

# ARC Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions (CEED)

## Media Release

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### **‘PICKING LOSERS’ AMONG AUSTRALIA’S WILDLIFE**

Sooner or later Australians may have to decide which wildlife they allow to go extinct.

Making choices between icons like the koala, bilby, Tasmanian Devil and hairy-nosed wombat might seem horrible, says ecologist Dr Michael McCarthy of CEED and The University of Melbourne – but at present levels of national conservation funding, it is more or less inevitable.

“And, given the sensitivity of such a decision, it will be up to the Australian public to make it – not scientists or managers,” he warns.

Dr McCarthy and colleague Prof. Hugh Possingham of CEED and the University of Queensland have put the unpalatable issue of ‘triage’ – deciding which Australian wildlife will live and which will die – squarely on the public agenda in the latest issue of the CEED journal Decision Point.

<http://www.decision-point.com.au/>

“At current levels of funding, it is not possible to save all threatened species in Australia from extinction. You might not like that (we definitely don’t) but it is a fact of life,” the scientists say. “Conservation triage involves spending the limited funding most efficiently.”

To assure the future of all of Australia’s endangered species we’d probably have to increase conservation funding tenfold, Dr McCarthy estimates. “If that sort of funding isn’t available, then we know that tradeoffs will have to be made,” he adds.

“Those tradeoffs will be hard – for example, do we spend limited funds on trying to stop declines of less-threatened species, where we have a better chance of preventing extinction, and let the most-threatened go extinct if they are hard to save?

“Or how do we choose which species to let roam in the wild and which are forever confined to zoos?”

The choice is made even more difficult by the public’s well-known preference for ‘cute and cuddly’ wildlife, as distinct from species that play key roles in keeping the Australian landscape going, the researchers says.

“Fungi, bats and insects, for example would be bound to lose in a ‘cuteness’ contest against most marsupials or birds – yet they play a critical role in maintaining the Australian landscape. How do we decide which is most important – looks or performance?”

The researchers agree that, at present funding levels Australia will need to adopt a ‘conservation triage’ approach that prioritises among threatened species, those most likely to go extinct. Critical considerations include:

- How much is the rate of extinction, decline and recovery of different species influenced by the resources that are spent?
- What is the budget available to allocate among species?
- Are there any opportunities available to improve conservation of multiple species or increase the available funding?
- How does the public value different species, and how does the public weigh extinctions of species against further decline and recovery?

Australia currently spends \$3m each year conserving endangered birds – which is only enough to save about a third of them, Dr McCarthy says. “Our research indicates that if we tripled that investment, we could probably save the lot, as well as removing quite a number from the endangered list.

“To put that in perspective, Australia spends that amount of money in the defence budget in a couple of hours. We could, for example, ground one steel bird such as a FA-18 Hornet strike aircraft for a short time – and you could save up to 260 feathered bird species, like the orange bellied parrot, which are currently of concern.

“This is just one way that we can help secure Australia’s future, by improving the chances that our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren can enjoy and benefit from our unique biodiversity,” the researchers say.

CEED is the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions. CEED’s research tackles key gaps in environmental decision making, monitoring and adaptive management.

More information:

Assoc. Prof. Mick McCarthy, CEED and Melbourne University, +61 (0) 452 220 725

Professor Hugh Possingham, CEED and UQ, +61 (0) 434 079 061

Karen Gillow, communication manager CEED, +61 (0) 402 674 409 or [k.gillow@uq.edu.au](mailto:k.gillow@uq.edu.au)

[www.ceed.edu.au](http://www.ceed.edu.au)