

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the origins of headline-grabbing wildlife statistics and asks how reliable are they?

A staggering one billion animals have been killed in Australia's wildfires. At least, that's what recent headlines claim. But is it true? Or, like so many 'statistics', has the number been plucked out of thin air, repeated, then repeated again and again, until it becomes 'fact'.

Fifa, for example, claims that more than 3.5 billion people watched at least some of the 2018 World Cup. That's nearly half the entire world population. But when you peel away the numbers, it doesn't make sense. Take away the one billion people in Africa without televisions, the one billion people in China who didn't tune in, the 0.7 billion children worldwide aged four or younger, and so on, and you begin to wonder where the figure comes from.

It happens with wildlife statistics all the time. People keep quoting a figure of 100 million sharks killed every year for their fins, to make shark fin soup. That may have been true 15–20 years ago, but not anymore. In many parts of the world, shark populations have plummeted and there simply aren't enough left for fishermen to find 100 million of them every year. Greenpeace and the Shark Trust now wisely quote a more conservative figure of 'tens of millions'. There is no need to exaggerate – the reason for the drop in numbers is shocking enough.

So, how many animals have been killed in Australia's fires? The headline-grabbing figure of one billion is a guesstimate based on umpteen different assumptions, from existing population sizes and the impact of

uncontrollable fires to the animals' own survival instincts.

The figure was extrapolated from a 2007 WWF report on how land-clearing affects wildlife in the Australian state of New South Wales. From those estimates, the report's authors calculated that approximately 480 million mammals, birds and reptiles had been affected (but not necessarily all killed) in New South Wales since the bushfires started in September 2019. As the fires swept through vast swathes of other states, the figure has been revised up to one billion.

But even that doesn't include bats, frogs, fish and other animals for which there is little data. It also doesn't include invertebrates: they would distort the figure beyond all meaning,

“There is no need to exaggerate – the reason for the drop in numbers is shocking enough.”

since there could be one billion insects in a single hectare of forest (and, so far, more than 10 million hectares have burnt to the ground).

Inevitably, some animals are surviving. Wallabies, echidnas and others have been hiding in deep and extensive wombat burrows. But the fires are so colossal and severe that most forest inhabitants – especially less-mobile species such as koalas (see page 54) are probably being killed immediately. Even those that do survive probably die later, due to a lack of food, water and shelter in the burnt landscape (birds and larger mammals such as kangaroos would normally flee the area, but this time there are few places to escape to).

The truth is that no one can say categorically whether one billion is right or wrong. Just that it is inestimable. And, as the fires rage, the number continues to increase.

One fact is undeniable: whatever the final death toll, this is a tragedy by anyone's count. And it probably represents the catastrophic beginning of a bleak future for Australia's native wildlife. These bushfires are exacerbated by climate change (don't get me started on Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's refusal to expand measures to combat global warming). If this is what it's like now, just imagine what is in store as temperatures continue to rise. 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Numerous animals, such as this wombat, were rescued from the fires in Australia, but how many lost their lives to the flames?