

CBSG Australasia: 2009 Regional Report

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For the period October 2008 – September 2009

Introduction

CBSG Australasia was launched at the Adelaide CBSG Conference in 2008. Branch activities during its inaugural year are described below.

Branch establishment

The Branch has been formally established in New Zealand as a not-for-profit entity with an associated bank account and domain name (cbsgaustralasia.org). Quarterly financial reports are provided to the CBSG Office in Minnesota.

Communication

CBSG Australasia activities are included in the broader CBSG Updates, which are forwarded by CBSG Australasia to its members. In addition, the Branch is trialling the web-based software package NING to build an on-line regional community. This initiative has been led by Craig Pritchard at the New Zealand Centre for Conservation Medicine. NING allows Branch members to communicate with each other informally, to launch conservation-directed discussions, to view information about past, current and future CBSG Australasia activities and to find avenues for involvement in advancing Branch priorities. Anyone who is interested in accessing this forum should contact caroline@cbsgaustralasia.org

Kakapo Disease Risk Assessment

The world population of kakapo, *Strigops habroptilus* stood at 91 individuals at the end of 2008. These birds are intensively managed on two predator-free islands in New Zealand: Codfish/Whenua Hau, off Stewart Island and Anchor Island, Fiordland. Over the next 10 years, the Department of Conservation (DOC) aims to establish three geographically separate meta-populations – at least one of which should be self-sustaining. At the request of the Kakapo Science and Technical Advisory Committee (KSTAC), Co-convenor of CBSG Australasia, Dr. Richard Jakob-Hoff, facilitated a workshop of key stakeholders in November, 2008 to evaluate disease risks associated with these manipulations using some of the CBSG disease risk assessment tools. Held at the New Zealand Centre for Conservation Medicine (NZCCM), Auckland Zoo and sponsored by Auckland Zoo and the New Zealand Department of Conservation, the workshop brought together 19 participants from 10 organisations to focus on the designated task. The group identified nineteen infectious and non-infectious diseases of concern, assessed their level of risk and developed a comprehensive risk management plan. The timing of this workshop was particularly critical as the biggest breeding season on record was anticipated in January – March, 2009 based on environmental indicators. This would involve numerous interactions between people and kakapo as females and their eggs and chicks were monitored, and, potentially, many of the

chicks taken for hand-rearing if the natural food supply proved inadequate. This scenario did, in fact, eventuate with 28 of the 33 chicks reared requiring some level of assistance during the rearing period. Consequently the workshop discussion and refinement of disease risk management protocols proved to be extremely valuable.

Maui's Dolphin PVA Scoping Workshop

Hector's dolphins (*Cephalorhynchus hectori*) are endemic to New Zealand waters and are categorised by the IUCN as Endangered. A sub-population that occurs on the west coast of the North Island is known as Maui's dolphin and is considered Critically Endangered.

At the invitation of the New Zealand Department of Conservation, CBSG Australasia convened a scoping workshop to consider the development of a population model specifically for the Maui's population. The broader Hector's taxon has been modelled extensively and the translation of these models into a Maui's specific tool could be an asset to future recovery planning.

The workshop brought together a small team of Auckland University and Department of Conservation personnel. A preliminary model was constructed and a plan for moving forward agreed. Efforts have stalled temporarily pending the outcomes of a court case challenging recent fisheries restrictions in Maui's habitat. However, progress has been made towards the establishment of a Maui's Recovery Team and CBSG Australasia has been invited to be involved in this.

Regional Marine Debris Forum

Plastics and other insoluble materials are major contributors to the pollution of New Zealand's coastal marine environment as well as the wider Pacific Ocean. Despite the efforts of multiple agencies working independently to prevent and clean up marine debris, the problem continues to escalate. A one-day Regional Marine Debris Forum, initiated by the Auckland Regional Council (ARC), was held on the 25 June, 2009. The objective of this Forum was to provide an opportunity for individuals and agencies to network, share information and discuss ways and means of coordinating their activities to more effectively prevent and clean up marine debris in the Auckland Region.

CBSG Australasia provided independent facilitation for a full program involving scene setting by a keynote speaker, large and small group activities, priority identification and action planning exercises and some unstructured times for informal conversations. Auckland Zoo provided the venue at its New Zealand Centre for Conservation Medicine (NZCCM) and Resonance Research provided a framework for planning and evaluation of the event.

A total of 35 individuals representing 19 organisations attended the forum. The highest priorities for action were agreed to be:

1. Establishment of a consistent system of data collection and recording and a database in which to pool this information
2. Development of a national campaign with a unified voice and consistent messages.

An evaluation at the end of the event showed that 65% rated the event as valuable with 35% giving it an 'extremely valuable' score.

Tasmanian Devil Meta-population Framework Document

Wild Tasmanian Devils are under threat from Devil Facial Tumour Disease (DFTD). To insure against species extinction and to provide a potential source of disease-free animals for release to the wild, the Tasmanian Government's *Save the Tasmanian Devil Steering Committee* (STTDSC) has approved the establishment of a large, biosecure population of devils, isolated and managed separately from remaining wild stocks. The strategy for achieving this is one in which a number of independently managed populations, distributed across a variety of locations, are linked by strategic animal exchanges so that they function as a larger and more robust "meta-population".

As reported previously, in July 2008 CBSG facilitated a conservation planning workshop in Hobart, Tasmania, aimed at progressing the meta-population concept to implementation. Over the past year, CBSG Australasia has provided ongoing assistance to the STTDSC in its efforts to advance the priorities agreed at that workshop. In August 2009, CBSG Australasia was engaged to write a framework document describing how the meta-population should function. This document is now complete and includes:

- the goals and rationale underpinning the meta-population strategy;
- the way in which the meta-population will be managed;
- the criteria that an individual population must meet in order to be a functioning component of the meta-population;
- the way in which meta-population performance will be evaluated.

The document has been approved by the STTDSC and CBSG Australasia has been invited to hold a seat on the a meta-population oversight committee.

Conservation Planning for Mala

The mala, *Lagorchestes hirsutus*, is a small, central Australian wallaby which became Extinct on mainland Australia following the expansion of European settlement into the area. The last wild colony was extinguished by a wildfire in 1992. A colony is located on Trimouille Island, Western Australia as a consequence of a translocation from the Tanami Desert to that site in 1999. As a result of other translocations, five captive and semi-captive populations also exist at mainland sites. These populations are currently managed in relative isolation. To improve their overall viability, CBSG Australasia has been invited by the Alice Springs Desert Park, to develop a population model for use in exploring meta-population management regimes for remaining populations. The modelling work will incorporate the results of molecular genetic analyses being carried out at Macquarie University and will be a collaborative effort involving zoo population managers, field biologists and recovery team representatives.

With the support of Alice Springs Desert Park and the Mala Recovery Team, this project is being carried out using web-based fora and tools and will be CBSG Australasia's first virtual workshop. It is scheduled to begin in September 2009.

Capacity Building

The Branch needs to build additional regional capacity in facilitation, population modelling and disease risk assessment. Training in these areas is planned for 2010. In addition, CBSG Australasia is providing training in conservation breeding. Courses are tailored to groups of participants and will help to build regional capacity in the application of small population science. The first of these courses was delivered to senior staff at Taronga Conservation Society Australia in July 2009.

C. Lees August 2009