



AUSTRALIAN CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

The Director
Terrestrial Species Conservation Section
Wildlife, Heritage and Marine Division
Department of the Environment
By email: species.consultation@environment.gov.au

16 August 2018

ACF Submission: Conservation status and recovery actions for the Leadbeater's Possum

Dear Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC),

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the eligibility of *Gymnobelideus leadbeateri* (*Leadbeater's Possum*) for inclusion on the EPBC Act threatened species list; and on the necessary conservation actions required to recover the species.

About ACF

The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) is Australia's peak national environmental organisation. We represent a community of more than 500,000 people who are committed to achieving a healthy environment for all Australians. For more than 50 years, ACF has been a strong advocate for the nation's forests and wildlife. ACF is proudly independent, non-partisan and funded by donations from our community.

ACF was a key stakeholder in the development of the draft National Recovery Plan for the Leadbeater's Possum ([Australian Government, 2016](#)) (recovery plan) and has sought to work with the logging industry to improve protection of the Leadbeater's possum and its habitat through participation in the Victorian Government's Forest Industry Taskforce.

Recommendations

ACF makes the following recommendations:

- 1 The Leadbeater's Possum should remain as critically endangered on the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* Threatened Species List.
- 2 Urgent conservation actions required for the recovery of the species include:
 - a) the cessation of logging in the species critical habitat,
 - b) the creation of new national parks and reserves,
 - c) the creation of strong new national environment laws,
 - d) the release and implementation of the draft recovery plan.



Discussion

ACF supports the preliminary decision reached by the TSSC to retain the critically endangered status of the Leadbeater's possum. The species clearly meets the critically endangered status under criteria 1A4(b). The species population has decreased by 80% over time and the trajectory for the species under the current forest management and logging regime is dire.

ACF endorses the authority and scientific independence of the TSSC to assess and decide on the conservation status of Australia's threatened species. Such decisions should be based on credible, peer-reviewed science (such as the Australian National University's unparalleled 30-year longitudinal study of the Mountain Ash ecosystem). Moreover, the status should be determined solely on the conservation needs of the species and should not be subject to the needs of industry or political interference.

The Australian Forest Products Association's ([AFPA, 2017](#)) attempt to down list the species and remove already inadequate habitat protections, appears motivated not by concern for the survival of the species, but rather the self-interest of the logging industry. Down listing of the species also appears to have been pursued for political purposes, with the former Agriculture Minister publicly calling for the removal of the species from the critically endangered list. The consequence of these actions has been to delay release of the long-overdue recovery plan and stall the implementation of urgent recovery actions outlined in that plan. The long-overdue draft plan should be finalised and released immediately with adequate resources to fund full implementation.

Despite industry claims that populations of Leadbeater's possums are far more numerous than previously understood, there has been a notable flat lining and now decline in possum sightings. The increase in sightings that did occur were largely as a result of volunteer survey efforts by conservationists searching for possums in a small number of areas of unprotected high-quality habitat where they are expected to occur, but were not being effectively surveyed prior to logging. These sightings do not represent a significant increase in possum numbers, rather a confirmation of their occurrence in high quality habitat scheduled for logging.

The recovery plan identifies that the ongoing reduction in the extent, quality and connectivity of suitable habitat is the greatest threat to the species. The primary drivers of this habitat loss is logging, bushfire and climate change. Of these drivers, it is logging that is most readily and easily mitigated. The cessation of logging in critical habitat for the species (defined in the recovery plan as 'all current and prospective suitable habitat'), is the highest priority recovery action for the species. This should be immediately followed by the creation of new national parks and reserves, such as the Great Forest National Park, which will help safeguard the habitat in the long-term.

The species cannot survive without old hollow bearing trees. The evidence from Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve is that artificial nest boxes are an ineffective habitat replacement. Nest boxes and other artificial hollows don't work for this species and ought not be considered a solution to reverse the decline of the population.

Indeed, the decline of large, old, hollow-bearing trees across the landscape is happening much faster than previously predicted, in large part because of our warming climate. Given the Leadbeater's



possums' known dependence on hollows to nest and breed in, protection and restoration of the ecosystem within permanent conservation reserves, so that it can provide suitable habitat, is essential for the survival of the species.

The TSSC is correct to use the abundance of hollow bearing trees as an index of abundance of Leadbeater's possum, and to treat all Mountain Ash Forest and Snow Gum woodland within the species' range as current and potential future habitat. All current and future suitable (and thus critical) habitat across the species' known range should be maintained and managed, including through formal protection, to maximise its suitability for the Leadbeater's possum.

The fact that VicForests has once again been unable to achieve even the lowest level of Forest Stewardship Council certification (Controlled Wood) is evidence that the current and ongoing logging regime is unsustainable. The logging industry benefits from an extraordinary exemption from Australia's national environmental laws. The consequence has been disastrous for forest ecosystems in general, and forest-dependent threatened wildlife such as the Leadbeater's possum, in particular. The exemption, created under two decades old Regional Forest Agreements, illustrates just how broken Australia's national environment laws are, and why a new generation of strong environment laws are urgently needed to help protect and recover species like the Leadbeater's possum.

Until Leadbeater's possum and its habitat is recovered and protected, critically endangered is the appropriate listing for the species.

For more information contact Jess Abrahams, ACF Nature Campaigner on 03 9345 1159 or j.abrahams@acfonline.org.au

*The Australian Conservation Foundation is Australia's national environment organisation.
We stand up, speak out and act for a world where reefs, rivers, forests and wildlife thrive.*