

The establishment of a flying-fox roost site at Yarra Bend Park

Questions and Answers

April 2004

What are Grey-headed Flying-foxes?

Grey-headed Flying-foxes (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) are large bats that are native to Australia. These mammals can have a wingspan of around 75cm and can weigh up to one kilogram. Flying-foxes are intelligent, social animals that roost together at a "camp" during the day, but feed individually or in small groups at night. Most feeding is done within 5 to 15 kms of the camp, but sometimes as far away as 30 kms. Being nomadic animals, flying-fox numbers in Melbourne can change dramatically due to the availability of food, interstate arrivals and departures and other factors.

There are three other kinds of flying-foxes native to mainland Australia, but they are not present in Melbourne.

Where are Grey-headed Flying-foxes found?

Grey-headed Flying-foxes are found from southern Queensland to southern Victoria, predominantly on the eastern seaboard in temperate to sub-tropical regions. They roost in a wide range of habitats from lowland rainforest through coastal stringybark forests to mangroves.

Grey-headed Flying-foxes have set up a number of permanent camps in the suburbs around the cities of Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne.

Why are flying-foxes so important?

Flying-foxes play a major role in the regeneration of native hardwood forests and rainforests by pollinating as they feed and dispersing seeds as they move throughout the forest.

Why is Melbourne so attractive to flying-foxes?

Large urban areas provide a year-round food source for the flying-foxes because of remnant bushland and the native trees planted by councils and private residents.

Why was the decision made to leave the flying-foxes at Yarra Bend Park?

The trial to relocate Melbourne's flying-fox colony from the Royal Botanic Gardens relied on two approaches: attracting the colony to move themselves to a pre-selected site in Ivanhoe; and, pushing them out of the Gardens using sound.

Unfortunately, efforts to attract the colony to Ivanhoe were unsuccessful. However, attempts to disperse the colony and prevent it from roosting in particular areas were effective. Despite this success, there are significant limitations in our ability to manoeuvre the colony and there is a risk that, in attempting to further relocate the colony, it could disperse into surrounding residential areas or back into inner-city parks and gardens.

Due to inability to attract flying-foxes to particular sites, the risk of the colony relocating to inappropriate areas during further relocation attempts and the suitability of the current location at Yarra Bend Park, it is considered that the most appropriate course of action is to settle and manage the colony sustainably in that area.

Yarra Bend Park provides ideal habitat for the flying-foxes and there is little conflict with people who use the park. The environmental and social benefits related to this particular site make the risk of trying to move the colony elsewhere unacceptable.

Won't the flying-foxes cause vegetation damage at Yarra Bend Park?

Irrespective of where flying-foxes roost, they will, like all animals, have an impact on their surrounds, so it's a matter of managing that impact and ensuring it's sustainable.

The presence of the flying-foxes in a small and sensitive area of the heritage-listed Royal Botanic Gardens was considered to be unsustainable and there was a decision to relocate the colony to a more appropriate location.

That part of Yarra Bend Park provides suitable habitat because of its size, isolation and vegetation type. The area the animals occupy is within a 26-hectare site, which is big enough for the animals to move around within and provide the opportunity for affected vegetation to recover.

As part of the management plan for the site, weed control and revegetation will improve the habitat and the net gain to the environment will exceed any loss.

Isn't this just a case of shifting the problem from one place to another?

No. The Royal Botanic Gardens is an icon and holds significant cultural and historical importance to the people of Victoria. Equally, the Grey-headed Flying-fox is an endangered species which plays a vital role in the regeneration of our forests. Both require protection but not at the expense of one or the other.

Flying-foxes will always be a part of Melbourne's native wildlife and we have to manage them in such a way that they are protected and that any conflict with people is minimised.

To move the colony from the Gardens and into an area of little-used natural bushland is the best outcome.

What will be done to make the habitat at Yarra Bend Park sustainable?

It is important to the long-term management of flying-foxes in Melbourne to make the site sustainable. Otherwise, they will have an impact on the area and move to another location where conflict could arise.

In order to ensure that the presence of the flying-foxes is sustainable, a management plan will be developed which will include improvements to the site such as:

- Removing weeds
- Creating wetlands
- Massive re-planting to improve the degraded and simplified vegetation community

- Irrigating the area to reduce environmental stress and
- Installing artificial roost structures.

How much money will be spent on the management plan at Yarra Bend Park?

\$1.7m has been allocated for implementation of a management plan at Yarra Bend Park.

The funding will not only benefit the flying-foxes, but also other wildlife in the park. New facilities like paths, viewing platforms and visitor information, will improve the experience for visitors.

What will happen to the flying-foxes at Horseshoe Bend?

The captive animals at Horseshoe Bend will be released into the Yarra Bend colony. The infrastructure at the site will be removed over time and habitat restoration efforts will continue as per the agreement with the Banyule City Council.

Hasn't the relocation project failed because the flying-foxes haven't been moved to Horseshoe Bend?

No. The objective of the relocation trial was to preserve the Royal Botanic Gardens and relocate the endangered flying-fox colony into an area where it could flourish and there was minimal conflict with people. Both of these goals have been achieved.

The risks associated with any further attempts to relocate the colony are unacceptable and could result in significant financial and social costs to the local and wider communities should relocation fail.

Isn't \$1.7m an excessive amount of money to spend on one species?

The \$1.7m must be seen as part of the program to ensure the protection of the Royal Botanic Gardens, by removing flying-foxes to a more suitable location. In addition, the Grey-headed flying-fox is an endangered species and the community has an obligation to ensure its preservation.

It will be critical to improve and manage the Yarra Bend site to ensure that it remains sustainable and that the colony remains there. This is more cost efficient than further relocation efforts.

The \$1.7m will be spent over a five-year period after which the Government will retain responsibility for the management of the colony and the site.

Wasn't establishing the Horseshoe Bend site a waste of time and money?

No. There have been several positive spin-offs in establishing an alternative roost site at Horseshoe Bend.

For example, the Ivanhoe community has benefited from over \$110,000 worth of habitat improvements through things like weed and rubbish removal and revegetation. During the trial, we have learnt much about the ecology and management of the species in an urban environment.

Establishing a roost site at Horseshoe Bend was an intentionally ambitious goal. In striving to achieve this objective, several complementary project successes have been achieved, especially in relation to learning which relocation techniques work.

Why don't you just move the flying-foxes to the country?

It was extremely difficult to relocate the flying-foxes into the area where they currently reside. To move an animal with the power of flight anywhere and have it stay there is challenging to say the least. We can't just pick them up, put them in an area and expect that they will stay there.

With its plentiful food supply and abundance of comfortable roosting sites, the flying-foxes will simply return to Melbourne.

Why don't we just cull them?

Flying-foxes are an important part of our natural environment and play a critical role in the regeneration of our forests. The species is listed as threatened at both a state and federal level and there are laws in place to ensure that we assist in the recovery of the species. Culling is inconsistent with this objective.

Flying-foxes will always be in Melbourne and culling provides a short-term reduction in flying fox numbers. Even if all the flying-foxes in Melbourne were culled, flying-foxes immigrating from interstate would soon replace them.