

*Friends of Catani Gardens*

**Submission to Port Phillip Council Requesting Review of Previous Council's Policy of Trapping and Killing Possums in the Catani Gardens**

Thank you for agreeing to hear me as a representative of Friends of Catani Gardens. Our organisation is dedicated to:

- the protection of the State heritage listed Gardens and their wildlife;
- the restoration and revegetation of the Gardens in accordance with original plan of pioneer landscape architect Carlo Catani;
- the return of the Gardens for informal leisure and recreation (not as a venue for sporting events and the St Kilda Festival); and
- ending the cruel and illegal destruction of protected brushtail and ringtail possums.

Our organisation is a member of the Protectors of Public Lands Victoria Inc. which has been acting in our interests over the past three years.

I would like to concentrate on informing Councillors of the real truth of the trapping and killing of possums in the Gardens and dispel once and for all the myths in Council about possums damaging palm trees and the supposed need for a Council "management program".

**1 Possums are not Vectors of Fusarium Palm Wilt (FPW), Do Not Chew Palm Fronds and Hence Do Not Damage Palms**

(i) It should be made clear that possums did not live 24 hours a day in the palms trees in the Catani Gardens nor did they eat or chew palm fronds. Being nocturnal, they used to sleep in the crown of the palms and descend in the night to feed. Although not native, the Canary Island Palm provides excellent sheltered habitat for possums and a sustainable colony has been living in the Catani Gardens for at least the past 50 years, that is until the previous Council drove them out of the trees by installing "possum exclusion bands" on the 104 Canary Island palm trees.

(ii) As Councillors will be aware, Mr David Yeouart, Executive Director Community Assets and Services, when answering questions at the Council meeting on 2 March 2009, said that the installation of the possum exclusion bands was "initiated" as a "preventative measure" against Fusarium Palm Wilt (FPW) in the Gardens. He agreed with me that possums do not carry or infect palms with FPW. It has now, apparently, been accepted by Council. He claimed, however, that possums were "gnawing palm fronds".

(iii) Where did the myth that possums chew and eat palms come from?

- On Tuesday 3 April 2004 Mr Dwayne Carter of Parks and Gardens advised then Councillor Carolyn Hutchens who forwarded his message onto the Protectors of Public Lands Victoria Inc. (PPL VIC) that: *"The banding of the palm trees within St Vincent Gardens was completed with a view that Possums can be a Vector due to the chewing that takes place along fronds so that they may make nesting sites."* This is incorrect as from our reading and expert advice we know that brushtail possums do not make nests.
- We have extensive evidence from scientific sources that possums do not chew palms - either the trunks or fronds. This type of vegetation is simply not one of possums' food sources. One scientist joked that *"Possums would have to be the size of dinosaurs to browse on fronds in the crowns of palm trees."* Dr Brett Summerell, eminent NSW plant pathologist and now Director of the Sydney Royal Botanic Gardens, commented in an email to Julianne Bell of PPL VIC on 27

February 2007: *“Regarding your inquiry about the possibility of possums having a negative impact on the health of Canary Island date palms (Phoenix canariensis). In all of the Canary Island Date Palms that I have inspected I have never observed possums causing any damage significant enough to warrant any danger to the health or sustainability of the palms, nor have I seen any signs of damage on the fronds that would be consistent with possum damage.”*

- Council apparently relied only on the evidence of a consultant Mr. Bryan Walters of Ecoplan Australia Inc. who produced a plan for the *“Management of Common Brushtail Possum in Canary Island Palm at Catani Gardens St Kilda”* in August 2006. He produced 3 microscope slides of possum scats purportedly showing palm frond fibres. Therefore he concluded that possums were eating palm fronds. Our consultant Mark Cairns Zoologist/Ecologist of “Endangered Species Recovery” commented on this in a report of 23 August 2007 stating that no acceptable level of dietary study has been conducted or published with any scientific validity for the Common Brushtail Possums showing percentage of occurrence of palm frond material in possum scats. He maintained that “a proper dietary study would require analysis of a minimum of 40 faecal samples (each sample consisting of 5 – 10 individual scats) taken from a number of different animals through a range of times during their peak activity periods.” We have therefore rejected Mr. Bryan Walters’ conclusions as having no scientific validity.

### **Trapping and Killing Possums Illegal**

We fail to understand why, after it had been established that possums are not the vectors of FPW, Council proceeded - at enormous expense - to hire a consultant, Bryan Walters of Ecoplan Australia Pty Ltd, who advocated banding palm trees and killing possums by installing the most complex traps ever devised in Victoria and unique to the Gardens. I have enclosed a photo (No 1) showing the apparatus of the band, the chute down which the possum was forced to descend and the refuge or trap from which the possum was collected in the daytime for disposal. This was a lethal means of “managing” the animals yet it is clearly in contravention of the Wildlife Act 1975. If it is proposed that brushtail possums are to be destroyed, a research permit is required from the Bureau of Animal Welfare issued by an animal ethics committee. According to advice from the Department of Sustainability and the Environment no permits were issued to Council or the consultant. Julianne Bell of PPL VIC will elaborate on this. I have also enclosed a photo (Photo 2) of a possum stranded above a band – these bands were attached to trees on October 2007. (This was a variant on the previous modus operandi). There was no means of escape and the possums suffered from dehydration and starvation. Council officers said that “they could jump” but mothers with babies on their backs and juveniles could not do so. This was, in our opinion, an example of aggravated cruelty.

### **Is the Killing of Possums Continuing?**

Mr David Yeouart assured us at the 2 March 2009 meeting that the Council is not continuing to kill possums. See Photo (No 3) which shows the remains of traps on the palms in which until several weeks ago possums were still sleeping in the day. These were recently removed and presumably the possums with them. Have these possums been destroyed? See Photo (No 4) Ron and “Whitey” the possum killed in May 2007.

**Conclusion:** We ask that you review as a matter of urgency the banding of palms in the Catani Gardens. We see no justification for their installation in the first place by the previous Council and ask for them to be removed. They degrade the heritage Gardens and are an affront to the citizens of Melbourne.

Signed Jill Quirk Executive Committee Member Friends of Catani Gardens 6 April 2009