

QUOKKAS

Statement by Minister for Tourism

MR R.C. KUCERA (Yokine - Minister for Tourism) [4.10 pm]: Mr Speaker, there is no doubt that Rottnest Island is a Western Australian icon that has a special place in our hearts. By travelling just 19 kilometres off our coast, any Western Australian - if he or she chooses - can soak up the experience of this natural wonder. Integral to this experience is the opportunity to enjoy a unique array of flora and fauna. As many of us who have taken up that opportunity know, the Rottnest quokkas are perhaps the most immediately identifiable native fauna that visitors will encounter on any visit. It is no surprise that the community has expressed concern about the management of sick and injured quokkas. This concern is not misplaced, but unfortunately some misconceptions have overshadowed what should rightly be the focus of any discussions about the issue; that is, the welfare of the animals involved.

Quokkas that are able to survive their injuries and be returned to their colony are treated and rehabilitated. It is only when an animal is suffering and dying from injuries or illness, or unable to survive in the wild - which I am told is only a very small number each year - that rangers on the island pursue what is in effect the humane option; that is, to euthanase. I recently convened a meeting with representatives from the Australian Veterinary Association, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Department of Conservation and Land Management and Murdoch University's School of Biological Sciences to discuss the treatment and management of injured quokkas. I sought from the experts in the field consensus on the most suitable way to deal with sick and injured quokkas, including the most appropriate method of euthanasia. As a direct result of that meeting, the Rottnest Island Authority will now move to adopt a five-point plan for the management of its sick and injured quokka population.

The experts all agreed that carbon dioxide is a humane way of euthanasing these animals. Consequently, the first part of the plan will see the installation of mobile carbon dioxide units in ranger vehicles so that this preferred method can be administered on dying animals found on the road or in isolated parts of the island. Secondly, Rottnest Island rangers will add to their already extensive knowledge of animal management by undergoing further training in wildlife triage. This will allow them to build on their ability to assess the extent of an animal's injuries and the most appropriate treatment. Thirdly, a dedicated wildlife station will be set up on the island for sick and injured quokkas, and other island wildlife that require care. This will build on the model already in place on the island to treat quokkas with the intention of returning them to their natural habitat. Fourthly, the Rottnest Island Authority will review its guidelines on the triage and management of sick and injured quokkas in conjunction with animal welfare experts. Finally, the Rottnest Island Authority will be looking to build on existing education campaigns already operating on the island encouraging people to reduce harmful interaction with quokkas. Quokkas are wild animals and there is no doubt that the more they interact with humans the more likely it is that they will come to some harm.

I have also met with the Rottnest Island Foundation to discuss its role in the care and conservation of quokkas. The foundation has, for the past decade, been committed to the preservation of the island's fauna, marine environment and buildings of historical and cultural significance. I welcome the foundation's involvement in the preservation of the island's quokka colony and encourage all interested members of the public to use the foundation's conservation trust to channel their financial support for this important issue. I will continue to work with the key players to implement this compassionate and sustainable response to quokka management on Rottnest Island. Management of wildlife is just one of a complex array of responsibilities undertaken by the Rottnest Island Authority, highlighting the need for greater support for its activities from other agencies with specialist expertise.