political fight too hard - we won't ever give in again. We learnt a raft of new skills and so did our dear hubbies!!



Mind you, Epping Forest is not for everyone.

Not everyone enjoys the experience of Epping, not everyone finds or understands the joy of a close encounter with a Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat. Not everyone finds the “Epping Magic” that June and I were so very lucky to find. If you would like to see if you can find Epping Magic, you should contact Alan and register your name to become a caretaker.

As sure as god made little green apples, I will return to Epping Forest National Park.

Thank you to all those out there who “care”- keep up the great work and keep on making a difference!

Thanks to Linda and Bill for helping me prepare this presentation

BIOGRAPHY:

My name is Shirley Lack & I have been a wildlife carer since 1982. My love for wildlife started when my cat arrived home with a baby sugar glider. My love for possum & gliders turned into a passion for macrapods when in 1987 we sold our seaside house & moved out of town to 15 acres of bush land. The move started an obsession with wombats that has lasted many years.. I was actively involved in my local wildlife group for over 10 years holding the position of treasurer along with many other roles. I was the treasurer on the organizing committee for the NSW wildlife conference in 2004, I was also the treasurer of the steering committee for the formation of the NSW Wildlife Council

I have seen lots of changes over the years, some great & some not so great. During the last few years I have been actively involved with trying to ensure better rights for wildlife carers.

