

**Open letter:** Cupidity, duplicity and obfuscation. Are we being told the real story about the proposed dispersal of Spectacled flying foxes from the CBD?

**Cairns Flying-Fox Advisory Committee Community Representatives categorically oppose Cairns Regional Council's plans to disperse Cairns CBD Camp of Spectacled Flying Foxes.**

We, the undersigned representatives of the Cairns Flying Fox Advisory Committee (FFAC) do not support Cairns Regional Council's proposal to forcibly remove the endangered Spectacled Flying Foxes from the Nationally Important CBD Library Camp<sup>1</sup>.

We believe the dispersal:

1. Will be detrimental to the bats whose population is already in rapid decline<sup>2,3</sup>
2. Will not work and has no evidence to support it<sup>4</sup>
3. Will waste rate payer money on unproven management actions<sup>4</sup>
4. Could set a dangerous precedent for management of Nationally Important flying fox<sup>1</sup> camps and of endangered species
5. Flying foxes could relocate to more undesirable areas E.g. residential properties<sup>4,5</sup>

The proposed action does not have the support of wildlife carers or community groups and council has not fully accepted the advice of the experts on Flying Fox Advisory Committee (FFAC)<sup>6</sup> of which we, the undersigned represent. The FFAC was established to provide feedback to Council on its adopted management approach. We, the undersigned, have given them the advice that dispersing the camp should not happen and they have chosen to proceed regardless.

## **Back Ground**

Spectacled Flying Foxes are one of four mainland species of flying fox in Australia. They are uniquely suited to the Wet Tropics of Far North Queensland where over 99% of the Australian population is found. Currently their population is in freefall<sup>2</sup>.

The spectacled flying fox is a coastal species and has been roosting in the Cairns region long before the city was developed. These bats are a keystone species as a long distance pollinator and seed disperser in our World Heritage listed rainforest; capable of travelling up to 80 km in one night. This contribution to genetic health of our rainforest is a key asset to the resilience of rainforest to withstand climate change. If we lose important seed dispersers and pollinators, we lose our rainforest.

The recent unprecedented heatwave in November 2018 killed at least 23,000 of this species<sup>7</sup> meaning they now meet the criteria for Critically Endangered<sup>2</sup> – more endangered than our iconic Cassowaries and just as important in maintaining the health of our Wet Tropics World Heritage listed rainforests.

After 3 years of sitting on the nomination to uplist the species from *Vulnerable* to *Endangered*, the federal Environment Minister finally uplisted the species in February 2019. But the nomination for uplisting was based on data from 2015<sup>3</sup> and does not include the catastrophic loss to population in the recent heat wave, or the decline in the two years prior to this<sup>2</sup>. Taking the most recent mortality into account only 15-20% of the Australian population remains (personal communication David Westcott) – plummeting from approx. 250,000 in 2004 to an estimated 40,000 in November 2018.

The majority of the flying foxes that died in November were breeding adults. Flying foxes don't breed until they are three years old and even then only have one pup per year. As

such, at the current state of decline it will take *many* years for the population to recover to pre 2004 levels.

### **Cairns Regional Council's Management**

Following a mass mortality event during the previous breeding season in 2017/2018 at the Cairns CBD/Library Camp, Cairns Regional Council and wildlife carers began discussing options to manage the camp to avoid further deaths.

The discussed option was to put a release cage<sup>8</sup> at Cairns Central Swamp in the hopes that the CBD bats may **CHOOSE** to move to the swamp area. This was to **AVOID** having to use deterrent and dispersal methods. Dispersal should only ever be considered as a last resort<sup>9</sup> as it **rarely works**, especially in the long term, can result in bats moving to even less desirable locations causing more human-wildlife conflict, and it is **extremely expensive**<sup>4</sup>.

Now, in a proposal that differs greatly to what was discussed with the experts on the FFAC the Council is proposing to disperse the CBD camp to forcibly remove them from the CBD in May.

### **It will not work and has no evidence to support it.**

A study assessing more than 25 dispersals in other cities found that flying foxes did not move more than 6 km<sup>4</sup>. Council had planned dispersing flying-foxes to the new site for the release cage in Edmonton,<sup>8</sup> 10 km away (as the bat flies). Had the enclosure been built in the Cairns Central Swamp, which is much closer<sup>8</sup> (1.8km), as previously discussed the concept of "luring" them to another location may have been far more feasible. Now Council appears to have abandoned the concept of "luring" the CBD bats to the release cage but is intending to disperse them out of the CBD to an unidentified "safer" location. Places under consideration for final and interim sites appear to be areas that were assessed for suitability for the release cage and found to be too dangerous for flying-foxes. (Rebecca Koller personal communication)

### **Our basis for not supporting this action.**

The nationally important camp<sup>1</sup> in the CBD is stressed. This is because since 2013, all three levels of government have allowed the systematic destruction of more than 2/3 of the trees surrounding the camp, to facilitate multiple developments<sup>10,11</sup>. The scale and proximity of development and removal of trees that could have been retained has exacerbated the levels of stress in this camp.

Removal of trees in urban locations is well known to increase heat island effect<sup>12</sup>, heating the area. We would like to acknowledge that Council's response in the CBD to the heat stress event was crucial and contributed to the high survival rate in the CBD camp. This may not have been needed if the trees had been retained.

The camp is stressed because of the cumulative impacts of short sighted decision-making, a starvation event, a spike in paralysis ticks, an unprecedented series of heat waves and continued pressure from developments and actions from the community.

Just because the CBD camp is stressed does not mean forcibly relocating them is what is "best for the bats".

In the heat stress event last November, the CBD camp actually fared better than other camps in Cairns<sup>13</sup>. It is the only camp in Cairns that is permanently inhabited, is a Nationally

Important maternity colony and regularly contains more than 10% of the entire Australian population<sup>11, 14</sup>.

**It is not in the best interest of the bats.**

Following the heat stress event, which was only months ago, the bats have not re-settled in many camps across Greater Cairns. We don't know where they are now roosting, or even how many are left. Forcibly removing the CBD camp will only send thousands more in search of new homes. These new homes could be in someone's backyard or behind an apartment or hotel. The current location has proven to be quite the tourist attraction and one of the highlights to visitors to Cairns. We can only see dispersing the bats as being an overall detriment to the Cairns region.

Furthermore, we believe the dispersal will not work in Cairns, due to the lack of a corridor of habitat to "nudge" the species along, and will waste ratepayer money on management measures that will not work. This enormous expense cannot be sustained indefinitely which is what will be required to keep them out of the CBD<sup>4</sup>.

**This plan will cost a huge amount of rate payer money, indefinitely.**

In conclusion, and to remove any doubt, we are making this joint statement to clarify that we do not support the Council's plans to forcibly remove the flying foxes from the CBD.

Especially not immediately after the recent population stress they have experienced, including the loss of nearly 30% of the species in 2 days last November.

We must find another solution and protect the few that are left, wherever they are, including in the Cairns CBD<sup>15</sup>

*Martin Cohen*

Wildlife Biologist

**Chair - CRC Flying Fox Advisory Committee**

*Maree Treadwell-Kerr*

Bats and Trees Society of Cairns Inc

**Community Representative - CRC Flying Fox Advisory Committee**

*Rebecca Koller*

Bats and Trees Society of Cairns Inc

**Community Representative (Animal Welfare) - CRC Flying Fox Advisory Committee**

*Sera Steves*

Bats and Trees Society of Cairns Inc

**Community Representative - CRC Flying Fox Advisory Committee**

**Contact:** Maree Treadwell Kerr: 0412 311 403 or  
Sera Steves: 07 4093 0607 or 0448 360 808

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Australian Government, Department of Environment. Map of Nationally Important Camps of Spectacled Flying-fox  
<http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/pages/0f6f5576-50e8-4e02-be7c-18e7d3ad7f23/files/map-spectacled-flying-fox.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Westcott, D.A., Caley, P., Heersink, D.K. and McKeown, A., 2018. A state-space modelling approach to wildlife monitoring with application to flying-fox abundance. *Scientific Reports*, **8**(1), p.4038. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-018-22294-w>
- <sup>3</sup> Westcott, D.A., McKeown, A. (2014) Spectacled flying-fox monitoring in the Wet Tropics Region. Report to the National Environmental Research Program. Reef and Rainforest Research Centre Limited, Cairns (13pp.)  
<http://www.nerptropical.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/files/NERP-TE-PROJECT-3.4-FINAL-REPORT-FLYING-FOX-COMPLETE.pdf> <https://tinyurl.com/yqhqwopv>
- <sup>4</sup> Roberts, B. J., Eby, P., Catterall, C. P., Kanowski, J., Bennett, G. (2011) The outcomes and costs of relocating flying-fox camps: Insights from the case of Maclean, Australia. *Aust. Zool.* **35**, 277–287.
- <sup>5</sup> Cohen, M. (2012) Assessment of Potential Flying-fox Roosts in the Cairns CBD. Report to Cairns Regional Council.
- <sup>6</sup> Cairns Regional Council, Flying-Fox Advisory Committee  
<https://www.cairns.qld.gov.au/community-environment/native-animals/flying-foxes/ffac>
- <sup>7</sup> ABC Far North, 19 December 2018 *Extreme heat wipes out almost one third of Australia's spectacled flying fox population*  
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-19/heat-wipes-out-one-third-of-flying-fox-species/10632940>
- <sup>8</sup> Steves, S and Treadwell Kerr, M, (2018) Flying-fox Tails - No 1, December 2018: Spectacled Flying-fox Management in Cairns CBD - A new release site in Cairns for hand-reared orphaned flying-foxes  
<https://wordpress.com/block-editor/post/batsoc72412150.wordpress.com/24>
- <sup>9</sup> Australasian Bat Society Position statement on on flying-fox dispersal  
<http://ausbats.org.au/principles/4573559802>
- <sup>10</sup> Cohen, M (2016) The challenges associated with managing a large breeding camp of Spectacled Flying-foxes in the Cairns CBD. A case study of working with local government to get positive outcomes. Presentation to 17th Australasian Bat Society Conference, Hobart 29 March – 1 April 2016
- <sup>11</sup> Cohen, M. 2012 - 2016 Flying-fox Counts of the Cairns CBD Spectacled Flying-fox Camp. Reports to Cairns Regional Council
- <sup>12</sup> Estoque, R.C., Murayama, Y. and Myint, S.W. (2017) Effects of landscape composition and pattern on land surface temperature: An urban heat island study in the megacities of Southeast Asia *Science of The Total Environment* **577**, 349-359  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2016.10.195>

<sup>13</sup> The Flying-fox Heat Stress Forecaster, The Lab of Animal Ecology, Hawkesbury Institute for the Environment, Western Sydney University

<https://www.animalecologylab.org/ff-heat-stress-forecaster.html>

<sup>14</sup> National Flying-fox monitoring viewer, Australian Government, Department of Environment <http://www.environment.gov.au/webgis-framework/apps/ffc-wide/ffc-wide.jsf>

<sup>15</sup> Welbergen, J. & Eby, P. (2016) Not in my Backyard. How to live alongside flying-foxes in urban Australia. The Conversation (Australian edition) 27 May 2016

<https://theconversation.com/not-in-my-backyard-how-to-live-alongside-flying-foxes-in-urban-australia-59893>