



20<sup>th</sup> January 2014

## Media release

### **Mass die-offs in extreme heat spark call for urgent government action to end 'war' on flying-foxes**

Bat carers are calling for national intervention to address human and climatic threats to protected flying-foxes in the Australian state of Queensland and today are releasing a specially-produced video to highlight the current 'war' on ecologically-vital species.

According to Bat Conservation and Rescue Queensland, the state has become the epicentre of a crisis for Australian native bats, with a locally unprecedented mass die-off of flying-foxes due to extreme heat coming hot on the heels of state government-sanctioned forced dispersals of maternity colonies.

An estimated 50,000+ native flying-foxes perished in south-east Queensland in the extreme heat event of Saturday, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014, when temperatures reached over 43°C. Some of the dead bats were Grey-headed Flying-foxes, which are red-listed internationally as being vulnerable to extinction. Extreme temperatures have also killed this species in Victoria, NSW and SA.

On-the-ground reports indicate the majority of bat camps in south-east Queensland were affected - with some massive losses at inland sites such as Boonah, Palmwoods, Ipswich, Woodford and Mt. Ommaney, while other colonies nearer the coast were spared.

This latest climate-related disaster for bats follows national and international media attention in December 2013 for a forced dispersal of a maternity colony at Charters Towers, part of a serious escalation over the past 18 months of both official and illegal attacks on protected flying-foxes in Queensland.

Bat Conservation and Rescue QLD (BCRQ) president Louise Saunders said that the extraordinary heat wave toll coming on top of human pressures on flying-foxes meant that official conservation measures such as the decade-old draft National Recovery Plan for Grey-headed Flying-foxes were now in tatters.

"To the bat rescue and carer community, this extreme heat event has been our Brisbane flood, our tsunami," said Ms Saunders. "We're calling on the federal government to intervene immediately, given that there is a clear failure to provide care and protection for a species that is internationally-recognised as being a keystone species vital to ecological health. You can imagine the national outrage if 50,000 koalas were dropping dead from the trees.

"The state government is wilfully neglecting its duty of care to protected and vulnerable species and the silence from the federal government is deafening. We are calling for urgent action on a new rescue and recovery strategy for all flying-foxes in Queensland, which is the frontline for this worsening crisis, and it also needs to cover other states as well."

Ms Saunders said that BCRQ was releasing a new short film ([http://youtu.be/2AXI0Uyb\\_CM](http://youtu.be/2AXI0Uyb_CM)) that it has commissioned to highlight the ecological value of flying-foxes, the human threats that they face, and also the amazing work of volunteer bat rescuers and carers.

"Our rescuers and carers continue to dedicate countless volunteer hours to rescue, care and clean-up. They have delivered a community service to not only aid the bats, but to also ensure that members of the public aren't put at risk by attempting to save bats without experts on hand. Our people have stepped-up.

"Members of the public have also been fantastically supportive with donations of native blossom, browse and mulberry leaves (a bat favourite), fruit, vet supplies, fruit-cutting assistance and giving money too.

"With over 400 baby-flying foxes in care, we need all the help we can get."

### **Keystone species**

The mass deaths from the January events have impacted populations in Qld, Victoria, SA and NSW. Three species of flying-fox have perished in these extreme heat events included Grey Headed Flying-foxes, which are on the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List as a species vulnerable to extinction, and also Little red flying-foxes and Black flying-foxes. All four species of native flying-foxes present in Queensland are officially protected, being regarded as keystone species in biodiversity terms, playing a vital ecological role as Australia's only nocturnal, long-distance pollinators and seed dispersers, especially of rainforest and high-value hardwood eucalypt tree species (the latter including several eucalypt species that are the only food source for koalas).

Ms Saunders said: "With this type of loss, we worry for the future survival of not only our flying-foxes but the biodiversity of plant and animal species that support a healthy Queensland forest system; a system that includes our tropical

rainforests and priceless koala habitat, all of which Queensland and Australia rely on to sell as tourist magnets. Once such treasures are gone, they are gone forever."

The Australian Government's Department of the Environment says: "Flying-foxes play a vital role in keeping our ecosystems in good health. They pollinate flowers and disperse seeds as they forage on the nectar and pollen of eucalypts, melaleucas and banksias and on the fruits of rainforest trees and vines. Flying-foxes are important in ensuring the survival of our threatened rainforests such as the Wet Tropics and Gondwana Rainforests, both listed as World Heritage sites." (See: <http://www.environment.gov.au/node/16394>)

### **Climate change threat**

Traditionally climate change has not been highlighted officially as a key threatening process for flying-foxes, however that is changing with a series of mass die-offs related to extreme heat events in recent years, especially in Queensland and NSW. (See 'Climate change and the effects of temperature extremes on Australian flying-foxes' Justin A. Welbergen et al <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2596826/>)

### **Citizen safety around bats**

BCRQ is committed to promoting safe interaction between people and flying-foxes, with our mission being to ensure they can live together in harmony.

"Never try to perform your own rescue. For your safety and for the sake of flying-foxes, always call a wildlife rescue service," Ms Saunders said.

"A frightened flying-fox is likely to bite or scratch, potentially exposing a well-meaning rescuer to the deadly Australian Bat Lyssavirus if the animal is infected. It must be noted that the virus is rare in bats, in fact less than 0.5% of the entire population of bats!

"If anyone is bitten or scratched that inevitably means vaccinations, and death for the flying-fox because Queensland Health requires them to be euthanased to be tested."

### **Rules for human safety and flying-fox welfare**

1. If you see a flying-fox in trouble, immediately call the 24 hour hotline 0488 228 134 or 1300 ANIMAL (1300 264 625).  
*Call if you see a flying-fox entangled in backyard netting, caught on barbed wire, on a powerline, alone in a tree during the day, or on the ground.*
2. Do not touch flying-foxes. It is safe to be near flying-foxes but Australian bat lyssavirus can be transmitted through a bite or scratch.
3. If you find a flying-fox on the ground, move it without touching it (eg. with a shovel) to a safe place away from traffic or dogs and cover it with a towel and a weighted box.
4. If you find a flying-fox entangled on barbed wire or in a net, cover it with a towel to keep it calm.
5. Even if a flying-fox on powerlines is dead, call a rescuer because they may have a live baby.
6. To safely protect your backyard fruit from birds and flying-foxes, only use netting with a weave smaller than 1 cm. If you can poke your finger through a net, it could be deadly to wildlife.

### **Contact for interview**

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Images are available including of flying-foxes entangled in backyard netting, orphaned baby flying-foxes and rescued adults in care. View BCRQ's new short film at [http://youtu.be/2AXI0Uyb\\_CM](http://youtu.be/2AXI0Uyb_CM)