

Wildlife Management Methods for Local Government Authorities

Brushtail Possums in municipal parks and gardens

Background

Common Brushtail Possums have adapted extremely well to urban environments and live throughout metropolitan Melbourne and in large regional cities and towns.

Many people welcome possums as part of the urban environment. Possums have become a familiar tourist attraction in some municipal parks and gardens.

Surprisingly, the hustle and bustle of our cities and towns has not inhibited the possum population. The planting of native and exotic plants and trees has provided a rich environment for possums. Consequently, possum populations in some urban areas are higher than in more “natural” environments.

Feeding possums, either deliberately or through littering, contributes to the increase of possum populations. Easily accessible rubbish bins are another source of food for possums.

The increased possum population can eventually cause significant damage to both ornamental exotic and native plants. This damage has been assessed during systematic surveys for some specific public gardens.

In some situations, intervention and management is needed for both the welfare of the park and its resident possums.

Purpose of these guidelines

These guidelines will help Local Government Authorities evaluate the need for intervention. Each municipal park or garden must be managed on a case by case basis.

An effective possum management strategy will involve a neighbourhood approach (factoring in movement of possums from adjacent properties) and will need to be implemented incrementally over a period of at least five years.

Steps to managing damage caused by possums are discussed below.

Step 1 – Define the Problem

To determine whether there is a significant problem caused by possums, Local Government Authorities should firstly document the answers to the following questions:

- What type and extent of damage is being caused to vegetation?

- Are possums the cause of the damage, or are there other contributing factors?
- Is the damage significant? That is, has it been occurring over time and is it increasing? How is the damage measured? Is it likely to have long term effect on the vegetation? If so, how?
- Do possums live adjacent to the park? Where?
- Are there existing studies of the local possum population?
- What do local residents think about possums in the park or garden? What is their understanding of possum management issues?
- Do possums have access to artificial food sources, such as:
 - rubbish bins that are not possum-proof
 - scraps left around the park
 - deliberate feeding by the public
 - if feeding does occur, is it *ad hoc* or systematic, what is its frequency, and how much food is provided?

Step 2 – Determine possum numbers

To assess the possum numbers and their relationship with the damage, the following questions need to be considered:

- Is the possum population high?
- Are people relocating possums into the park?
- Have you engaged an ecologist or used a standardised counting technique to conduct a survey or possum numbers?

Use the results to establish a baseline which subsequent counts can be compared to.

Step 3 – Develop a Strategy

If you have identified the need to reduce possum numbers to limit damage, document the information outlined in steps 1 and 2 and develop a strategy for action. The strategy should include:

- Consultation with major stakeholders, such as regular park users, land managers and adjacent property occupants.
- A determination on the use of non-lethal techniques.

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Non-lethal management techniques aimed at reducing damage from possums

Protect damaged trees by placing bands around their trunks. Bands can be made from sheet metal, polycarbonate, Perspex or similar materials and should be not less than 60 cm wide. Place bands so that possums cannot jump from one trunk to another. Make sure bands are properly fitted to prevent possums squeezing under them.

Wherever possible, place bands above the first fork of the tree to give possums a refuge if pursued by dogs (dogs should be required to be on leashes in parks, this should be sign posted and enforced).

Place bands on adjacent trees that have interconnecting branches, or branches that are closer than about two metres apart. Alternatively, prune interconnecting branches.

Reduce access to den sites in other trees by placing bands around those tree trunks, or by filling possum hollows, preferably using a qualified arborist.

Prevent access to all sources of non-natural food through public education and possum-proofing of rubbish bins.

Monitor and record the effectiveness of these non-lethal management techniques, especially changes to possum numbers and the health of the vegetation.

These measures should reduce the damage caused by possums. However, Local Government and park users must allow adequate time for the possum population to decrease. This may take several months. Some possums will disperse to surrounding areas. If all suitable territories are already occupied, some possums may die. This reflects what happens at the end of every breeding season when young possums leave their hollows and try to be independent. If the possums are allowed to over-browse they may ultimately kill the trees in the park and then suffer themselves.

In the long term, the number of possums will stabilise and a more sustainable population will minimise the damage to vegetation.

The strategy may then consider reducing possum density by culling.

If survey results show that possum numbers are at such a high level that the management methods outlined previously will cause significant welfare problems, it may be necessary to reduce the number of possums before implementing non-lethal techniques.

Contact the holder of a Commercial Wildlife (Wildlife Controller) Licence Type 1 endorsed for taking possums to reduce their numbers by trapping and veterinary euthanasia. Telephone the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) Customer Contact Centre on 136 186 for details on Wildlife Controllers.

Trapping Common Brushtail Possums

A Governor in Council Order provides that where a clearly documented strategy has been prepared, the relevant land manager may reduce the number of Common Brushtail Possums in municipal parks and gardens.

Specifically, the legislation provides that:

- Only Common Brushtail Possums may be trapped;
- Only holders of Commercial Wildlife (Wildlife Controller) Licence Type 1 endorsed for taking possums, with the express permission of the land manager and in accordance with a possum management plan, may trap or control Common Brushtail Possums in municipal parks and gardens;
- Possums may only be trapped in a cage trap designed not to cause injury;
- Trapped possums must be protected from rain or wind, direct sun and domestic animals at all times;
- Trapped possums must be humanely destroyed by a registered veterinary practitioner within 24 hours of capture.

Further information

Please contact the DELWP Customer Contact Centre on 136 186, your local DELWP regional office or the DELWP website www.wildlife.vic.gov.au.

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