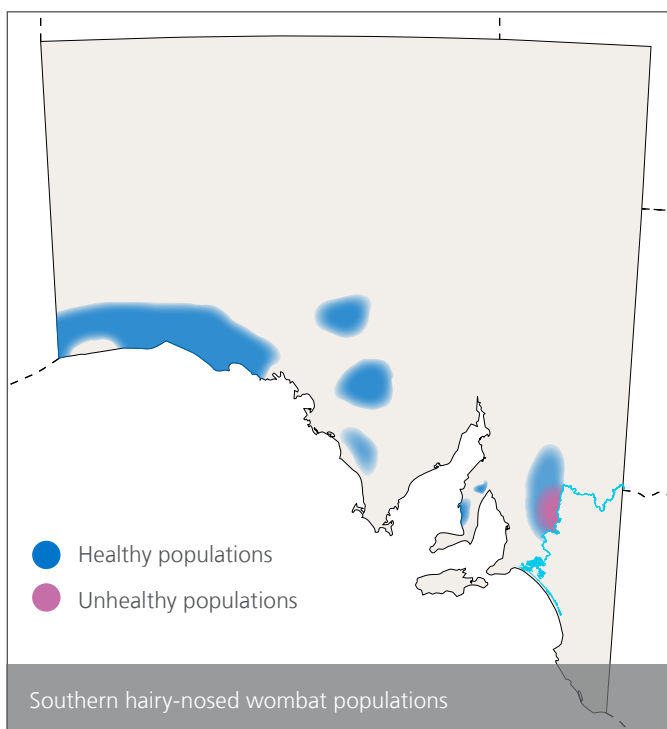


# The health of southern hairy-nosed wombats in the Murraylands

Despite their sturdy shape and ability to survive in arid climates, there is a health problem in the Murraylands southern hairy-nosed wombats that has South Australian scientists and conservation NGOs working together to find out what's making our state's animal emblem unwell.

## Where do southern hairy-nosed wombats live?

Southern hairy-nosed wombats live in arid and semi-arid environments in several areas across the state.



## Are southern hairy-nosed wombats endangered?

They are a protected species in South Australia but they're not classified as endangered.

## What do southern hairy-nosed wombats eat?

Searching for food during the night, they eat mainly native grasses but will also eat fresh shoots and bulbs when available.

## How healthy are our southern hairy-nosed wombats?



A healthy southern hairy-nosed wombat.

The populations of southern hairy-nosed wombats in most of South Australia are healthy. However, in an area of the Murraylands south of Morgan and north of Mannum, unhealthy wombats have been found with signs suggesting poor nutrition, starvation and liver disease.

The emergence of these signs takes on greater significance because traditionally this area has been a stronghold for the southern hairy-nosed wombat.



A southern hairy-nosed wombat is sick if it is thin, has skin infections and/or hair loss.

Healthy wombats can still be found in other parts of the Murraylands where good quality feed remains.

*This factsheet was prepared in partnership with the following organisations and the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources:*



## What is making some Murraylands southern hairy-nosed wombats unhealthy?

The starving and poorly nourished wombats were found living in degraded areas overgrown with introduced weeds or with limited native grasses – a wombat’s staple feed – to eat. Not only do the introduced weeds provide limited nutrition, some of them are toxic and can cause liver disease in wombats searching for enough to eat.

## What might be the underlying causes of the wombat health problems?

Native grasses seem to have disappeared in some areas where wombats live due to poor land management practices in the past, including running large numbers of livestock. When this grazing pressure was removed it led to the invasion of weeds such as onion weed and warden weed. In some areas, a shift from grassland to shrubland has been observed even on conservation reserves. Times of plenty and times of scarcity and change are a cycle of nature, but a loss of native grasses and infestations of introduced weeds appear to be contributing to ongoing health problems in Murraylands wombats.

## What is being done about the health problem?



A number of groups are working together to investigate the underlying causes of the health problem (see box to the right for more information) and aiming to:

- Improve health in Murraylands southern hairy-nosed wombats
- Determine how to identify habitats where wombats are at risk of health problems
- Use wombat health as an indicator of grazing and feed availability for wildlife in the Murraylands
- Find ways to improve how we manage land
- Start on the path to restoring habitat

The ultimate goal is to create healthier landscapes, helping both farms and native animals.

## What are the research projects showing?

The University of Adelaide School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences together with Flinders University School of Environment scientists are leading research projects on wombat health, which are supported by conservation NGOs, other researchers, government and landholders. These efforts are coordinated by the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources through the South Australian Wombat Health Working Group.

## Timeline of research projects

- 2010-11** : Thin southern hairy-nosed wombats with skin infections and hair loss were first spotted near Blanchetown in the Murraylands by the Wombat Awareness Organisation.
- 2011** : University of Adelaide veterinarians and other researchers began investigating what was causing the health problems in some Murraylands wombats, pointing to poor nutrition and starvation as the causes. In order to learn more about wombat health recovery researchers are monitoring some wombats taken into care by the Wombat Awareness Organisation.
- 2011** : University of Adelaide and Zoos SA researchers estimated how many wombats are in the Murraylands and surveyed where they are.
- 2011-13** : Flinders University researchers are investigating other ways to better estimate wombat numbers by combining several methods and using past wombat numbers linked with rainfall data.
- Since 2011 volunteers, through the NGOs, have been finding sick wombats, caring for some sick wombats, collecting relevant data for researchers and have made a start with rehabilitating land.
- 2012** : Natural History Society of South Australia convene a discussion forum on the wombat health issue.
- 2012-13** : Natural History Society of SA began developing and trialing new methods to restore wombat habitats and control introduced weeds.
- 2012-13** : Zoos SA and University of Adelaide researchers began investigating how to better manage wombats in agricultural areas.
- 2012-13** : Flinders University researchers began comparing a range of health indicators with available food sources, weeds and grazing pressures to develop a rapid assessment tool.
- 2013** : University of Adelaide veterinarians are comparing healthy with sick wombats to further investigate the underlying causes of the health problems and what might be needed to prevent these problems from reoccurring in the future.

## What can I do?

There are opportunities to help with land rehabilitation and collecting data for research. Contact your local natural resources officer or Natural Resource Centre for more information on wombat health, wombat and land management and how to get involved.

### Natural Resources Centre Berri

2 Wade Street Berri SA 5343

P. 08 8580 1800 (during normal business hours)

### Natural Resources Centre Murray Bridge

110A Mannum Road Murray Bridge SA 5253

P. 08 8532 9100 (during normal business hours)

