

Locally Wild launch: Christopher Cheng teaches children to bond with native pets

Adults and kids recently gathered together at Sydney Wildlife World to celebrate the launch of Christopher Cheng's exciting new book *Locally Wild*.

Held opposite the humid butterfly habitat, and with some snake petting to keep people on their toes, the event was launched by Simon Marnie, Tony Moore, Verity Firth, Minister Assisting the Minister for the Environment, Climate Change and Water, Professor Michael Archer, and of course, Christopher Cheng.

Locally Wild is a glossy, fully illustrated book and it reflects Chris's belief that Australians need to live close to native animals if we wish to have any hope of conserving them.

The book explains state laws and licenses to children in a fun and smart way, and demonstrates easy ways to attract native animals into their backyard by creating the shelter, food and habitat they require. It takes a look at enthusiasts who care for native pets as varied as turtles, cockatoos, bats, native honeybees and marsupials, and provides information on how to keep native animals as pets, with helpful details on caging, feeding and keeping them healthy.

MCing the launch of *Locally Wild* was Simon Marnie, presenter on 702 Sydney during weekends. He has owned his fair share of native pets, including a kangaroo on two separate occasions. Aside from the novelty of owning a native animal, he found that they made great pets and bonded quickly, regularly taking him by the shoulders and giving him big hugs. Unfortunately, he explained, "on both occasions we had to get rid of the kangaroo because the neighbourhood dogs would come up and harass them."

If it weren't for Tony Moore from Pluto Press, there wouldn't have been a book to launch. He made the original call to Chris suggesting they publish a book about keeping native animals as pets. Sharing a passionate belief that people get to know Australian animals by caring for them, the two created the book as a 'how to' for parents and children to look after pets. Tony believes that it teaches children not to be passive consumers, but rather to become interactive in keeping native animals. Despite being warned never to work with either children or animals, Tony said, "Thanks to Chris Chen it was an absolute hoot."

Described by Tony as "more child-friendly than playschool", Christopher Cheng is an award-winning author of a number of picture and information books, short stories and novels. Among his many literary achievements, Chris is the official Federal Government's mascot for Literacy Week '07. He is familiar with TV appearances, and has been seen on shows including *Playschool* discussing animals and promoting his books.

He acquired a love of native animals during his eight years as Education Officer at Sydney's Taronga Zoo, and developed Australia's first Zoomobile taking zoo animals to schools and community groups throughout NSW.

At one point he and his neighbours planted Australian bushes in his home in Newtown, and before long they found lizards and cockatoos making their homes there.

Speaking about the book, Chris explained, "I wanted to make it really accessible to kids." He also wanted parents and teachers to get involved.

"There is no better way than having first-hand experience," said Verity Firth. She believes that *Locally Wild* teaches children to respect the environment they live in and encourages a better relationship with local wildlife.

"We have to find ways to get native animals into our kids' lives," said Professor Michael Archer, who is a big fan of Australia's native animals. In 1967 he came from the US to study fossils of Australia's carnivorous marsupials, and was given a baby quoll by a friend. It crawled into his shirt and stayed there for the day. He soon discovered that it ate everything he put in front of it, and was obsessively clean. They bonded within a couple of days and "we had a great relationship," he said.

Conducting a small survey, Michael went up to kids and asked them to name ten animals off the top of their heads. Time after time they named exotic species. Only 15% of them named native animals.

Illustrating how dangerous introduced species are to these vulnerable native animals, Michael explained that his quoll was killed after biting a cane toad, and a Squirrel Glider which he later owned was attacked by a cat.

He believes that sanctuaries can only do so much. In Eastern Australia quolls are now only found in Tasmania, and he is certain that if they were to be kept as pets, they could be saved from further extinction. For example, in the USA Sugar-gliders are kept as common pocket pets. "There are probably more sugar-gliders kept as pets in the US as there are in the whole of Australia," he said.

Above all, the launch highlighted the importance of books like Chris Cheng's *Locally Wild* in encouraging children to responsibly own native pets. With children's help, Australian native animals may just be saved from a grim future.

This book is available from Pet Industry News at a retail price of \$26.95 or contact Pluto Press in Melbourne for wholesale purchases.

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