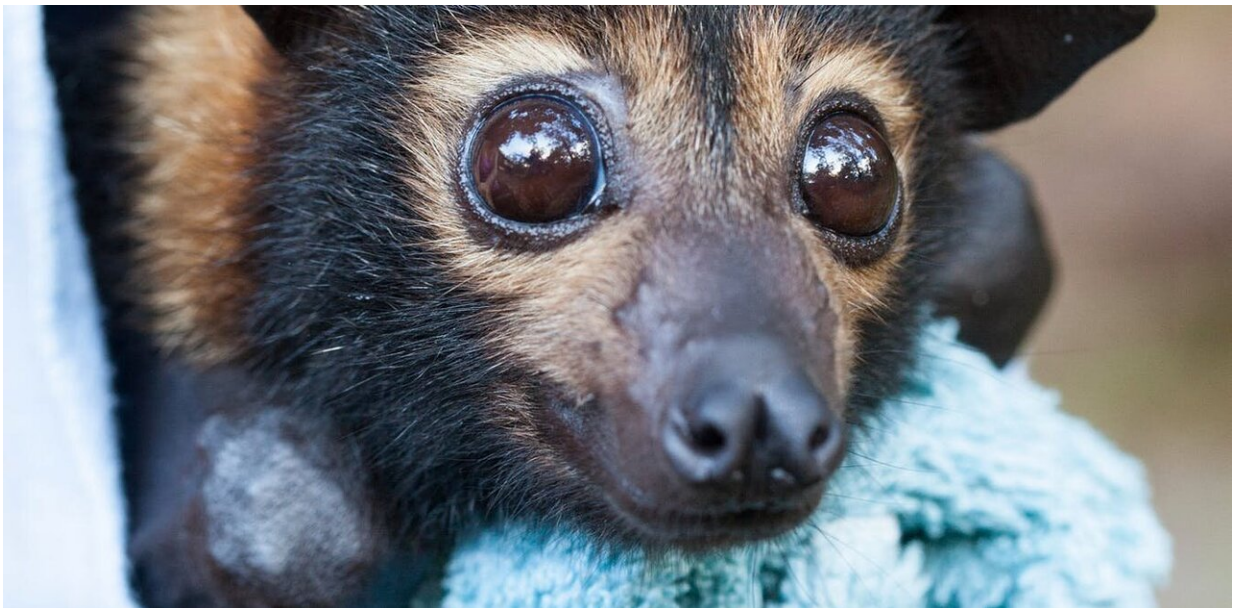


Our laws failed these endangered flying-foxes at every turn

July 1 2020, by Justin A. Welbergen, Noel D Preece, Penny Van Oosterzee



Credit: David Pinson, [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

On Saturday, Cairns Regional Council will disperse up to 8,000 [endangered](#) spectacled flying-foxes from their [nationally important camp](#) in central Cairns.

The camp is one of the last major strongholds of the [species](#), harboring, on average, [12%](#) of Australia's [remaining spectacled flying-foxes](#). But

after recent [catastrophic declines](#) in spectacled flying-fox numbers, moving them from their home further threatens the species survival.

Yet, the federal environment minister [approved](#) the dispersal last month under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act) – Australia's key environment legislation for protecting threatened species, and currently under a [ten-year review](#).

This [planned dispersal](#) – which the council says is in the interests of the species—is set to conclude a long series of controversial management actions at the site. The EPBC Act [failed to protect the species at every turn](#). The camp may now be non-viable for the flying-foxes.

Decline of the rainforest specialist

Spectacled flying-foxes are critical for [pollination and dispersing fruit](#) in Australia's Wet Tropics, and so underpin the natural values of this world heritage-listed region.

But [habitat destruction and harassment](#) largely caused the species' population to drop from 250,000 in 2004 to 75,000 in 2017. Subsequent [monitoring](#) has, so far, shown [no sign of recovery](#).



Spectacled flying-foxes are important pollinators and seed dispersers in Australia's Wet Tropics. Credit: Inigo Merriman

In late November 2018, another 23,000 bats – [a third of the population](#) – died from [heat stress](#). It marks the second largest flying-fox die-off in recorded history.

Today, the camp is not only home to a big portion of the species, but also around [2,000 pups](#) each year. Flying-foxes are extremely mobile in the region, so the camp provides a roosting habitat for more than what's present at any one time.

Why dispersals don't work

The council is [permitted to disperse](#) the flying-foxes with deterrent measures, including pyrotechnics, intense lighting, acoustic devices and other non-lethal means.

The Conversation sought a response to this article from Cairns Regional Council. A spokesperson said: "Relocation measures will only occur between May and September—outside of the spectacled flying fox pup rearing season to avoid a disruption to the species' breeding cycle."

The relocation activity will be undertaken by appropriately qualified and experienced individuals and non-lethal methods will be used.

The program is tailored to minimize any stress on the animals and causes no injury of any type.



Endangered spectacled flying-foxes are set to be dispersed from their camp in Cairns CBD, one of the last strongholds of the species. Credit: Justin Welbergen

However, ample evidence shows dispersals are extremely [costly](#), [ineffective](#) and can exacerbate the very wildlife management issues they aim to resolve.

Dispersals risk [stressing](#) the already disturbed animals, and causing injuries and even [abortions](#) and other [fatalities](#). They also risk shifting the issues to other parts of our human communities, as the bats tend to end up settling in an unanticipated location after having been shuffled around town like a game of musical chairs.

Even in the [often-cited](#) example of the "successful" relocation of [vulnerable](#) gray-headed flying-foxes from the Melbourne Botanic Gardens in 2003, [experts couldn't direct](#) the bats to their designated new camp.

Instead, the flying-foxes formed a permanent camp at Yarra Bend, one kilometer short of the intended destination, where they're now subjected to renewed calls for [culling or dispersal](#).

Poor management

Cairns Regional Council [argues their decision](#) to attempt to move the bats to the Cairns Central Swamp is in the long-term interest of their survival. A council spokesperson says: "Heat stress events, urban development and increased construction in close proximity to the Cairns City Library roost will continue to stress and adversely affect the spectacled flying fox population."



‘Fogging’ is one of several methods used to disperse flying-foxes from their camps. Credit: Australasian Bat Society

Also, the health of roost trees at the library site, and therefore the viability of the site as a spectacled flying fox roost, is diminishing.

Council believes relocation will mitigate human/flying fox conflict, enable the trees at the library to recover, and will likely reduce the high rates of pup mortality that have been recorded at the library colony.

But these animal welfare concerns arose from the accumulated impacts of the council's poor management actions, or actions the council supported.

In 2014, the council was [found guilty](#), under the Queensland Nature Conservation Act, of driving away spectacled flying-foxes and illegally pruning the habitat trees.

The Cairns camp was then subjected to a series of EPBC-approved roost tree removals in [2014](#), [2015](#), [2016](#) and [2017](#). Collectively these destroyed more than two-thirds of the available roosting habitat at the site.

This directly contradicts the specific EPBC Act referral [guideline](#), which states actions to manage the flying-fox camps should not significantly impact the species.

And in 2015, Cairns Aquarium developers [had to destroy](#) trees home to hundreds of spectacled flying-foxes before they could start construction. That's because under the EPBC Act, no building near or around the flying-foxes is permitted. In this case, the act's well-intentioned protection measures caused far more harm than good.



Over the past seven years, most roosting trees of the Cairns CBD camp were either removed or heavily pruned, resulting in the destruction of more than two-thirds of the available roosting habitat. Credit: Justin A. Welbergen, Noel D Preece and Penny van Oosterzee

Warnings fall on deaf ears

In the meantime, the national conservation status of the spectacled flying-fox moved too slowly from "vulnerable" to "endangered" in the listing process.

In 2017 the government's own [Threatened Species Scientific Committee](#) advised listing the species as endangered, which would provide them with more protection.

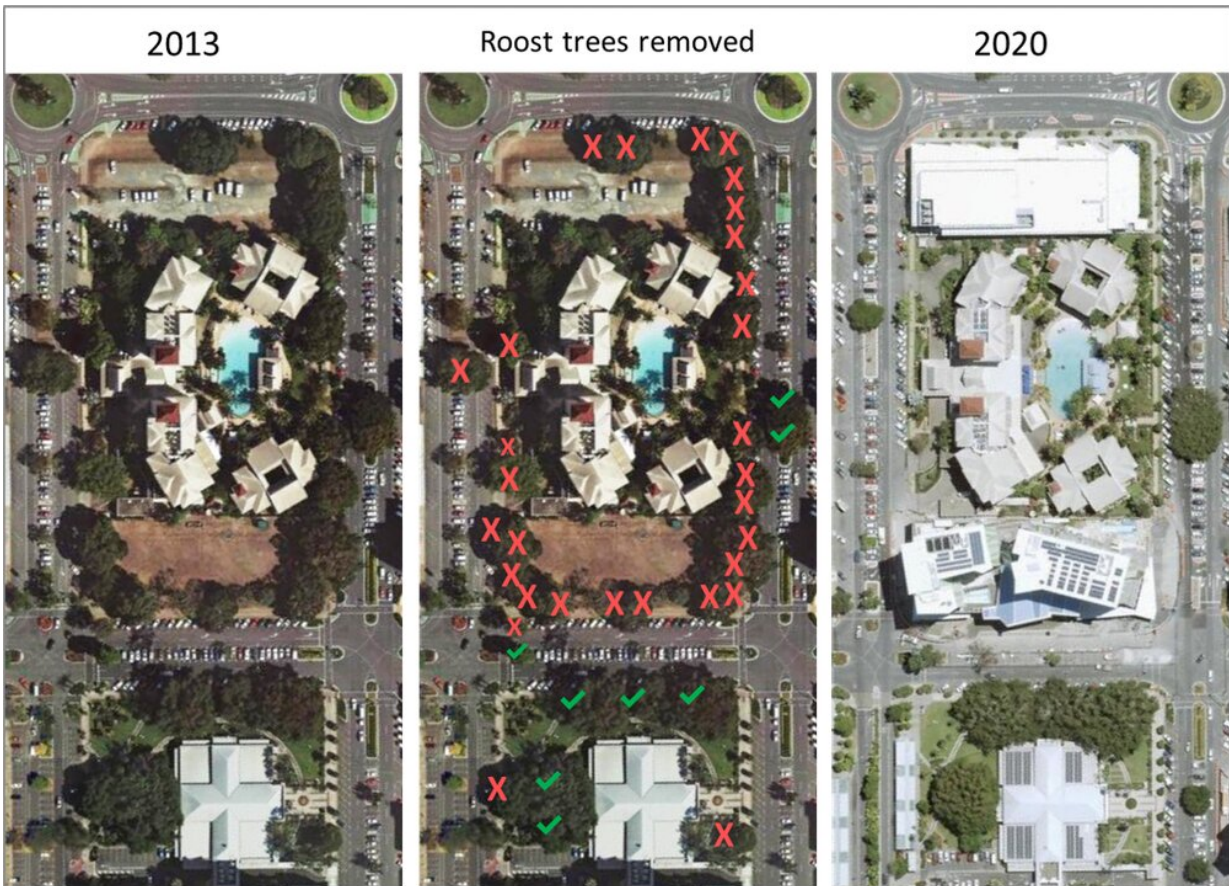
But when the spectacled flying-fox was finally [declared endangered](#) in February 2019, they already qualified as critically endangered, according to [official guidelines](#).

What's more, the state government's [recovery plan](#) for the spectacled flying-fox—in place since 2010—has never been implemented.

Are there any solutions?

There are no solutions under the EPBC Act as it's currently framed.

The tragic end to the story is that a dangerous precedent is being set for flying-fox management in Australia. Bat carers in Cairns are readying themselves for an influx of casualties from the dispersal.



Removals (X) of roost trees from the Cairns flying-fox camp between 2013 and 2020. The new white rectangular buildings visible in 2020 are high-rise hotel (centre) and Cairns aquarium (top) developments Provided by authors. Credit: Justin A. Welbergen, Noel D Preece and Penny van Oosterzee

Some bat carers have sadly reached the conclusion the dispersal is now the least-bad option for the bats after their stronghold suffered a [death by a thousand cuts](#), leaving their home unviable.

The [review of the EPBC Act](#) must see strengthened legislation to prevent such tragic outcomes for our threatened species. Australia's inadequate protections allow species to be pushed towards extinction [at one of the highest rates in the world](#).

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Provided by The Conversation

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