

## SECRETARY'S POST

Welcome to our long awaited Newsletter. I know it is the first one in a long time, mostly due to the impacts of the bushfires, COVID-19 and all the other crazy things happening in the world today. You will see our newsletter is very large, as we are playing catchup to cover all the amazing projects and activities we have been doing through Australian Ecosystems here at Secret Creek Sanctuary. We just finished construction of our Mountain Pygmy Possum Breeding Centre which we will be officially opening.

**This event is on 11<sup>th</sup> September at 11am – bookings are essential on our website.**

Over the past 12 months, we have been very busy and have been successful in securing various state and federal grants for bushfire affected communities. What AEFI did recognize after the fires was that there were no facilities to care for all the injured and dying wildlife in the Blue Mountains and Central West Regions. AEFI then planned, applied and were successful in securing funding to build a Wildlife Hospital and Rehabilitation Centre. This facility will be operated and managed by Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital management staff, with whom we have built a strong partnership during the planning phase of the best practice design for this facility.

Another major grant was secured for a Visitor & Cultural Centre, which will serve as an entry point to Secret Creek Sanctuary and as a working cultural hub for the local indigenous community One Mob. We have worked closely with One Mob on a number of projects and we partnered with them to design the Visitor & Cultural Centre. A 1km self-guided walking track with interpretive signage will be constructed to complement the centre. We are also working with One Mob to develop an outdoor cultural meeting place which will include a native food garden. This space will be used for community engagement but also to accommodate our Walk Talk n Do program teaching youth art, song and dance.



*Trevor Evans*

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- Mountain Pygmy Possum (*Burramys parvus*) Breeding Centre Completion
- Walk Talk n' Do Indigenous Mentoring Program
- New Koalas, Mountain Pygmy Possums and Tasmanian Devils welcomed at Secret Creek
- Grant Success & Progress of the projects
  - Cultural & Visitor Centre
  - Wildlife and Rehabilitation Centre
  - First Nations Meeting Place – One Mob
  - Restoration of the Sanctuary Walking Track





In the last issue, we informed you about the climate adaptation project we have been working on – the Mountain Pygmy Possum Breeding Centre. After 20 months, working through numerous obstacles such as COVID-19 and flooding events, we completed the construction of the breeding centre, brought in 14 Mountain Pygmy Possums from Victoria and had Prague Zoo representatives visit on 19<sup>th</sup> April.

*“We’ve now got a facility that will enable these alpine possums to adapt to a very different environment of the kind that their ancestors enjoyed and thrived in for millions of years. The breeding facility will provide the bridge to help them transition back into those far more comfortable environments and survive the lethal changes coming to the alpine zone,”* says AEFI Secretary Trevor Evans. *It’s just great to be able to finally see this dream – which has been over a decade in the making – turn into reality.”*

For the past 11 years, AEFI have been working closely with the Mountain Pygmy Possum management group, namely Professor Mike Archer (UNSW), Dr Hayley Bates (UNSW) and Senior Threatened Species Officer Dr Linda Broom of NSW DECCW to build this world-first facility.

The project received a boost from an unexpected quarter when the Prague Zoo offered to donate \$190,000 following the devastating bushfires that swept eastern Australia in 2019/2020. Representatives from Prague Zoo, including the Director Miroslav Bobek, and the Czech Republic Ambassador to Australia, his Excellency Tomas Dub also came to the Secret Creek Sanctuary to view the the breeding facility.

#### MOUNTAIN PYGMY POSSUM (*Burramys parvus*)

These critically endangered possums are the only hibernating marsupial in Australia. They are normally found in Victoria’s alpine regions and Mt Kosciuszko where they hibernate for about 7 months of the year under the snow. They emerge in Spring weighing only 40 grams! Unfortunately research suggests there are only 2000 left in the wild as their main food source, the Bogong Moth, has dropped from over 4 million to only a few hundred in Victoria. Mountain Pygmy Possums were first found as a 10,000 year old fossil and were thought to be extinct, until a live one was discovered at Mt Hotham ski lodge in 1966. This is our last chance to save the species.



Local One Mob Elder and current President of AEFI Bob Sutor opened the day with a smoking site cleaning ceremony.

#### HOW IT WORKS

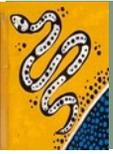
The breeding centre comprises outdoor enclosures with thermally stable, insulated rock-walls with nest boxes deep inside. There is an option for the possums to go inside the air-conditioned nest box or to an outdoor environment, allowing them the options to acclimatise.

The thermal refuge room enables us to move possums indoors if temperatures exceed the insulating capacity of the outdoor nest bank, or in case of fire. To maintain a cool and moist environment, a drip system will mist the enclosures during hot, dry conditions. In addition, the centre has research & observation room, office area, quarantine rooms, storage room and food preparation area.

The possums are thriving at Secret Creek Sanctuary – they’ve now had 6 possum babies. Congratulations to all involved!

#### OPENING DAY – 11<sup>th</sup> September 2022 at 11am

We will be holding an official opening day of the breeding centre on 11<sup>th</sup> September at 11am. See our website for more detail if you’d like to join us.



# PRAGUE ZOO VISIT OF THE SANCTUARY ON 19<sup>TH</sup> APRIL TO VIEW THE BREEDING CENTRE



*At the centre entrance from the right: Secret Creek Sanctuary Owner and AEFI Secretary Trevor Evans, UNSW Professor Mike Archer, Prague Zoo Director Miroslav Bobek and the Czech Republic Ambassador Tomas Hub*



*AEFI President Bob Sutor doing a smoking ceremony on the day*



*MPP Breeding Centre from the outside*



*Research area in the Breeding Centre*



*Internal habitat cages with rock-walls*



# \$1.3M DEVELOPMENT AT THE SECRET CREEK SANCTUARY FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IS OFF AND RUNNING

In June 2020, AEFI was successful in securing \$1.3M in government funding from the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund for two infrastructure projects to be built at the Secret Creek Sanctuary.

“Funding for the projects at the Secret Creek Sanctuary are part of the recovery journey of the Lithgow region following the devastating bushfires and helps us to continue repairing the social and economic fabric of the community” said Mr Paul Toole MP.

## WILDLIFE HOSPITAL & REHABILITATION CENTRE

The need follows the devastating 2019/20 bushfires in which more than three billion animals – mammals, reptiles, birds and frogs – were killed or displaced (143 million mammals, 2.46 billion reptiles, 180 million birds, and 51 million frogs) (*Australia’s 2019–2020 Bushfires: The Wildlife Toll, commissioned by the World Wide Fund for Nature*). Many animals in the local area suffered the same fate. All of the rescue, rehabilitation and release activity during the bushfires had to be sourced from other areas of NSW. Due to this lack of veterinary wildlife expertise, support and resources locally, we’ve seen the need for a dedicated wildlife hospital.

The Wildlife Hospital & Rehabilitation Centre will serve the Blue Mountains and Central West region, which are surrounded by six NSW National Parks providing habitat to a variety of endangered and rare species.

We are collaborating with Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital (BBWH) and their staff on the design, function and fit-out requirements. BBWH will be the operational managers that will collaborate and partner with AEFI & Secret Creek Sanctuary to carry out rescue and rehabilitation work. The fully fenced, predator-free Sanctuary as well as the 1000-acre AEFI property on the Newnes Plateau will provide opportunities for release.

## CULTURAL & VISITOR CENTRE

The Cultural & Visitor Centre will become the new welcoming entry into the Secret Creek Sanctuary on the ground floor and a cultural arts centre upstairs. This has been in the planning for many years and is finally happening.

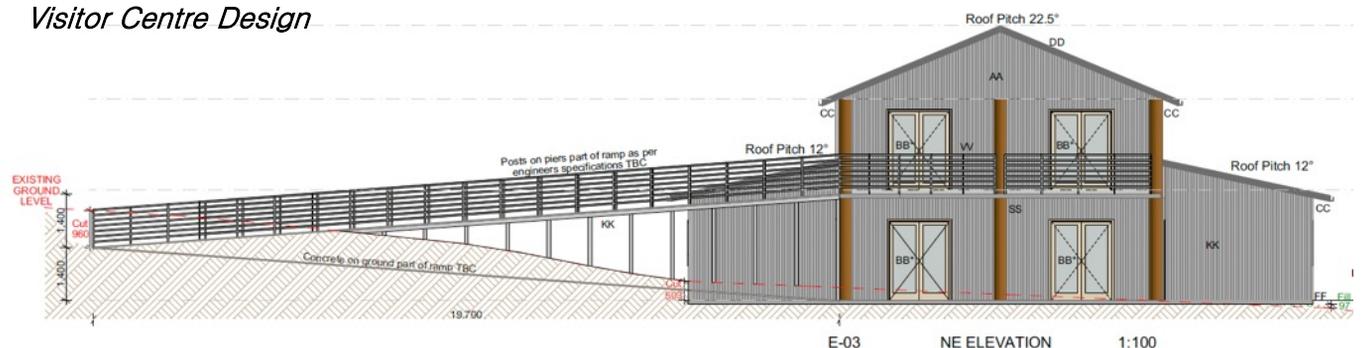
We are collaborating with the local Indigenous group One Mob to inform the design of the centre, which will serve multiple uses:

- Aboriginal Cultural Centre for the local group “One Mob”
- Wildlife / Ecosystem Interpretative Centre for environmental education
- Health and Wellbeing Community Centre for local community
- Wildlife and Visitor Centre entry to Secret Creek Sanctuary
- Point of sale for local artists

## CURRENT PROGRESS

Site plans, detailed designs as well as Environmental and Bushfire reports have been completed and we are liaising with Council for development approval (DA).

### Visitor Centre Design

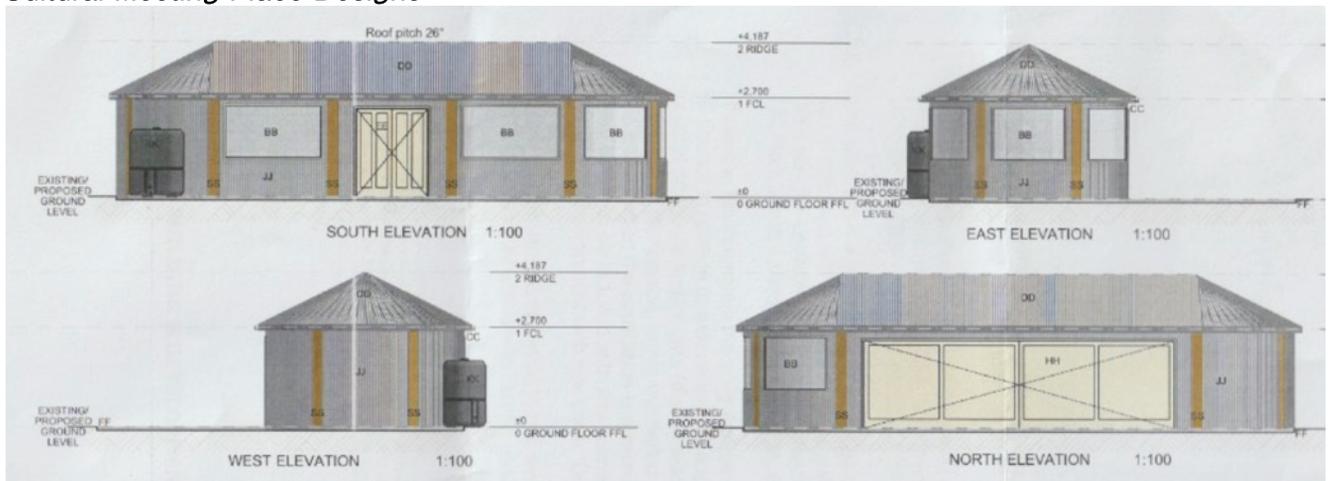


# ...AND WE SECURED FURTHER FUNDS TO STRENGTHEN THE CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY COHESION

## CULTURAL MEETING PLACE FOR THE LOCAL INDIGENOUS GROUP ONE MOB

In August 2020, AEFI was successful in securing \$34,000 from the Building Better Regions Fund to upgrade the existing camping ground next to the Secret Creek Sanctuary. The upgrade will include building a shelter, a camp kitchen and installation of water tanks & solar power. It will mainly serve as a meeting place for the local First Nations group One Mob. One Mob will contribute to the project by building a Native Food Garden.

### *Cultural Meeting Place Designs*



## RESTORATION OF THE SANCTUARY WALKING TRACK

In December 2020, AEFI was successful in securing \$290,000 from the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program to restore the 1.2 km Sanctuary walking track, which was destroyed in the 2019/2020 bushfires.

The new track will be partly wheel-chair accessible and self-guided. It will start at the newly built Cultural and Visitors Centre and it will take visitors through the Sanctuary to view the various endangered species in their enclosures and natural habitats. Interpretive signs will be installed along the track to educate visitors about the site.

Would you like to help complete one of these projects? This is where funds are currently needed:

Wildlife Hospital & Rehabilitation Centre: Hospital fit-out (~\$1M)

Cultural & Visitor Centre: Platypus Tank & Native Fish Tank (~\$300k)

Cultural Meeting Place: Bushtucker Garden Beds (~\$10,000)

# WALK TALK N' DO FIRST NATIONS MENTORING PROGRAM

One Mob is our local Not For Profit Aboriginal Corporation endeavouring to keep our culture strong. We educate our youth and the community about the importance of connecting to country, preserving and protecting our land, heritage and culture.

AEFI in conjunction with OneMob designed and completed a 4 month First Nations Mentoring Program from 2020–2021 for local youth on Wiradjuri country. The aim of Yanhanha Girinyalanha Yama (Walk, Talk n Do) was to provide a safe space for Aboriginal youth to come together with Elders and learn about their culture on a grass-roots level and improve overall well-being.

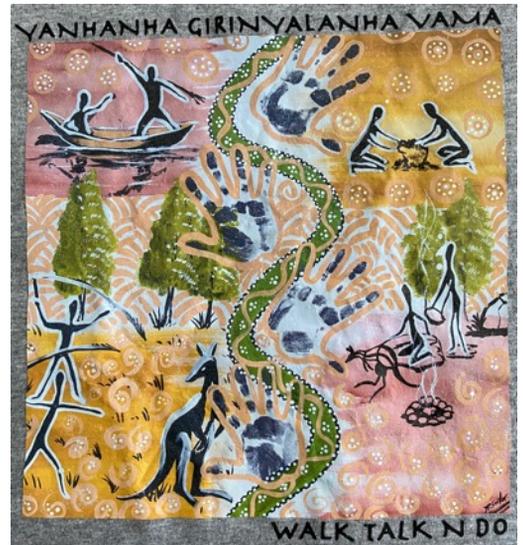
First Nations Elders Bob Sutor and Ceane Towers worked alongside AEFI in delivering the following topics & activities:

- Stone tools and weapons
- Fire ecology
- Bush tucker, food and medicine
- Art therapy
- Revegetation of local species
- How to care for country
- Connections and relationships
- Aboriginal language
- Wildlife conservation
- Scats, tracks and habitat
- Music – Yidaki (Didgeridoo) and clap sticks
- Cultural dancing
- Welcome to country

A field trip to wrap up the program was organised at Six Foot Track Eco Lodge, on Gundungurra country. With the day consisting of swimming in waterholes, listening to Bob on Yidaki, having a yarn circle, and eating Barramundi in paperbark as well as Kangaroo stew with bush tucker spices.

This program was funded by Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network as part of the Empowering our Communities Initiative.

*Dale Pracy*



# Surprise spotted-tailed quoll discovery in Orange has raised hopes for this endangered species survival

In July, Trevor Evans and Lucille Hoy from the Secret Creek Sanctuary were at the forefront of the "shock" discovery of Australia's largest mainland carnivorous marsupial in the New South Wales Central West.

Orange resident Ross Radburn was working in his industrial shed when he stumbled across a spotted-tailed quoll. Commonly known as the tiger quoll, only 14,000 remain in the wild across the nation with their population declining by up to 90 per cent since colonisation, according to the Australian Conservation Foundation. A combination of loss of habitat, competition with introduced pests like cats, and deliberate trapping in response to chicken predation has resulted in the decline.

Mr Radburn said the Wildlife Information Rescue and Education Service (WIRES) barely believed him when he reported the discovery. "I actually sent him a picture and said 'You can ring me back'. It didn't take him very long to ring back."

Lucille Hoy, also a WIRES volunteer, picked up the quoll and then transferred it to the Lithgow Secret Creek Sanctuary to recover.

"He had been doing it a little bit tough," Lucy said. "He had been in the workshop for a few days, he was a bit grubby and obviously needed to come into care for some respite and a good check over."

He has now been released back into the wild in the Ophir Reserve near Orange.



*The rescued tiger quoll spent several weeks recovering at the Secret Creek Sanctuary*

The number of tiger quolls remaining in NSW has been difficult to determine due to their shyness and nocturnal lifestyle.

Trevor says the discovery is a positive indication for the native species' survival.

"It is a good sign there is probably a population hanging on there."

Tiger quolls have a lifespan of up to seven years in the wild, making it crucial for the population's survival that they breed every year. The 2019 fires in Wollemi National Park would have pushed species like this into other fringe areas.

The quoll was released as soon as possible to give it the best chance at reproduction. "Every animal that can be out there is important to the population," said Trevor. "We would sooner see it out wild and free where it came from and hopefully looking for a mate."

Tiger quolls are a vital part of the ecosystem. According to Trevor, the explosion of pests like brushtail possums in New Zealand illustrates the importance of the carnivore species. "There are no predators there and they [brushtail possums] are totally out of control and affecting their biodiversity with eating bird eggs and grazing endangered plants," he said. "So here in Australia our possum numbers would be through the roof if it wasn't for predators like spotted-tail quolls."

You can watch a video of the tiger quoll being released into the Ophir Reserve on our website.

# NEW SPECIES WELCOMED AT SECRET CREEK SANCTUARY

## PJ and Nook the Tasmanian Devils (*Sarcophilus harrisii*)



An exciting addition to our wildlife at Secret Creek Sanctuary is the recent arrival of two male Tasmanian Devils – PJ and Nook, who are half brothers and come from Western Plains Zoo in Dubbo where they were born.

They are a shy pair, hiding most of the time while getting used to their new environment.

Typically Devils live for 8 years but only breed during their first 4 years. We also hope to educate the public on the Devil's plight with facial tumors that have almost wiped out the whole species.

## Nellie and Bo the Koalas (*Phascolarctos cinereus*)

We have welcomed two new koalas, a 4-year old female Koala Nellie from Featherdale Wildlife Park and a 5-year old male Bo who came from Taronga Zoo.

We temporarily said goodbye to our male koala Jarrah who went on to make babies in Featherdale Wildlife Park.



## 14 + 6 Mountain Pygmy Possums (*Phascolarctos cinereus*)



We are so excited to announce that we now have 20 Mountain Pygmy Possums at the Secret Creek Sanctuary.

14 of them arrived from Victoria for the Opening of the Mountain Pygmy Possum Breeding Centre in April and the most exciting news is they had 6 babies since!

# HIGHLIGHTS OF AMBER WEBB'S FIELD TRIP TO THE DESERT

Our previous Assistant Manager of AEFI, Amber Jane Webb, has just returned home after an extended field trip out to the Strzelecki Desert/ Sturt National Park. This trip was undertaken as part of her Bachelor of Environmental Science and Management (Ecology and Conservation) degree with Charles Sturt University.

Over her time in the desert, Amber worked alongside Rebecca West (Ecologist) and project Reece Pedler (Project Coordinator) of Wild Deserts, as well as Professor David Watson (Lecturer at CSU). Wild Deserts is a conservation partnership between the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Ecological Horizons, Office of Environment and Heritage and Taronga Conservation Society Australia. The project aims to reintroduce locally extinct mammals to Sturt National Park. The site covers 40,000ha and is located in the north-west corner of New South Wales in Sturt National Park, where NSW, SA and QLD meet. This region is also known as 'Corner Country' and is on the traditional lands of the Wongkumara and Malijangapa peoples. Species involved in the reintroduction project include Bilbies, Burrowing Bettongs, Golden Bandicoot, Western Barred Bandicoot, Stick-nest Rat, Western Quoll and Crest-tailed Mulgara.

Over the duration of the field trip, Amber conducted a range of ecological monitoring. Survey methods included Elliot, harp, cage, funnel, light, camera and pitfall traps, as well as the use of vegetation transects, spotlights, mist nets, bat detectors and radio trackers. This enabled Amber and the other students to identify current ecological knowledge gaps and translate them into testable, on ground research questions, generating new knowledge.



*Amber taking a measurement of a Crest-tailed Mulgara (*Dasyercus cristicauda*)*



*Wild Deserts Field Station*

Amber strongly encourages people to get behind the Wild Deserts project and spread the word of the important conservation work happening out there, you can do this by following them on Fb, Instagram. Moving forward, Amber is driven to continue working in diverse landscapes alongside First Nations peoples to sustainably conserve native species, both flora and fauna.



*Rattlepod (*Crotalaria eremaea*)*



*Sturt desert pea (*Swainsona formosa*)*

# WELCOME TO AUSTRALIAN ECOSYSTEMS FOUNDATION



**LUCILLE HOY** had been a regular volunteer at Secret Creek Sanctuary for years so we are excited to have her started working with us on a full-time basis, caring for the Sanctuary animals and the environment they live in. Lucy is the local Animal Rescue Collective Hub (ARC) representative and is also a WIRES volunteer, giving her time to rescuing and rehabilitating injured wildlife. This means she never comes to work alone – since February, a baby Wombat “Olive” tagged along, and now she is looking after a joey Wallaroo “Omar” and Red-Neck Pademelon “Batman”.

## VOLUNTEER PROFILE



**GEMMA MATHESON** has been volunteering at Secret Creek Sanctuary one day a week since February for work placement while studying at TAFE. She is currently completing a Certificate III in Wildlife and Exhibited Animal Care at Richmond TAFE. Gemma lives locally in Katoomba and has an interest in the welfare and conservation of wildlife not only in the Blue Mountains but for all of Australian wildlife. She is very passionate about ensuring the best care for all animals in care. When not at TAFE or at the sanctuary, she also volunteers at Zambi Wildlife Retreat and with WIRES as well as working casually as a waitress.



**DANIELLE OSTE** has been volunteering at Secret Creek Sanctuary for a few days a week during her University holidays. She is completing this work placement as a part of her degree at the University of Sydney, where she is undertaking Bachelor of Science/Bachelor of Advanced Studies (Animal and Veterinary Bioscience). Danielle has a strong passion for animals and wildlife conservation in particular. She highly values the work that SCS and AEFI undertakes and has loved being able to help care for endangered species at the sanctuary. Aside from her University studies, she works casually as a Veterinary Nurse, as well as volunteering for WIRES.

## FAREWELL AMBER WEBB



**AMBER WEBB**, our Assistant Manager at the Secret Creek Sanctuary worked with us for two years. She has been very eager to learn and devoted a lot of her energy and passion into this job. So it is no secret we were reluctant to say goodbye. Amber decided to pursue new opportunities on the South Coast and focus on finishing her Bachelor of Environmental Science and Management (Ecology and Conservation) degree with Charles Sturt University. We still keep in regular touch with Amber and hoping she will come back one day.

# AEFI would like to thank the following people and organisations for their support

Gemma Matheson

Danielle Oste

Harry Ellington

Lilly Hasler

Lisa Ashby

Jemma-Louise Cross-Czako



## How can you help?

There are many ways you can contribute to the work we do at AEFI. As a non-profit environmental organisation we rely on donations and the support of our members, as well as grants and the work of volunteers, especially during COVID lock downs and construction at Secret Creek Sanctuary as we have remained closed to the public.

### BECOME A MEMBER / DONATE / VOLUNTEER

If you'd like to renew your membership, become a new member, donate or register your interest in volunteering please visit our website and complete our online application form at [www.ausecosystems.org.au/support](http://www.ausecosystems.org.au/support)

We are a registered charity in Australia and are listed on the Register of Environmental Organisations, therefore donations over \$2 are tax deductible. We are a registered charity in Australia and are listed on the Register of Environmental Organisations, therefore donations over \$2 are tax deductible.

### HELP FUND A PROJECT

Wildlife Hospital & Rehabilitation Centre  
Visitor & Cultural Centre  
Secret Creek Sanctuary self-guided and wheel-chair accessible walking track  
Indigenous Meeting Place

### CONTACT US

[info@ausecosystems.org.au](mailto:info@ausecosystems.org.au)



Australian Ecosystems Foundation Inc.



[A\\_aefi\\_](https://www.instagram.com/A_aefi_)