

THREATENED SPECIES

Grievance

MS C.M. ROWE (Belmont) [10.00 am]: I rise today to raise a grievance with the Minister for Environment regarding conservation of wildlife and the protection of some of our threatened species. I was very interested in the minister's recent speech in this place on world-first research and the numbat genome sequencing program that has been going on in Western Australia. Of course, for some who may not know, the numbat is our state's fauna emblem, but it is suffering from a significant and worrying decrease in its population. I was really thrilled to hear that Perth Zoo and DNA Zoo Australia at the University of Western Australia have formed an ongoing partnership to enable genome sequencing work to be done, with a priority focus on not only numbats, but also WA's endangered native animals. We are very lucky in WA to have incredible natural habitats and native parks, which, of course are home to some of the most unique wildlife in the world. We are also very lucky that our very own Perth Zoo is a world leader in animal research and conservation efforts, doing such a wonderful job on preserving and saving wildlife.

I think that many people will be shocked to know that Australia has one of the highest recent rates of mammal extinctions in the world. Shockingly, almost 40 per cent of mammal extinctions globally in the last 200 years have occurred in Australia. Loss of habitat and introduced animals like dogs, cats and foxes are all threats to our native species. One other big contributor, of course, is climate change. We know that climate change is happening and we know that it is happening right now. Although there is often talk about the impact of climate change on environments like the Great Barrier Reef, there is also no doubt that it is a threat much closer to home. For example, the south west of WA has been identified as a global drying hotspot, but it is also home to thousands of plants species and animals, some of which exist nowhere else in the world. It is important that we have environments and habitats that are safe for native species to live, survive and thrive. Changes in weather and climatic conditions like warmer temperatures and reduced rainfall, as well as extreme events like droughts and bushfires, will have a massive impact on the habitats of our wildlife. Climate Council of Australia CEO Amanda McKenzie, recently stated —

Policy decisions made today are so important because our future depends on how quickly and decisively we respond to the climate challenge in the 2020s. So much is at stake: our whole way of life, our health, our livelihoods. Our window to avoid catastrophe is closing ...

The McGowan government is committed to tackling climate change because we know it is arguably the biggest threat facing countries all around the world. I am really proud of our government's commitment to transition WA's economy to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. I truly hope that we can work towards achieving interim targets by 2030. It is the only way to curtail the damage to nature.

We have also outlined our plan for plastics. Plastic waste is having a massive and detrimental impact on the environment here at home and right across the globe. It is one of the greatest threats to wildlife around the world. WA is leading the way when it comes to banning single-use plastics and, in turn, saving hundreds of millions of single-use plastic items from becoming litter or landfill. What a difference that will make for our waterways and oceans, and the animals that live within them.

The minister's speech about the research into numbats caught my interest and I look forward to hearing more about the results of the partnership between Perth Zoo and DNA Zoo Australia as the project continues. I know he and his team and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions do incredible work and have delivered real outcomes for our natural habitats and threatened species. I want to recognise and acknowledge their efforts and especially congratulate the minister in this regard. I would really appreciate hearing from the minister about the action that our government is taking to further protect threatened species in WA.

MR R.R. WHITBY (Baldivis — Minister for Environment) [10.04 am]: I thank the member for Belmont for raising this grievance. I know that she is an intensely passionate advocate for our native fauna and the protection of our environment and she rightly raises a number of issues of concern that threaten our very precious species. It also allows me the opportunity this morning to respond particularly in the area of our threatened species, or threatened fauna species at least.

The member is right, Western Australia is home to a very rich and unique array of native animals. We are very blessed in that regard. Western Australia's native mammalian fauna includes about 50 per cent of Australia's threatened mammals. Currently, 41 of these native mammal species are listed as threatened under the Biodiversity Conservation Act in Western Australia.

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions staff, as the member rightly pointed out, do an amazing job to not only actively manage threats to mammals on land under the control of the department, but also, in collaboration with traditional owners, private landholders and other land managers, conserve threatened mammals outside the conservation estate. Most threatened mammals have recovery plans that identify and prioritise action that supports the recovery of the species and that guides the activities of the department and its partners in conservation.

The department also undertakes research and management to reduce key threats to the survival of threatened species. In particular—the member mentioned this in her address to the chamber—the biggest threat, our key enemy, are foxes and feral cats. A key initiative in these activities is the operation of Western Shield. Feral cats and foxes have been implicated in the extinction of or decline in many of our native mammals, birds and reptiles. Research shows that feral cats kill more than 1.5 billion native animals each year. That is an incredible and staggering loss to our environment—feral cats killing more than one and a half billion native animals each year in Australia. Foxes are responsible for the deaths of about 300 million Australian native animals a year. One of the best ways to ensure the survival of these species is to control those introduced predators.

Western Shield is the department's flagship native animal conservation program—one of the largest conservation projects in Australia. Western Shield takes control of foxes and feral cats through baiting across 3.8 million hectares of the conservation estate, from Karratha in the north to the south west and east of Esperance. In 2021, this program celebrated its twenty-fifth year of operation. Western Shield has achieved significant conservation outcomes for many threatened mammal, bird and reptile species, including the recovery of populations and increases in distribution. More than 30 local native species have directly benefited from the program, including the numbat—as the member mentioned, the emblem of our state—quokka, quenda, chuditch, woylie, western brush wallaby and black-flanked rock-wallaby. Dryandra Woodland National Park, near Narrogin, has benefited significantly through long-term introduced predator control, which has resulted in an increased number of numbats in the area. Researchers have found there has been a threefold increase in native animal numbers in forests where fox management has occurred, including for threatened species like the chuditch and woylie.

In January this year, I announced that one of Australia's rarest marsupials had had a boost, at least to its wildlife population, with the release of 36 dibblers at Dirk Hartog Island National Park. The Return to 1616 is an ecological restoration project that aims to restore the conditions on that island to the same as they were when Dirk Hartog landed there in 1616. Through the project, scientists from the department have successfully released 17 male and 19 female dibblers. They were born at Perth Zoo and bred in captivity, and they were the third group of the species to be released onto the feral cat-free habitat. To date, 93 dibblers have been released on the island and, although they are difficult to monitor, there is evidence that they are breeding successfully.

Ms C.M. Rowe: Well done, minister.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Well done to DBCA as well.

Since commencing the wildlife reconstruction stage on Dirk Hartog Island, scientists have also translocated five other species, including the rufous hare-wallaby, the banded hare-wallaby, the Shark Bay bandicoot—sounds like a footy team, does it not?—the Shark Bay mouse and the greater stick-nest rat. These translocation efforts were made possible by the first stage of the project, which successfully eradicated feral cats, goats and sheep.

Dryandra Woodland, which I mentioned previously, down at Narrogin, 180 kilometres south-east of Perth, is also the first national park in Western Australia's wheatbelt region. Dryandra Woodland supports a range of native species, including the state's fauna emblem, the numbat. The abundance of numbats has increased at Dryandra in recent years thanks to the Western Shield program, which has achieved significant conservation outcomes for all native fauna species in Dryandra that are preyed on by feral foxes and cats. The conservation of this magnificent woodland in a national park demonstrates the McGowan government's commitment to safeguarding the state's precious biodiversity in what is an area of outstanding value. It has wonderful visitation opportunities for people from Perth, being a couple of hours down the highway. The creation of this new national park will better protect Dryandra Woodland's unique native species while also offering wonderful outdoor recreation opportunities for visitors and the local community in that part of the wheatbelt.

I am pleased to provide this information to the chamber. In closing, I want to make this comment: feral cats and foxes remain our key environmental enemy in Western Australia. They are the target for action as we work hard to save our precious and unique threatened fauna. I thank the member for Belmont for her ongoing interest in this area.