

Common Wombat

By Andrew Yarde

There are not many wombats held by private wildlife license holders. So it is always surprising at the amount of calls I receive from people wanting to keep a wombat. The wombat that can be kept on our wildlife schedules is the Common Wombat *Vombatus ursinus*. Realistically the wombat is a specialised species. Requiring a great deal of fore thought before considering obtaining an animal. Wombats live 12 –15 years in captivity ages up to 25 years have been recorded.

In reading information about this species' husbandry the recurring topic was shade, keeping the animal cool and effects of heat stress that will very quickly kill an animal if its requirements are not adequately met. Wombats do not sweat, "common wombats can show signs of overheating when temperatures exceed 24 degrees Celsius"

As with any good enclosure design, considerations need to be given to the animals natural behaviour. Allowing natural activities to occur, the fore thought of good enclosure design will avoid many husbandry issues that may arise.

Shade - It would almost be impossible to plant a new enclosure. It would be difficult to stop wombats digging up seedlings. Creating the enclosure around an established shade tree could be an option, you may need to protect existing plants with enclosure furnishings. However the established area may cause issues with the mesh or concrete underlay. So consider positioning an enclosure with plantings around the outside of the enclosure's perimeter either in an established area or with your own landscaped planting design.

Sprinkler system - It is suggested to install sprinkler systems for hotter weather.

Dry bedding - Shelter areas and dry clean bedding should be available at all times, ensure that the enclosure is large enough and the sprinkler system designed does not affect the shelter and bedding area.

Shelter - Nest boxes should be provided for the animals to sleep in, but also to allow some ease when handling animals. Size 1m x 1m x 1m, with a hinged lid. Entry opening should be 30cm high.

Enclosure - Only a basic design is required due to wombats being so destructive. The position of the enclosure is important - shade in the heat and sun to bask when it is cold. The main substrate should be of soil. 1-1.5 meters under this soil should be a mesh underlay or concrete base. This will prevent animals escaping when they inevitably dig. Enclosure size DSE Code of Practice recommends minimum floor area of 50sq metres. Maximum number of animals 1. Wall height 1.2m. Increased floor area for each additional animal 25sq metres. Stephen Jackson *Australian Mammals Biology and Captive Management* suggests "45 metres sq up to 400 metres square". Common wombats are usually held as a pair.

Husbandry does differ between the wombat species due mainly to behavioural differences. Common wombats prefer to be solitary in permanent confinement. Enclosures could be fully open (remember shade) or semi covered.

Walls at 1.2meters high and continuing below the substrate until they reach the mesh or concrete base. Walls should be smooth or a strong mesh construction. Animals can chew and dig at fencing which could cause damage to the animals teeth, gums and feet.

If using concrete under the substrate or you have a clay base soil you will need to consider drainage to prevent flooding.

Indoor enclosures could also be an option allowing better temperature control and the opportunity for reverse light display.

Furnishings - Mock rock, concrete pipe and hollow trees all make good additions to a wombat enclosure. Furnishings need to be secure to prevent movement when wombats dig. Digging is required for wombats to wear down their claws if they cannot dig their claws will grow excessively. Wombats also enjoy a dust bath, sandy loam and leaf litter make an excellent substrate.

Handling - Smaller animals can be picked up under the arm pits and can be carried like this. Larger animals can be difficult to handle and highly aggressive. This is one of the reasons for the use of hinged lid on the nest box. I would suggest further research in handling these animals before even thinking of acquiring this species.

Hygiene/ Cleaning - Enclosures should be checked daily. Remove uneaten food and faeces. Water should be available at all times.

Record keeping - Behavioural information on each individual is always helpful with the species especially when try to find a compatible pair.

Feeding requirements (diet taken from *Australian Mammals Biology and Captive Management*) Daily per animal; Ad lib meadow hay, oaten hay, fresh grass, 500g carrots 1 eucalypts or wattle branch, Lucerne and maize can be given on alternate days.

Alternative diet; Per animal 400g pellets, 50 g maize, 50g crushed oats, 50g wheat.

Diet in common wombats has been linked to their breeding in captivity. A basic diet for the majority of the year of hay, grass and pellets. Fresh green grass should be increased to every day for several months prior to the breeding season. This should be continued to the end of the season and may assist in reproduction. Wombats can become obese on high protein and energy diets. Think low energy, low protein.

I really have provided a basic outline of wombat husbandry the main objective being to highlight the specialised needs of this species and the commitment you would need to have to adequately house and cater for a challenging animal like the wombat.