

2. Aims of the National Forum

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For inspiration in preparing this address, I visited the national Malleefowl database. I scanned the map showing the distribution of monitoring sites scattered across the Mallee belt. What strikes you is how fragmented are the areas of remnant habitat, and in many cases how small. Take the case of Innes National Park which my wife and I visited at Easter. Malleefowl literally have just a toehold at the bottom of a large peninsula which has otherwise been totally cleared. Then I changed over to the satellite view and the large fire scar in the Big Desert Wilderness Park in Victoria became visible. This exercise highlighted for me the relevance of the themes chosen for this conference to the long term conservation of Malleefowl.

We have known for many years (since Joe did his PhD on the subject) that fire plays a critical role for this species. Monitoring has certainly shed further light on the period post-fire before habitat again becomes suitable for breeding. But not until the Mallee Fire and Biodiversity project of La Trobe and Deakin Universities simultaneously sampled a large number of fire mosaics across mallee habitats in Victoria, N.S.W., and South Australia has it been possible to quantify on a large scale some of the relationships between fire regimes and the presence and abundance of a broader suite of Mallee fauna. Simon Watson will be shedding more light on these relationships later today.

Fragmentation of habitat due to historical clearing is another long term issue. Are we facing the prospect of extinction debt – the future loss of a species due to events in the past; such as fragmentation of habitat? My understanding is that this phenomenon is most likely to be exhibited by long-lived species and those with specialised requirements. Sounds like Malleefowl. Until Taneal Cope embarked on her PhD study, we had no real measure of the risks associated with genetic isolation for this species. I am sure everyone will be most interested in her prognosis.

A key aim of the Forum is for each of us to learn the lessons of recent research and communicate these back within our own regions. Our capacity to apply evidence-based management has been greatly enhanced by the development in recent years of the national database. I expect that Joe's presentation on the database will open our eyes to the potential of this tool.

The role of community groups will continue to be central both from the perspective of collecting evidence through monitoring, and ensuring that land managers take account of that evidence in their management decisions. You should not feel that you do not have influence in this area. In recent times in Victoria, we have been faced with the prospect of burning 5% of our mallee habitats each year as a consequence of the findings of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. There was a groundswell of opposition to this proposition for the mallee, based primarily on the findings from research and monitoring. This has swayed the responsible government agency to amend the burning quota to a more sustainable level.

Because Malleefowl occur over such a vast geographic area, we rarely get the opportunity to meet together as a group. The aim of the National Forum is to support and promote the activities of the large pool of volunteers who are scattered across the southern half of the continent. As convenor of the National Recovery Team for the past 7 years, I am mindful of the fact that our national newsletter 'Around the Mounds', previously produced by the Threatened Species Network, has gone into abeyance in the last few years. This is a matter that we will be addressing in our recovery team meeting tomorrow afternoon. I would encourage volunteers to approach me or other members of the recovery team with suggestions on how your efforts can be better supported. You are the backbone of the conservation effort and this forum is for your benefit.