

2010 AGM & Chairman's report

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I am pleased to be able to serve the Foundation (RFA) once more in the role of president. I completed a term as president over 10 years ago and have been closely involved with the Foundation since its creation in 1990.

I want to thank previous president Tim Rogers for his efforts over his term to continue to encourage investment in research on the European wild rabbit. None of us need reminding that we are dealing with Australia's worst vertebrate pest, which continues to hold that dubious position in spite of enormous effort and investment by both the private and public sector for a hundred years. Notwithstanding this effort, there is still not a lasting solution in sight.

One of the difficulties facing the Foundation is that this is such an entrenched problem that it can easily escape notice of the general community, key decision makers and even some landholders, unless rabbit numbers are in plague proportions. Yet one only has to go and look closely to see that rabbits are back in increasing numbers in parts of Australia. In some coastal and hilly locations, they are doing very well, as is the case in parts of the arid zone where rabbit calicivirus (RHD) may not have gained or re-gained a foothold. The threat to our primary production and our biodiversity continues to build. I believe this is a cause for alarm if we are serious about proper natural resources management.

RFA is continuing to do what it can with its limited resources to provide research-funding support, usually in conjunction with other allied groups. It has been involved with the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre (IACRC) in part funding the RHD Boost project which is exploring how to gain the best results out of RHD, including understanding more about the way it affects rabbits and importantly, if there



are other strains of RHD overseas that may be more effective on rabbit populations in Australia. This is RFA's principal research investment and we look forward to it producing positive results.

RFA is concerned that the IACRC may not receive further support funding from the Commonwealth government, which will mean that there will be no national organisation with a focus on rabbit control. We believe that this would be an unfortunate outcome given the nature and economic implications of the threat from rabbits.

Partly in response to this likelihood, RFA has initiated negotiations with Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) to explore the possibility of jointly funding the work of the now in recess Rabbit Management Advisory Group. This group of largely technical representatives from the Commonwealth, States and New Zealand and chaired by a producer had been meeting a couple of times a year with funding support from IACRC and AWI and initially from Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA). Progressive withdrawal of support funding by MLA and AWI meant that the group could no longer function, notwithstanding the fact that it was the only national forum where research and management of the country's rabbit problem was being discussed and priorities identified.

RFA has now put a written proposal to AWI offering to act as the parent support body for the group

RFA Supported by:



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Beating Rabbits at Monarto

Conservation Ark is cleaning up Monarto to encourage regeneration of native flora and fauna.

Monarto Zoo, a 1000 hectare property just east of Adelaide SA, is situated at the crossover of two habitat regions (mallee and woodland), providing a unique and valuable refuge for a range of native flora and fauna. The remnant habitat at Monarto supports a number of nationally and locally threatened bird and plant species and two nationally threatened ecological communities. There is very little of this habitat type remaining in the region (Murray Darling Basin) with the majority degraded due to fragmentation, grazing pressure and the invasion of weed and vertebrate pest species. This makes conservation of the remnants on the Monarto property an important priority.

Conservation Ark (RZSSA) staff have designed a large scale restoration project for the Monarto property that aims to reduce critical threats to biodiversity and enhance condition, connectivity and resilience of remnant habitat. This project gives us the opportunity to have a significant and long term impact on this habitat and work towards landscape scale conservation for EPBC listed species and communities. The project will follow a series of steps: verte-

brate pest control (rabbit, fox and cat removal), weed control, revegetation and remnant habitat recovery and the breeding and re-introduction of native species.

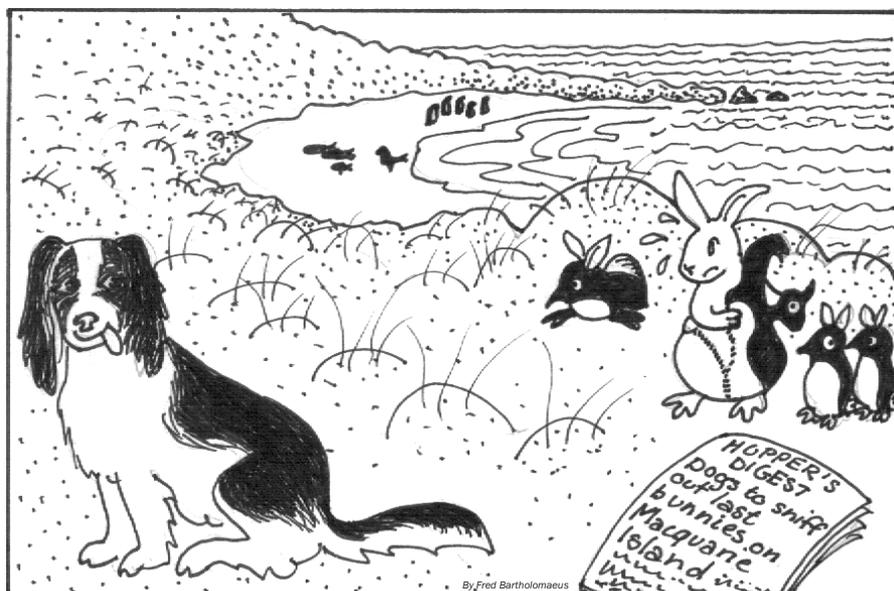
As the remnant habitat at Monarto zoo is no longer subject to clearing or grazing from livestock one of the biggest threats to biodiversity is rabbits. They are responsible for the continued loss of plant species diversity on the property and reduced success in revegetation activities. This grazing pressure severely impacts recruitment of species, habitat structure and the food resources available to native fauna, resulting in a reduced suite of fauna species that can survive on the property.

To maximise the impact of rabbit control activities on the property by preventing recolonisation from neighbouring properties we will make our perimeter fence rabbit proof. Following the upgrade of the perimeter fence we will conduct a staged removal of rabbits by dividing the property into sections and clearing rabbits from one section at a time. This will be done

using a series of moveable fences such that they can be shifted from one section to the next in a gradual sweep across the property. The methods applied for rabbit control will include warren mapping and destruction and a trapping, shooting and baiting program.

We hope to achieve the complete removal of rabbits from the property or if not complete a reduction in their numbers such that their impact on the habitat is significantly reduced. Rabbit removal from small areas on the property has shown a halt the decline in biodiversity and increase in regeneration, particularly of the understory. This has the potential to reveal plant species that have not been seen in the area for some time. In addition the recovery of understory has the potential to increase invertebrate densities and allow the recovery of a range of fauna species. It is hoped that this work will also provide a strong foundation for the ecosystem in the face of climate change.

Briony Horner
Conservation Officer
Conservation Ark



2010 Chair's report *(Continued from page 1)*

and to provide secretarial and some funding support. If this proposal is accepted, RFA would have a technical working group working directly in partnership with industry. There has been some interest from AWI officials, but no commitment has been made as at the end of June.

I am sad to report the death late last year of RFA's patron Professor Frank Fenner AC. Professor Fenner was a strong supporter of RFA and had a highly distinguished career spanning more than seventy years. However the Foundation has been fortunate to have appointed Dr Brian Cooke as its most recent patron and I cannot think of a more appropriate appointment. Dr Cooke has been Australia's foremost rabbit researcher for decades and his wisdom and experience is and will be greatly valued.

The RFA Committee is advancing planning for a national forum in Canberra next April on the rabbit threat and options for tackling it. While planning is still in the early stages, we see this event as a means to raise awareness of government and indus-

try sectors of what will happen to our landscapes and our primary industries if we continue not to respond to the looming rabbit problem.

Finally, I wish to thank our supporters and in particular Haighs Chocolates which has for years provided the backbone of financial support to the Foundation. Haighs' has been 'rabbit free' for well over ten years and sales of Easter Bilby chocolates (along with other Australian native species) continue to grow.

For any person who is reading this newsletter and is not a member of RFA, I encourage you to show your support by joining us. Our annual fee is modest and an application form is contained with this newsletter. Our AGM will be held in Adelaide on 17 November 2011 and details can be found on the RFA website at www.rabbitfreeaustralia.org.au

Nicholas Newland AM

President RFA

FOUNDATION FOR RABBIT FREE AUSTRALIA Annual General Meeting



Notice is hereby given that the NINETEENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING will be held at The Santos Conservation Centre, Plain Tree Drive, Adelaide Zoo on THURSDAY 17th NOVEMBER 2011 at 2:00 pm.

Membership and donation form is on the last page of your Newsletter.

Membership fees for 2010 are due by the AGM.

For catering purposes, we would appreciate it if you could let us know if you plan to attend the AGM.

***RSVP to Edwina Grant on mb 0407 721 195,
e-mail admin@rabbitfreeaustralia.org.au***

Introducing Dr Brian Cooke — Our New Patron



Born in Geelong, not far from where Thomas Austin's infamous rabbits were reportedly ferried ashore in 1859, my earliest distinct memory of a rabbit dates back to 1952. While visiting some friends on a farm I saw one with acute myxomatosis. I don't remember being horrified at the sight, rather I was extremely curious, and heavily questioned my dad about it as we drove home in the car. At eight years old I knew all about 'myxo'. Later, when about 12 or 13 years old, we would hunt rabbits with a pack of dogs whenever we visited another farming family in the Winchelsea area. It was a regular pastime for kids even in the muddiness and bleakness of a full 'Western District winter'. The dog pack featured a couple of greyhounds, a staghound, the Border collie sheep dogs and a couple of fox terriers as well.

I certainly didn't plan a career in 'rabbits' nonetheless. That was more or less fortuitous. After finishing a science degree with a major in Zoology at Melbourne University, I answered an advertisement for a research officer's job in the Department of Lands in Adelaide. John Bromell, who was 'Chief Vermin Control Officer', flew to Melbourne to interview me over a cafe lunch. Before the meal was over I had the job; there was no need for HR people and reporting in those days. Part of the deal was that I would enrol at the University of Adelaide for a higher degree, done part-time, while I worked on rabbit control projects to help fight the rising rabbit tide. As an undergraduate I had been greatly attracted by the ideas of Prof H.G. Andrewartha, then professor of Zoology in Adelaide, who specialized in studies on animal population dynamics. It proved a good move, eventually leading to a PhD scholarship supported by both the Lands Department and the Wool Board. Additionally, John Bromell saw to it that I spent

three months in Canberra at CSIRO Wildlife and Ecology in Ken Myers group visiting their field sites and generally making contact with other scientists in the 'rabbit world'.

Much of my early work involved assessing rabbit control methods, comparing oat and carrot bait and 'conventional' and 'one-shot' poisoning methods – but all the time we were putting rabbit control onto a sounder biological basis and increasingly looking at conservation benefits as well as economic benefits. The conservation aspects of rabbit damage had been largely ignored even in the immediate aftermath of myxomatosis and it was time to put that right. There was certainly an acute need for this kind of work because mallee farmers were increasingly calling for permission to clear remnant mallee vegetation on roadsides which they regarded as mere 'rabbit harbour'. Fortunately, our small research team which included David Chinner and Brian Sutton demonstrated that, by using a combination of poisoning, careful warren ripping and fumigation, rabbits could be successfully cleared from among roadside vegetation without having to clear the trees. This in turn enabled a stronger policy on roadside vegetation conservation to be maintained by the South Australian Government and was part of policy development to ensure better conservation ethics across the state. Interestingly, one of the key people behind this work was Mr Basil Newland, and Nicholas Newland his son was soon to become an officer in our group as it evolved into the Animal and Plant Control Commission. The policies and friendships built at that time produced lasting benefits still in evidence today.

When CSIRO's Bill Sobey successfully brought European rabbit fleas into Australia as new vectors of myxoma virus, it was natural that we should form a partnership when it came to releasing and distributing the fleas in South Australia. We were able to assess the effectiveness of the fleas in enhancing myxomatosis because by then we had long-term data on rabbit biology from many sites across the State and could monitor changes in the rabbit population. Nonetheless, it also became apparent that the fleas would not persist in the driest parts of South Australia and with Bill Sobey planning retirement it became my job to plan towards introducing arid-adapted fleas from Spain that might help spread myxomatosis in the arid zone.

Interestingly, I had arranged for an experienced entomologist, Dr Peter Bailey, to do that work but an invasion of Adelaide by Portuguese millipedes and an impending state election put an end to those plans. Peter was suddenly in Portugal pondering millipede bio-control and my wife Pam and daughters Natalie and Julia were travelling with me to Spain where we spent considerable time as I worked to assess and import arid-adapted Spanish rabbit fleas. Those were difficult family times in some ways as we had little spare cash due to a huge depreciation in the Australian dollar, but infinitely rewarding in terms of making new friends and understanding another culture.

Our New Patron *(cont)*

It was during one of my field trips in Spain that rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD) broke out in wild rabbits and I was able to see its effects first hand. Because it heavily reduced rabbit numbers in Almeria province, the driest part of Spain, I quickly realized that it was worth serious investigation as a new bio-control agent for release in inland Australia. On returning home, I immediately contacted Dr Brian Walker in CSIRO Wildlife and Ecology to make him aware of this new biological control agent but also closely involved South Australian Agriculture and Department for Environment and Planning staff to generate interest at a State level too. The idea quickly gathered momentum and a program to import the virus got under way although my involvement was limited because work on rabbit fleas needed to be finished off before I could move to CSIRO as a Principal Research Scientist to lead a team to introduce RHD.

The virus which causes RHD was imported into the high security CSIRO laboratory in Geelong for testing and when it was declared safe to use a decision was taken to run trials on Wardang Island to make sure that it would spread successfully before more general releases would be made. The Island became my second home for months at a time and I again found myself working closely with Nicholas Newland who at that stage had been seconded to oversee the Australian and New Zealand RCD Program to introduce the virus.

The escape of the virus from the quarantine compound on

Wardang Island to the mainland was naturally a subject of acute political embarrassment but nonetheless one that was dealt with effectively. But since that time the virus proved its worth. For an investment of a little over \$12 million, we have had 15 years where the virus has produced a return to graziers of about \$400 million annually and led to the regeneration of millions of shrubs throughout the rangelands.

Yet new problems are looming. There is more than enough evidence that rabbits are building resistance to RHD and many of our hard-won gains are being eroded. I believe that we need to alert our fellow Australians that it is not enough to sit by and imagine that rabbits are beaten. We are capable of doing much more and strategically we should do everything possible to achieve this now rather than waiting until the rabbit problem again becomes severe enough to generate renewed action. For that reason I am very proud to have been asked to be the Patron of the RFA. I do not have the academic prestige the previous patron, Professor Frank Fenner, but I know I have a lot to give because I have direct experience from the earliest days of myxomatosis and I personally knew most of the main players in the story of that disease in Australia as well as having close contact with those who now work with rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus in a wider international collaboration.

Rabbit Management at the 15th Australasian Vertebrate Pest Conference, Sydney

Research presentations on a wide variety of aspects of rabbit control featured at the 15th VPC in June. The Rabbit Management symposium began with Queensland's Dr David Berman showing how ripping programs on Bulloo Downs Station in the channel country of western Qld are focussed on key refuge areas around permanent water points. Rabbit management in vast pastoral enterprises is always economically difficult, but David's work showed that targeting identifiable drought refuge areas can provide a high degree of rabbit control for some entire properties. Greg Mutze looked at

options for seeking new biological control agents for rabbits to bolster myxomatosis and RHD. Ron Sinclair presented 15 years' results of RHD monitoring at Turretfield, near Gawler; showing that recovery of rabbit numbers has been associated with lower mortality rates from RHD infection in some recent outbreaks. John Kovaliski followed up with a summary of the known genetic diversity of the RHD virus in Australia. The virus strains that were associated with low mortality at Turretfield are genetically distinct from all other strains that have been reported around Australia.

Importantly, the Australian strains detected so far are all quite distinct from virus strains that are proposed for introduction to the effectiveness of RHD under the RHD Boost project. We are still very keen to obtain further samples of livers, for virus identification, from rabbits that may have died in RHD outbreaks, in order to further this research. If you notice dead rabbits around, please contact John Kovaliski at Biosecurity SA on 08 8303 9502.

G Mutze, Senior Research Officer, Biosecurity SA.

"We are still very keen to obtain further samples of livers for virus identification"

Bernard Fennessy Memorial Lecture 2011: Julia Cooke presents My Little World.



Bunny "was a very good scientist but his great ability was to get information out from the realm of the scientist to the various state authorities and to the man on the land"

Bernard "Bunny" Fennessy (1923-2006), was recruited to CSIRO by Francis Ratcliffe. He worked with a team tackling the rabbit problem, investigating a range of control techniques. In the 1930s and 1940s myxomatosis trials had been run, with disappointing results, but in 1950 an outbreak of myxomatosis occurred that spread rapidly and allowed the highest recorded annual wool and meat production at that time. Bunny "was a very good scientist but his great ability was to get information out from the realm of the scientist to the various state authorities and to the man on the land" (Brian Cooke¹). I heard many stories about this period some years ago during a memorable dinner at our place, when Bunny, Frank Fenner and my father (Brian Cooke) were reminiscing. We all laughed as Frank described injecting myxoma virus into himself and two other high-ranking scientists, Burnet and Clunies-Ross, to demonstrate that it had no impact on humans. Bunny then told us that he had also been accidentally inoculated during field trials without ill effects but Francis Ratcliffe considered this inadequate to allay public fears as Bunny was not an 'eminent person'. Such was Bunny's self-deprecating sense of humour.

Bunny retired from CSIRO in 1988 and became a volunteer guide at the Australian National Botanic Gardens. He was soon a familiar sight in the gardens, dressed in his trademark forest green clothes and rabbit felt hat and over the next 17 years enthralled and inspired hundreds of visitors with his stories and knowledge. He was also an excellent listener, and took great

pleasure in the fascinating stories and information he learned from visitors. It was at this time that I met him, and he became my 'honorary grandfather'. Bunny helped me with a high school project on scribbly gums, facilitating access to trees in the gardens. He was fascinated by my findings that scribble morphology differed significantly between host eucalypt species, suggesting that there was more than one species of the moth (whose larvae make the scribbles) than the single species described. He told many visitors about it. I wish he knew that I eventually published that school assignment in the Australian Journal of Entomology. Bunny has been honoured with a street name, Fennessy Way, in the new Canberra suburb of Forde and is remembered every year with an annual lecture at the Australian National Botanic Gardens.

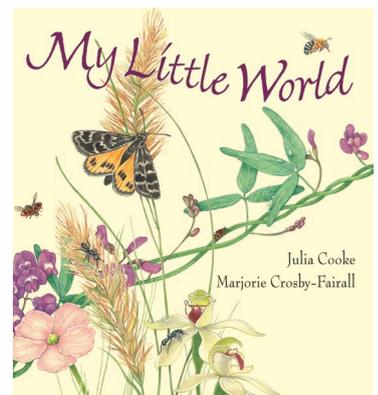
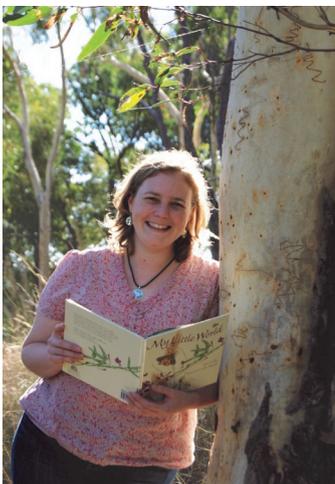
This year it was my pleasure to present the Bernard Fennessy Memorial Lecture and I talked about my new, first book *My Little World*, published earlier this year by Omnibus Books. It is the story of a child who discovers a world of tiny plants and animals when unable to see the birds and mammals that the grown-ups see. It shows what different perspectives children have, and how valuable that can be. *My Little World* features a suite of real species that can be found on Black Mountain in Canberra, and Marjorie Crosby-Fairall's illustrations are vibrant and realistic. Species are labelled and there is an information page in the back. I'll talk about how the illustrations were developed and spreading conservation messages. The production, publication and promotion of *My Little World* has brought

me so much joy - I've met so many interesting people, learned about many new things, both biological and literary, and hopefully I am encouraging children to look at the little things, take pleasure in new discoveries and want to conserve the natural world. I think Bunny would have liked that!

Julia presented the 2011 Bernard Fennessy Memorial Lecture at 12:30 on August 9 at the Australian National Botanic Gardens, Canberra. She is a post-doc at Macquarie University having just submitted her PhD thesis on '*The functional role of plant silicon*'. Her website has more information about *My Little World* and her research: <https://sites.google.com/site/cookejulia/> *My Little World* is available from all good book stores.

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/obituaries/bunny-waged-war-on-the-rab-bit/2006/08/23/1156012607478.html?page=2>

Pictures:
Top Left: Bernard Fennessy (courtesy Murray Fagg)
Bottom Left: Julia Cooke
Bottom Right: Julia's Book



Haigh's Chocolates Helping to Save the Bilby



Back in 1991, The Foundation for Rabbit Free Australia (RFA) created the Easter Bilby in order to draw public attention to the plight of this endangered species. Two years later in 1993, Haigh's joined forces with RFA and stopped making chocolate Easter bunnies to make Australia's very first chocolate Easter Bilbies.

Part proceeds from the sales of all Haigh's Easter Bilbies assist RFA in their work to help protect the Bilby's habitat. At Easter we offer large and small Bilbies in both milk and dark

chocolate and in 2011 sold over 35,000 across our 13 stores located in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. We also have other Bilby treats including our foil-wrapped Baby Bilbies, 20g of solid premium milk chocolate, which are available all year round. In our stores we also promote the cause with information brochures about the Bilby and our support of the environment. At Easter we also run store promotions with our Easter Bilby character giving out Bilby ear headbands and Bilby colouring in cards to thousands of children.

Haigh's are also very proud to be major sponsors of the Adelaide Zoo's purpose-built Bilby exhibit. It's a comfy open-plan environment for the Bilbies so you can get a peek at how they live in their natural habitat.



Current Executive Committee Members & Advisors

Chairman	Mr N Newland AM
Treasurer	William Morgan
Executive officer	Edwina Grant
Committee	Richard Downward
	Sandra Keane - SAFF representative
	Ms Sharon Oldfield
	Dr John Radcliffe AM
	Ms F Bartholomaeus
	Dr Simon Humphrys
	Dr Simon Habel
Technical advisers	Mr G Mutze
	Mr Tim Rogers

Members of the RFA Executive Committee are elected every year at the AGM.

FOUNDATION FOR RABBIT-FREE AUSTRALIA

Membership and Donation Form - 2011



Details for Membership or Donation

Title _____ Surname _____ Given Names _____

Organisation _____

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_____ State _____ Postcode _____

Phone _____ Fax _____ Mobile _____

E-mail Address _____

DONATIONS OVER \$2.00 TO THE FOUNDATION ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE

I would like to contribute/pledge \$ _____ to support RFA's funding of rabbit research programs

MEMBERSHIP OF THE FOUNDATION FOR RABBIT-FREE AUSTRALIA

I would like to become a member of the Foundation for the period 1 November 2011 to 31 October 2012

Subscription Fees Tick Box

Student \$10.00 General \$50.00 Corporate \$250.00

TOTAL \$ _____

SEND PAYMENTS TO

Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia
 PO Box 145
 COLLINSWOOD
 SA 5081

Subscriptions for 2011/2012 RFA membership
 are due by the AGM (17th November 2011).
 Thank you to those members who have already paid
 their subscriptions this year

Office Use Only

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