

Neighbours from hell? Better the possum you know than the devil you don't

By LORNA EDWARDS

WILDLIFE officers are concerned about an increase in the illegal trapping, dumping and killing of possums by residents of Melbourne's leafy suburbs who, it seems, just can't learn to get along with the natives.

Possums are renowned for noisy squabbles in roofs at night and eating prized rose bushes, but now more Melburnians are breaking sustainability exact a cruel revenge.

Department of Sustainability and Environment spokesman Ron Waters said it was illegal to trap ringtail possums. Their larger brushtail cousins could be trapped only if they were in a roof or a building.

Under the law, trapped possums must be protected from the elements and released within 50 metres of where they were captured. It is legal to have them humanely euthanased by a veterinarian, although many vets discourage this as a solution.

"People have been illegally trapping them in their backyards and releasing them in other places and we guess in some cases they are probably illegally killing them," Mr Waters said. "There are ways of dealing with them that vary in their success but the answer isn't going and knocking them off," he said.

Popular dumping grounds for the animals some uncharitably dub the "cane toads of the south", such as Fitzroy Gardens and St Kilda's Catani Gardens, have been transformed into possum war zones as the territorial animals fight new arrivals.

But the department warned that it was often a case of "better the possum you know" as removing problem possums from a garden will only create vacancies for new ones that could prove more troublesome.

"If your local possums are not that destructive, they are the best deterrent as they will defend that territory," Mr Waters said.

Pete the Possum Man is in the thriving industry of possum eviction and gets about 50 calls a week from across the city. The company installs one-way exits in roof holes to evict noisy noc-



turnal residents. Service manager Patrick Cahill said people got extremely frustrated by possums in their roofs, especially when they fought. Possum fights are often a case of mothers trying to evict their offspring, something their human neighbours might relate to, he said.

While there are no population statistics, Mr Cahill said possums seemed to be flourishing.

He said he had heard reports of people trying to kill them with rat poison or by placing a cat in the roof to get them out.

Australian Veterinary Association spokesman Brendan Carmel said many vets were reluctant to euthanase possums but it was preferable to them being dumped. "We view euthanasia as a lesser of two evils compared with releasing them to a site where they will probably die a slow death," Dr Carmel said.

Veterinarians encouraged people to learn to live with their possums before considering euthanasing them, which could cost up to \$50, he said.

A spate of illegal trapping in gardens was probably partly due to ignorance about the laws, Mr Waters said. But he warned that those who moved or destroyed possums faced six months' jail or fines of more than \$5000, with additional \$500 penalties for each animal killed. The penalty for aggravated cruelty leading to the serious injury or death of an animal was a year's jail or fines of more than \$12,000, he said.

LINK
▶ www.dse.vic.gov.au



Food fights: possum dumping grounds such as the age.com.au grounds become battlefields as the marsupials fight for limited territory.

PICTURE: PAUL ROVERE



MARSUPIALS IN THE ROOF

How to handle a possum problem in your roof:

- Call a licensed possum controller to remove them.
- Hire a trap from your local council and release possum in your garden after blocking holes in roof.
- Find the entry point in your roof and install a one-way flap.
- Prune any tree branches at least 1.5 metres away from the roof.
- Install a nest box in your garden as alternative accommodation.

In your garden

- Install floppy fences around trees so that possums are reluctant to climb.
- Place metal "collars" on tree trunks.
- Try commercial repellants from nurseries.

WOKO: DSE

Fur goodness sake: They're turning the varmints into garments!

By CAROLYN WEBB

A SHOCKED look and a sharp intake of breath is the common reaction when Jeanette Santamaria tells people she's wearing clothes made with possum fur.

But Mrs Santamaria, 54, of Heidelberg, feels no guilt about the 20 jumpers, scarves and beanies she's bought that are made with a possum, merino and angora mix.

Buying a part-possum, cardigan from a shop at Christchurch airport three years ago, she was hooked on its softness and warmth.

"I thought, 'What a good idea, and why don't we do it in

Australia?" Mrs Santamaria said. "That's probably not a politically correct thing to say, but I'm a gardener, and the possums kill my garden."

Now available in Melbourne, possum fur is the latest fashion must-have in the suburbs. The fur comes from New Zealand, where possums are a pest and not protected as in Australia.

Pen Drysdale, the chief executive of Christchurch manufacturer Snowy Peak, said 100 Australian stores stock its possum label, Merinomink, up from 50 last year. Prices are about \$440 for a long-line jacket, \$300 for a jumper and \$130 for gloves.

Ms Drysdale said Merinomink was doing the environment a favour in New Zealand, which was overrun by introduced Australian brushtail possums.

"Now there's 70 million of them who every single night are eating 20,000 tonnes of our native bush. They're an ecological threat," she said. "We haven't had any problems with the animal rights lobby. We've got letters from the World Wildlife Fund and so on, supporting what we do and why we do it."

But Glenys Oogies, executive director of animal welfare group Animals Australia, said the use of any animal's fur to warm ourselves or as a fashion state-

ment was "a terrible thing". She said some industry suppliers killed possums using poison, gunshot or traps. "It can mean great suffering to the animals."

Ann Marovitch, owner of Options of Ivanhoe boutique, said despite strong sales since her Upper Heidelberg Road shop first stocked Merinomink four years ago — she says it doesn't prickle the skin, is warmer than lambswool and doesn't pill — some clients "just can't get their head around the fact that possums have been used in the wool".

LINK www.snowypeak.com



Fur go: Jeanette Santamaria tries some possum fashion.

PICTURE: ANGELA WILHE