

## Why bother saving the bilby?

*Dear Sir/Madam,*

*There is nothing to be gained in saving the bilby, not in the wild anyway. Someone might get a nice university qualification out of studying it but let's face it, the bilby lives in pretty remote areas, so who's going to miss it? I'll bet most people in Australia never get to see one anyway, not in the wild at least. Look, as long as there's a few bilbies in zoos here and there, what's it matter? I mean, are you going to trek out to the middle of nowhere on the off-chance you might see a bilby when you could be guaranteed of seeing one at the zoo? I don't think so. For a start, they only come out at night. Besides, a bilby's safer in a zoo. Free food, veterinary care and protection from predators. You let a bilby go in the desert and what are its chances? Not that good I reckon, not with foxes and cats prowling all over the place, and cattle and horses smashing their burrows. No, they're definitely better off in a zoo.*

*And think of the cost. Wouldn't the money be better spent on roads, housing, education and health? Things that matter? I mean, bilbies are nice, but they don't matter much when you're out of work or you need an operation. Look, I'm not against spending money on wildlife, but if we are going to spend it, let's pick an animal closer to home. Something we might have a chance of seeing. What about making sure that the animals that live around the towns and cities are taken care of? I mean, I was reading that parrots need hollow trees for nesting. With the money we waste on wild bilbies, we could buy a heap of nest boxes and stick them up in local parks. Make sure they don't go extinct. It's amazing, isn't it? We always wait until something's just about disappeared before we get concerned about it. Like the bilby. We should just admit that it's too late, and let it go.*

*Yours faithfully*

*Concerned*

The points of view expressed in this letter are supported by some people and opposed by others.

In this activity, you will decide on your answer to the question *Why bother saving the bilby?* using the arguments presented in the letter as a starting point.

**What to do:**

1. Working alone, read the letter and then write:
  - a summary of the arguments presented by the writer
  - a list of the things the writer assumes are true.
2. Work in a small group of 3 or 4 students to:
  - share your summaries with others in the group
  - discuss whether you think the arguments made in the letter are good ones
  - discuss whether it matters that different people may think a species is more valuable than other people do. Does something other than people's opinions of the value of a species make all species important?

You might want to take notes during the group discussion, so that you can use what has been said to contribute at least one point to the following whole class discussion.

**Biodiversity and biotechnology**

Biodiversity is the variety of all life forms (plants, animals and microorganisms) in an area. It is often considered at four different levels:

- genetic diversity
- species diversity
- ecosystem diversity
- landscape diversity.

Each group of 3 or 4 students should analyse how using biotechnology to save the bilby can affect these kinds of diversity. When the group representatives present these findings to the class, the others should ask critical questions. Now, return to the letter and think of a way that biotechnology could possibly threaten the existence of the bilby, if new species of plants, animals, or microorganisms are introduced into the bilby's habitat.

**Anthropocentrism and biotechnology**

Anthropocentrism (human-centeredness) is an attitude that conceives of everything in terms of how it affects humans. This means that animals and plants are seen as being of value only to the extent that they serve human interests. For example, an anthropocentric viewpoint would say that a plant has no value unless it provides food, beauty products or medicine for humans.

- How many different clues in the above letter indicate that the writer is anthropocentric?

3. Participate in a whole class discussion of the issue.
  - Draw up a table like the example below so that all contributions to this class discussion can be written up.

Points of view	for	against
Economic	for example, money from tourism	for example, predator control is expensive
scientific		
cultural		
ethical		
environmental		
other		

- Everyone in the class should contribute at least one view for or against conserving wild populations of bilbies. These views should be written in the appropriate place in the table.
  - Discuss any points that members of the class want to question or clarify.
4. Return to your small group or split up into pairs to:
    - Devise a program for the conservation of bilbies. Strategies to consider include:
      - predator control
      - captive breeding
      - public education
      - any others you may think of.

If you are not familiar with possible conservation strategies you should consult the section of the *Biotechnology online* site that deals with the protection of endangered species, or search for information about bilbies in the library or on the internet.

- Present your plan as a poster, a newspaper story or a PowerPoint presentation.

In your workbook:

5. Write a reply to the letter reflecting your views about the conservation of wild populations of bilbies.

**Biotechnology Online School Resource**