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## Australia Expands Wildlife Sanctuaries to Aid Bettongs

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The Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) has reintroduced 147 brush-tailed bettongs (also known as woylies) into the wild at its Mount Gibson Wildlife Sanctuary, marking a pivotal moment in national conservation efforts. Over four nights in early July, the animals were moved beyond a predator-free enclosure into surrounding bushland where invasive predators once eradicated them from the Wheatbelt region.

Located about 350 kilometres northeast of Perth, Mount Gibson occupies a former sheep station covering around 130,000 hectares, acquired by AWC in 2000. Within its fenced

sanctuary—a feral-free zone—bettong numbers have increased from 162 in 2015 to roughly 1,000 individuals. The recent release is intended to encourage the species to establish in a broader landscape while learning predator awareness, even in areas with low levels of cat presence.

The reintroduced bettongs act as ecosystem engineers, improving soil and aiding native seed dispersal through their digging habits. AWC ecologists hope breeding will occur beyond the safe haven, expanding natural ecological processes. AWC wildlife ecologist Dr Bryony Palmer described the bettongs' energetic departure from release bags, noting that survival outside the fence, despite risks, is an important step for long-term species restoration.

Over the last decade, AWC has successfully returned eight threatened mammal species such as numbats, quolls, bilbies, and phascogales to areas they had previously vanished from. These reintroductions have re-established local populations across the landscape since AWC began restoration at Mount Gibson.

AWC now operates across 6.8 million hectares through ownership or direct management, and partners on an additional 6.1 million hectares totaling about 1.7% of Australia's landmass. The organisation aims to expand its conservation footprint to 5% by 2035, working with pastoral landholders to integrate conservation on agricultural land.

This expansion is aligned with Australia's commitment to the global "30x30" biodiversity goal, under which it has pledged to protect 30% of its land by 2030. AWC Chief Executive Tim Allard emphasized that effective management not just protection is essential, echoing national strategy documents that highlight active conservation as key to biodiversity outcomes.

To support its goals, AWC plans to increase its annual budget from around AU\$40 million to AU\$100 million primarily through philanthropic fundraising. The recent appointment of former NSW Treasurer Matt Kean, now Chair of the Climate Change Authority, to AWC's board is expected to bolster strategic development and fundraising, though the organisation maintains a firm focus on ecological outcomes rather than political alignment.

As the newly released bettongs are monitored via radio collars and field surveys, AWC hopes their success beyond the fenced zone will illustrate the value of science-based, landscape-scale restoration efforts in protecting Australia's unique native wildlife.

