



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**ADJOURNMENT**

**Christmas Island Pipistrelle**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 19 March 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

---

## SPEECH

**Date** Thursday, 19 March 2009  
**Page** 3431  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Ley, Sussan, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Ms LEY** (Farrer) (12.19 pm)—I want to talk about the imminent extinction of a critically endangered animal species—that is, the Christmas Island pipistrelle, which is one of Australia's smallest bats. If we allow this small mammal to become extinct, it will be the first mammal extinction in Australia for about 50 years.

I have been contacted by a zoologist in the west of my electorate, Mr David Gee, who is part of a network, including the Australasian Bat Society and other conservationist and wildlife biologists, who are incredibly concerned about this. I have been touched and motivated by their concern, and I wish to try to use the House to bring this issue to the attention of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Mr Garrett, because Mr Garrett has responded to the plight of the Christmas Island pipistrelle by referring the issue to a threatened species advisory panel. That is right—the imminent extinction of Australia's first mammal for 50 years has been referred to a panel.

The decline of this species has been staggeringly rapid, and the wild numbers are so low that now it is probably only months before the species will become extinct. The time that would be taken to deliberate on this animal's fate by a committee will use up all the valuable time we have left. What we are seeing is extinction by committee. In the media releases from Mr Garrett, claiming to be a hero regarding the imminent extinction of the pipistrelle, there is no mention of time frames. There is no indication of when the committee will report or of any other timelines determined by the minister. We do not have time to deliberate. If it takes three months or so for a decision to be made, that could well be too late. We need continued pressure to be applied to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, and in my capacity as shadow minister for territories I am trying to apply some pressure to the minister responsible for Christmas Island, the Hon. Bob Debus. It is the case that species do become extinct and a sad reality of our ever-changing environment, but it is even sadder when no effort is made to prevent the extinction, or the effort that is made does not do anything to assist, particularly in a country as environmentally enlightened as Australia

What the Australasian Bat Society is proposing is a three-stage program: an emergency rescue program aimed at catching the few remaining animals and establishing a captive colony; if sufficient individuals are caught and they survive being taken into captivity, a long-term captive breeding program in a purpose-built facility on Christmas Island with experienced staff to run it, which would need to be maintained for 10 years; and targeted research to determine the cause of the decline so that mitigation actions can be undertaken. The three-stage program would really be a last-ditch effort, because there are as few as 20 to 50 animals left. Any animals caught will of course affect the wild population, but we have no knowledge of what is causing the extinction in the wild, so this is the only action we have left. If—and I agree with my constituent David Gee that it is a big if—a captive population can be established, it will buy time so that the environmental attributes that are causing the extinction can be identified and hopefully corrected so that captive-bred individuals can be released back on Christmas Island in order to re-establish a wild population.

I think it is appalling that a government with the purported green credentials of this government is standing by and letting this happen. This is a tiny mammal which weighs less than three grams. In the big picture, people may say, 'Who cares?' But we should care, because when a species becomes extinct there is no going back and, if action can be taken to prevent it, we would all be better human beings for having taken it. If we do not succeed we can say, 'We tried.' If you look at the economic arguments, they possible do not add up, but this is not about economics. Christmas Island needs something to give it a lift, to improve its tourism and to make it a place where people think not just of its detention centre—and I think this could be one such issue. I call on the environment minister to take action, sweep the Threatened Species Scientific Committee aside and do what the Australasian Bat Society recommends: capture the bats and breed them in captivity.