

Wombats through time and space

Mike Swinbourne

School of Biological Science, University of Adelaide, Oliphant Building, North Terrace Campus,
Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia. Email: michael.swinbourne@adelaide.edu.au

Of all of Australia's large native animals, wombats are among the most enigmatic. While virtually everyone has heard of wombats, most Australians would not have seen one outside of a zoo or wildlife park, and even there they are poorly represented and often missed because they are 'hiding' during the day. The wombats' nocturnal and burrowing nature means that even people who live in 'wombat country' rarely see one in the wild, outside of accidental encounters such as road trauma or when wombats occasionally emerge from their burrows during the day.

While Indigenous Australians have had a long relationship with wombats as a source of food and other resources such as fur, hair for twine and as cultural totems, the more recent arrivals to Australia did not begin to study wombats in-depth until the 1970s. Unfortunately, by that time so much had changed; the northern hairy-nosed wombat was nearly extinct, and both the southern hairy-nosed and bare-nosed wombat populations had been decimated by feral pests – especially rabbits – and human persecution.

In the past 50 years or so since those first scientific studies of wombats our understanding has increased dramatically, but there is still a great deal to learn. In 1994, a major scientific conference on wombats was held by the Royal Zoological Society of South Australia, culminating in the publication in

1998 of the seminal book 'Wombats', which has been 'the bible' for wombat researchers ever since. On the 20th anniversary of that book, researchers at the University of Adelaide decided that the time had come to once again gather everyone together and to update our knowledge of wombats, and the 'Wombats through time and space' conference was held in Adelaide, 17–19 September 2018. This special issue of *Australian Mammalogy* includes many of the papers that were presented at that conference, as well as some additional studies by wombat researchers around the world.

It would be difficult to name and thank everyone involved in the production of this special issue and for the work involved in planning and conducting the 2018 wombat conference without accidentally overlooking someone – therefore I will just say a big thank you to everyone concerned. I would also like to express a huge thank you to everyone who has worked with wombats over the years and who had passed on their knowledge to others. As Isaac Newton is purported to have stated: '*If I have seen further, it has been by standing on the shoulders of giants*'.

Hopefully, with more scientific research, together with the hard work of carers and volunteers who work with wombats every day, our understanding will continue to grow and develop, and we put forward this collection of papers as our contribution.