



Saving the Bilby, One Step at a Time

Kevin Bradley

Bilbies have been an intrinsic part of the unique Australian landscape for a very long time, with fossilised remains of their ancestors' carbon-dated to be more than fifteen million years old. Before Europeans arrived in Australia, greater bilbies (*Macrotis lagotis*) roamed across 70 percent of Australia's mainland and stretched from the Great Dividing Range in Queensland to Western Australia's beaches.

Yet, in the last one hundred years, they have been pushed to the brink of extinction as a direct result of colonisation and change of land use, population growth, and the introduction of non-native species, particularly invasive predators such as the European red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) and the feral cat (*Cattus cattus*).

The bilby is of significant cultural importance to Australia's First Peoples as a 'creation animal' present in their Dreamtime stories, songs, and art – spanning across many Indigenous Nations and language groups across Australia.

Bilbies are a 'flagship' species, meaning that their protection is even more critical because their survival will

increase the chances of survival of other threatened species and countless wildlife that share the same habitats and face the same threatening processes.

Bilbies Love to Dig

They are one of nature's ecosystem engineers and play an essential part in the restoration of soil and rejuvenation of vegetation in arid Australia. Bilbies use their strong front paws to dig deep burrows that spiral down into the ground for over two metres. In doing so, they facilitate water penetration deep into the ground. In contrast, hard-hoofed animals that have been introduced to Australia compact the soil surface so when the rain comes, instead of soaking in, it runs straight across the soil, causing erosion and disrupting the balanced ecosystem of arid Australia.

When bilbies feed, they scratch many smaller holes in the soil (feed scrapes) that collect seed and plant material and water while aerating the soil to support seed germination. Bilbies essentially create numerous compost pits and native market gardens every night, which is why bilbies are so crucial to our harsh but fragile arid environment and the balance of our natural ecosystems.

The overall bilby population in the wild has suffered a catastrophic decline, primarily due to the introduction of invasive predators to Australia and changes in land management practices, including fire and intensive agriculture. Over 80 percent of Australia's remaining wild bilby populations occur on 'Indigenous Protected Areas'. However, other bilbies are safe from feral predators behind large predator exclusion fences or in captivity for breeding to support a National Recovery Plan for the species. Consequently, it is scarce for anyone ever to see a bilby in the wild.

The greater bilby is a nocturnal, omnivorous marsupial in the order Peramelemorphia (bandicoots). It is also commonly referred to as a dalgite, pinkie, or rabbit-eared bandicoot. Strictly speaking, they are not a bandicoot; they are a family of their own – Thylacomyidae.

Bilbies, none-the-less, are the last of our bandicoot line in arid Australia. There were thought to be six species in the

Above: Opal, the bilby, being released into Currawinya Sanctuary.

early 1800s, but sadly the greater bilby is the only remaining one. The lesser bilby (*Macrotis leucura*) became extinct in the 1950s; the greater bilby survives but remains Endangered.

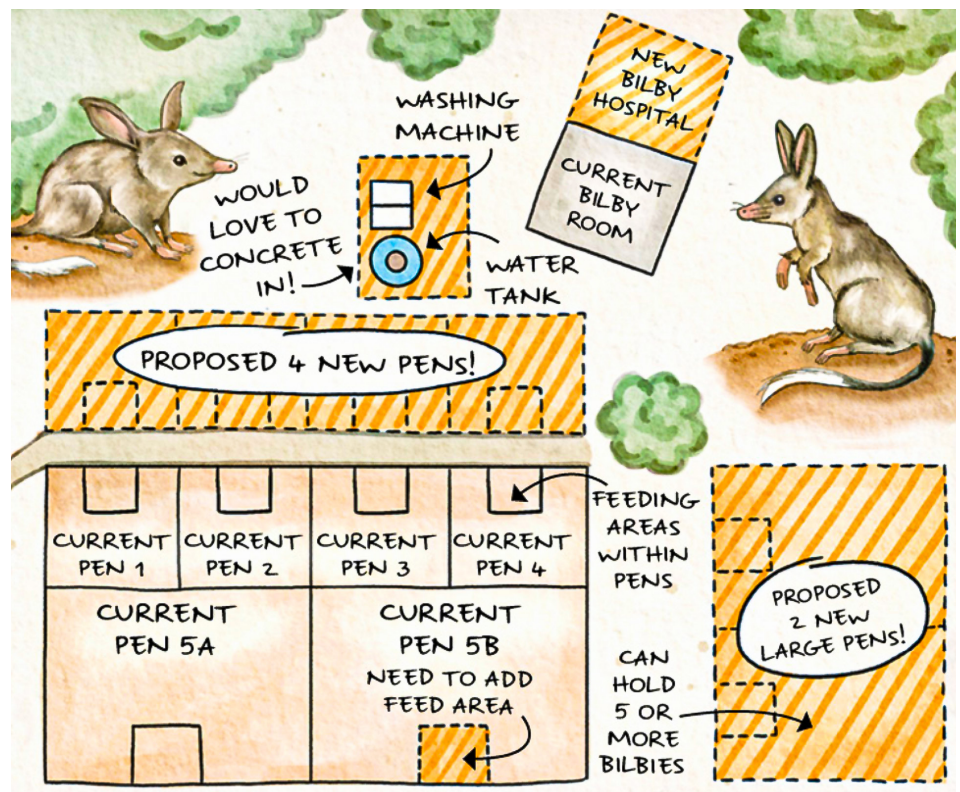
Save the Bilby Fund is a small charity doing a mighty job to ensure that the bilby does not join the appalling list of thirty-four mammal species that Australia has lost forever. With just one full-time employee – the Chief Executive Officer, Kevin Bradley, aided by three part-time staff, Save the Bilby Fund plays a lead role in national recovery efforts for the species.

Save the Bilby Fund was co-founded by the late scientist, Peter McRae, and the late Frank Manthey OAM – known fondly as ‘the bilby brothers’. Save the Bilby Fund launched in 1999 as a national appeal to build a predator exclusion fence on Currawinya National Park and re-establish bilbies after a seventy-year absence from the landscape. They chose Currawinya as having suitable habitat. It is close to the centre of the area where bilbies used to occur in eastern Australia and the last remnant wild populations in Far West Queensland, between Birdsville and Boulia.

In March 2015, Save the Bilby Fund hosted the Greater Bilby Recovery Summit. It brought together thirty-nine experts who represented twenty-nine stakeholder groups involved in bilby conservation nationally. These groups openly discussed the challenges to bilby recovery and forged a consensus on a plan for this species’ future in the Australian landscape.

The event was an initiative of Save the Bilby Fund, in partnership with the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, the Taronga Conservation Society Australia, Dreamworld Wildlife Foundation, and the Australian Government Department of the Environment. The workshop was designed and facilitated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Species Survival Commission Conservation Breeding Specialist Group.

Since the Greater Bilby Recovery Summit in 2015, Save the Bilby Fund Chief Executive Officer, Kevin Bradley, has been the Greater Bilby National Recovery Team’s chair. Kevin works with stakeholders from all over Australia, and members include Indigenous ranger groups, state and federal government agencies, non-governmental organisations, landholders and



Save the Bilby Fund breeding facility.



Bilbies love to dig.



Inside the bilby fence at Currawinya Sanctuary.

managers, researchers, and participants of the Australasian Species Management Program that assist with a nationally coordinated breeding program.

Save the Bilby Fund is committed to delivering on the Greater Bilby Recovery Summit 2015 Report and Interim Conservation Plan. Save the Bilby Fund is working with all stakeholders to develop a new Greater Bilby National Recovery Plan that has been based on the essential outcomes of the Summit. It is a tremendous task that Save the Bilby Fund cannot do alone.

Save the Bilby Fund receives no current government funding and must fundraise from the public to complete every single step towards achieving its immediate (and attainable) goals. Save the Bilby Fund aim to create a safe population of four hundred bilbies at Currawinya Sanctuary and 10,000 bilbies across Australia to provide appropriate genetic insurance against extinction in the wild for the next one hundred



Kevin Bradley, Chief Executive Officer of Save the Bilby Fund.

years. Save the Bilby Fund are working to understand and protect Australia's few remaining wild bilby populations facing increasing threats. Managing threatening processes to establish bilbies back to areas where they have disappeared remains an important focus for Save the Bilby Fund.

In the last three years, the predator exclusion fence at Currawinya Sanctuary has been significantly upgraded. Consequently, Save the Bilby Fund has had the joy of welcoming forty-six newborn bilbies in its breeding facility in Charleville and has released twenty-six bilbies into the fenced sanctuary to live freely.

Save the Bilby Fund is working with PhD Candidate Cass Arkinstall from the University of Queensland, who is researching and monitoring the health and movements of re-introduced bilbies at the sanctuary. Save the Bilby Fund believe that it is safe to say that there may be over one hundred bilbies at Currawinya Sanctuary already.



Bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*) tracks.



PhD student, Cass Arkinstall, measuring bilby tracks.

Support Bilby Conservation

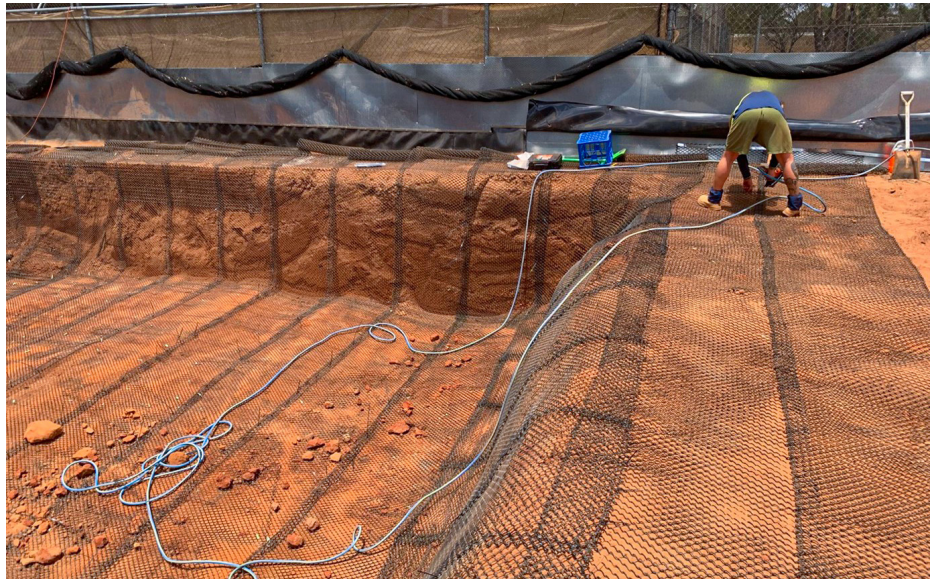
Save the Bilby Fund relies on everyday Australians who want to save the bilby from extinction and can afford to make a financial contribution. Small or large, every little bit helps, and they are incredibly grateful for everyone who has supported the project so far.

There is still a tremendous amount of work ahead. Save the Bilby Fund need to re-survey the last remaining wild bilby population between Birdsville and Boulia that has not been extensively surveyed since the late 1990s when Peter McRae undertook the work. They also need to manage threats to the bilbies beyond the fence at Currawinya Sanctuary. Generating ongoing funding and support is critical to saving the bilby and Save the Bilby Fund's vital work.

Please help ensure our children and grandchildren can continue to have bilbies in their world and that we do not lose these precious battlers of the outback on our watch. All donations greater than \$2 are tax-deductible. If you would like to donate, you can easily do so via the Save the Bilby Fund website www.savethebilbyfund.org

Key outcome and impact of the funding provided:

Save the Bilby Fund have been able to upgrade their bilby captive breeding facilities, built new crèche-ing pens, and make enclosure improvements, including new feral-proof fencing. Save the Bilby Fund has already witnessed several births, with more on the way! Great news for the conservation of this species.



Excavation of the bilby crèche.



A completed bilby pen.

Kinder Nattoons sponsorship helps save Australia's threatened native wildlife

The Australian Wildlife Society continued its significant sponsorship program with family-owned confectionery brand, Ferrero, for a second year.

Ferrero's Kinder brand created the Kinder Nattoons collection which aims to help families *play, learn, and protect* endangered wildlife across Australia and around the world. Kinder's support has helped five wildlife conservation initiatives in 2020, including Save the Bilby Fund.

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