

Kareela Flying-fox Camp – Maintenance Dispersal

COUNCIL NAME

Sutherland Shire Council

WEB ADDRESS

sutherlandshire.nsw.gov.au

SIZE

370 square kilometres

POPULATION

212,000

Overview

The nationally significant Kareela Flying-fox camp adjoins residential, educational and recreational facilities. Ongoing concerns regarding community impacts led to a dispersal attempt in winter 2015. This initial dispersal action resulted in the camp remaining empty of flying-foxes during the day for the majority of days but maintenance dispersal is required to prevent recolonisation. Sutherland Shire Council applied to the NSW Flying-fox grant program to assist with the cost of ongoing maintenance dispersal and to ensure there was no inappropriate roosting in other locations in the Shire whilst maintaining Flying-fox welfare.

Background

The Kareela Flying-fox camp is located approximately 30km from Sydney's Central Business District within a 2.2 ha bushland reserve. The reserve lies within an urbanised environment and adjoins residential, educational and recreational facilities. Council has undertaken a range of in-situ actions identified in the Kareela Flying-fox Camp Plan of Management Plan (2014) such as vegetation removal to create a buffer.

Ongoing concerns regarding adjacent school children and community impacts led to flying-fox dispersal actions in winter 2015. Dispersal was undertaken in accordance with conditions of licensing and a dispersal plan. Council spent more than \$270,000 on the initial dispersal and more than \$500,000 on the overall management of the Kareela camp. This initial dispersal action resulted in the camp remaining empty of flying-foxes during the day for the majority of days but maintenance dispersal 5-7 days per week for at least 2 years is required to prevent the permanent recolonisation of the Kareela flying-fox camp following these initial successful dispersal actions.

Implementation

Prior to the grant assistance becoming available, council had already obtained approval from the Commonwealth Department of Environment (EPBCA) and the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage for dispersal activities.

The approval process specified important conditions on the approach and when to cease maintenance dispersal activities. Key triggers for ceasing work included:

- A population assessment demonstrates that females are visibly pregnant, birthing, individuals are malnourished or when dependant young are present
- During or immediately after climatic extremes, such as heat stress, severe weather or a period of significant food stress.

Maintenance dispersal actions were generally limited to 3-5 staff using torches and walking around the flying-fox camp one hour prior to sunrise which was a sufficient disturbance to move animals on of their own accord.

More than 800 hours of observations and maintenance dispersal activities were conducted by casual staff over the project timeframe with 20 hours of shifts per week, and over 700 hours of supervision conducted by OEH approved ecologists with 10 hours of shifts per week for 12 months.

Other tasks included:

- Monthly checks of alternative roosting habitat in the LGA and camps within 20km of Kareela to ensure new camps were not being formed or existing camps were becoming problematic
- Consultation and awareness activities with the affected community and schools to inform them of the activities being undertaken

A food shortage declared in November 2016 resulted in cessation of maintenance dispersal activities for a period of time and was replaced with observational activities. The camp population rose during this lull in dispersal. Observations of the camp, reproductive status and body condition were required to assess the status of the food shortage and the impacts on the flying-foxes. These observations enabled Council to determine when the impacts of the food shortage had lessened and when impacts to dependent young were no longer occurring. The camp voluntarily abandoned in May 2017 and thus initial dispersal as undertaken in 2015 was not required to be repeated but maintenance dispersal continued.

Outcomes

The dispersal definitely had the intended outcome of reducing and/or eliminating impacts to the directly affected, adjacent community of residents and schools at Kareela however as soon as dispersal actions ceased flying-foxes returned in large numbers. This was doubly impacting for those in the affected community that thought they wouldn't have to experience impacts in relation to flying-foxes again.

The option of dispersal activities on newly formed but inappropriate roosting localities elsewhere in the LGA was not required.

In acknowledgement of the uncertainty of dispersal as a management tool for flying-fox camps, Sutherland Council is in the process of implementing other actions from the Camp Management Plan to lessen future conflict.

Key Learnings

- The general community consider dispersal the answer to getting rid of flying-foxes in any situation and not an extreme action that was attempted in this unique situation to protect vulnerable children.
- Dispersal should be a last resort. All other avenues should be explored before attempting dispersal.
- Dispersal should not be considered a permanent solution as maintenance dispersal cannot continue indefinitely.

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