

Concerns raised over bat-borne diseases...

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CHARTERS Towers geologist and environmentalist Eric Heidecker is concerned a variety of bat-borne diseases could affect the region.

According to the World Health Organisation, fruit bats in Africa are considered natural hosts of the Ebola virus, which has already claimed more than 700 lives and, most recently, has spread to two cases in the US.

Mr Heidecker said he was concerned that Australian bat colonies could get in contact with other colonies in Asia or Africa, risking outbreak of new viruses within five years.

A Department of Environment and Heritage Protection spokesman said it would be difficult to predict the bat colonies' likely moves over a five-year period.

"Flying foxes can travel up to 50km each night in search of food," he said. "Over their life span it would not be impossible for individual flying foxes to travel hundreds of kilometres, conceivably from one state to another."

A study written by Andrew

C. Breed, published in *Eco Health* in 2010, revealed information on bats travelling long distances and the implications for disease risk management.

It said satellite telemetry was used on nine flying foxes, across three species, to determine the scale and pattern of their long-distance movements and their potential to transfer viruses between countries in their region.

Of the nine, one had a transmitter attached in July 2006 in Papua New Guinea.

The study stated that the transmitter was active for 342 days, during which time the bat travelled a distance of 3011km, flying from inland Papua New Guinea to Abusi Island, Australia, Northern Torres Strait and then returned to Papua New Guinea.

The study also recorded flying foxes moving across national boundaries, indicating

the potential for transmission of pathogens between countries.

Mr Heidecker said leptospirosis was a virus of particular concern, as many other animals could act as hosts.

"Leptospirosis is just one of the parasites carried by flying foxes," he said.

"I know people who have had leptospirosis and got over it. They got it when they took their shoes off and went into the cattle yards, so they probably picked it up from the urine of the cattle.

"The other day I was looking up at some bats flying over and got hit in the face by urine. I had to go and wash my face immediately because that is how you get infected."

Mr Heidecker said a number of years ago council proposed erecting a bat sanctuary to remove the bats from Lissner Park, but he thought it

wasn't a good idea as it would take years for the trees to grow.

But he believes there could be a win-win resolution with the bats in Lissner Park, and one way forward would be to facilitate the return of bats to former camps on crown lands, away from people and farms.

"Currently colonies make strenuous nocturnal flights back to former habitats which provide water and nutrients," he said.

North of Charters Towers on the Burdekin river is Big Bend, one of their favourite haunts.

"Since they took the stock off it is completely covered in weeds," Mr Heidecker said.

"Because they burnt it, the weeds recover first. All they need to do is get people to work in the camp sites, and they might have to reintroduce some of the native vines.

"It wouldn't annoy too many people because it is away from farms. It's on crown land, and it's a national park."

He said if the bat population stayed at Lissner park it would "explode", because the colony had no predators in the park.

"I think there is a win-win situation here, where we can handle the environmental aspect but also the town," he said.

"We can't have them here much longer."



A helicopter attempts to disperse bats from Lissner Park.

...but authorities insist risk is minimal

HEALTH authorities insist the risk of bats carrying Ebola into Australia is minimal, despite concerns from Mr Heidecker.

Public health physician Dr Steven Donohue said there was no Ebola carried by bats in Australia, and the bat contribution to leptospirosis was virtually zero.

"You could mount the same kind of case for cats and dogs," he said.

"Nobody is saying we should exterminate all the dogs because humans could

get diseases from them. The risk of the Ebola virus either getting into Australia or becoming a problem here is remote.

"The serious thing about Ebola is that in those very remote parts of Africa where it is happening, they haven't had the resources and they haven't been able to communicate to the public clearly enough about the risks of contact with sick and dying people."

He said the Ebola virus was not as much of a threat to advanced western countries

where there were adequate health services and infection control.

"If we had one case of Ebola anywhere in Australia they would be very smartly put into isolation," he said.

A spokeswoman for the Federal Department of Health said the Australian Government Department of Health assesses the likelihood of Ebola being imported to Australia as very low.

"To assist with ongoing analysis of that risk, (the department) is actively monitor-

ing the epidemiology of the outbreak, with a particular focus on the potential spread of the disease," she said.

"Australia has sophisticated, high-end laboratory diagnostic capability at Physical Containment Level 4, the highest level.

"This provides laboratory space, testing facilities, diagnostic methods, and highly trained virology and medical science staff capable of handling Ebola and other viruses that cause viral haemorrhagic fever."

Doctor incentives unfair to rural communities

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"THIS is a huge problem that takes away from the concept of a rural incentive," Charters Towers Regional Council Mayor Frank Beveridge said.

"It is a ridiculous situation, unfortunately the power is with the voting population and it would be very beneficial for areas such as Townsville.

"We think there should be another tier put on the system for situations such as ours."

Gold City Medical Centre owner Dr Kevin Zischke said the current classifications are just not fair.

"Originally Townsville was excluded from incentive because it was a provincial city, but the Labor Government changed it some years ago," Dr Zischke said.

"They deemed that the further away from your capital city the more rural you are."

A spokeswoman for the Federal Department of Health said the incentive payments are in accordance with the Australian Standard Geographical Classification — Remoteness Areas system, which defines physical remoteness from goods and services.

"Remoteness is calculated using the road distance to the nearest urban centre, based on population size," she said.

"The Government is aware of anomalies caused by this and is currently considering options to better target health workforce incentives.

Dr Zischke said the issues with the system particularly impact on overseas doctors that train in rural areas.

"We train them we get them through their exams and we would like that time be reciprocated with time at our practice.

"Once they get through their exam they can then apply for permanent resi-

dency. The scheme was initially brought in to convince these doctors to stay for a while, but it is difficult when the option of moving to Townsville for the same money exists."

Dr Zischke said he lost three general practitioners to Townsville-based practices, and he believes Mount Isa has lost at least five.

The spokeswoman for the Department of Health said that while various options for improving the current classification scheme are being considered, it is important go through rigorous testing to ensure that all problems are identified, and where possible eliminated.

"On completion of this work the Government will consult with stakeholders to implement a system that better supports communities most in need," the spokeswoman said.

— SAM BIDEY

FAYLENE SPARKES



Charters Towers 2014 Visitation
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CENTRE 61-63 Dalrymple Road

TIME: 7:00pm Also at the regular
SUNDAY MORNING SERVICE 9:30am

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