



## ECO GOSS

### Food for thought on car parks

WHO COULD be Canberra's fresh food czar? The city of Baltimore in Maryland (population 2.7 million) has appointed a food policy director to promote urban agriculture, farmers' markets and affordable fresh food choices in take-away cafes. Nutritionist and sustainable agriculture advocate Holly Freishtat says she won't be banning junk food, but will be working with the city's planning department on a new draft zoning code to allow more land to be used to grow fruit and vegetables. It's all about turning urban "food deserts" into community farms. Perhaps that might be a more creative makeover for Canberra's inner-city car parks, after they were passed in at auction recently and withdrawn from the market.

### A future for happy Vegemites?

WHAT will become of Kevin Rudd's veggie garden at The Lodge? It seems Prime Minister Julia Gillard has more traditional culinary tastes than homegrown greens. Last year, she promised to defend Vegemite from being taxed or banned by a Government taskforce recommending action on fatty and salty foods. "I am a very happy Vegemite eater and there is no way in the world that Vegemite would be banned in this country," she said, when asked if the yeasty toast topping might fall victim to a modern version of the mediaeval salt tax. "Vegemite is part of being Australian, part of our history, part of our future – and I'll be continuing to wake up in the morning and having it on my toast." Meanwhile, fresh food activist, journalism professor and best-selling author (*The Omnivore's Dilemma, In Defence of Food*) Michael Pollan has urged President Barack Obama to appoint a Farmer in Chief, or national food policy director. Doesn't look like the idea will catch on with a Gillard cabinet.

### Stay tuned for the tour de bamboo

THE LATEST in city cycling chic is a bamboo bicycle. Made in (where else?) California, the bikes have taken off after winning a swag of awards – including a People's Choice award – at bike shows across the United States. Top-of-the-range models aren't cheap, costing about \$US10,000 (\$A11,400) for a custom-designed racing bike with a 10-year warranty. But a small company in New York runs weekend workshops where you can learn to build a serviceable bamboo bike for about \$1000. The cost of the class supports the Bamboo Bike Studio's efforts to help set up a bamboo bike factory in Ghana. Popular? A glance at the studio's website shows the workshops are booked out until November.



Wildlife biologist with the Save the Tasmanian Devil program, Dr Samantha Fox, and, below, a disease-free devil.

# A ray of hope for Tassie's devils

FINALLY, there's some good news about the future survival of the Tasmanian devil.

A trapping survey in the far north-west of the island state has found a healthy population of devils, free from any evidence of fatal facial tumour disease. Studies of DNA samples confirm the population in this remote area is genetically different to those in eastern areas of Tasmania where the disease has already wiped out more than 90 per cent of devils.

Dr Samantha Fox, a wildlife biologist with the Save the Tasmanian Devil program, says the survey results showed "it's not all doom and gloom for the devils."

Speaking at the Australian Mammal Society national conference in Canberra this week, Dr Fox said the survey team trapped, monitored and released more than 100 devils during the seven-day trip earlier this year. They found healthy animals that were seven years old, well beyond the normal life expectancy of five to six years. But at Mt William in the north-east, where the disease was first detected in 1996, a trapping survey found older devils had died out and animals were rarely surviving past their first year.

Dr Fox, who did her doctorate on a threatened species of flying fox in tropical north Queensland, moved to Tasmania last year to take up "a dream job" with the program. The first time she encountered a severely diseased devil in the wild, she found it "pretty confronting", because the facial tumours had spread to the devil's lungs.

"It was incredibly upsetting, because the devil was having

enormous trouble breathing. There was nothing we could do except euthanase it, and it really hits home how awful this disease is."

As for the popular image of devils as ferocious, snarling animals, Dr Fox says they're "pretty dozy and usually easy to handle when you take them out of the trap." But you need to know how to handle them, and be alert to their reactions.

"They're awesome to work with, because they're such characters. The snarling and biting usually comes into play when there's another devil around, but when we take them out of the traps during the day, they're usually asleep because they're nocturnal animals.

"I think they're a bit terrified to be honest. They seem to freeze when we pick them up, which makes them easy to

handle. They just stare up at you, and are remarkably placid for an animal that's supposed to be nasty and ferocious."

Dr Fox says without devils, Tasmania's ecosystems will see an increase in the numbers of feral cats and foxes. Farmers are already noticing an increase in sheep flystrike in areas where devil populations have declined. As carrion eaters, the devils clean up carcasses and keep blowfly numbers down.

Although it's welcome news there's a population of devils that may be resistant to facial tumour disease, the Save the Tasmania Devil program still needs support to continue its research. There's still a long way to go to save the species.

■ If you'd like to donate to the program or become a volunteer, go to [www.tassiedevil.com.au](http://www.tassiedevil.com.au)



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