

Haven for the hairy-noses

IN these days of almost weekly appeals for one foundation or another, or one charity or another, organisers really need a good gimmick to get the thing off the ground.

The bigger the appeal, the harder the PR men have to work to capture public imagination and money.

It is interesting, then, that the appeal gimmick of the year here has been a handsome hairy-nosed wombat delighting in the improbable name of Ernest.

Ernest is one of the last survivors of a breed which is pretty improbable in itself — three feet long, weighing 70lb, far livelier than the common wombat found in south-eastern Australia, almost as cuddly as the koala, and now almost extinct.

That is what the appeal was all about. The Natural History Society of South Australia had for a long time been concerned with the way the hairy-noses had been dying out in one of their last strongholds, a bush area of Portee Station, near the River Murray town of Blanchetown.

It was an area badly affected by the drought which had turned much of the Murray Mallee into a desert of burnt crops and drifting paddocks, and which robbed the few remaining Portee wombats of food and shelter, inadequate as it was at best.

But Mr Powers, owner of Portee, was as interested in the survival of the wombats as

he was in trying to maintain his dwindling sheep flocks, and offered to the Natural History Society 3,000 acres, in which most of the wombats lived, for \$4 an acre.

Taking into account that another \$2 an acre would be needed to provide water and fencing, the society appealed for \$18,000 on the basis that for \$6 anyone could buy an acre of Portee, and help save a wombat.

THE Press and TV people took up the cause ("save our State", good sobb' popular stuff), and Ernest, six months old and a great publicity lover, ambled into the spotlight and won the hearts of animal lovers from all over Australia, as well as some in Canada and South Africa, so quickly that the money was raised in a couple of weeks and the appeal is now over-subscribed by \$3,000.

Rising to the occasion, Mr Powers, delighted by the success of the whole thing, said the society could have a further 2,000 acres at the same price, and money continued arriving from all over the place to this end.

If this extra land is taken

From our South
Australian
correspondent

over, the society hopes to provide protection for other indigenous animals in the area like the hairy-nosed (it must be the soil) bandicoot, echidnas, or native ant-eaters, kangaroos and mallee hens which are expected to return once the wattles begin to grow again on the Portee areas where sheep have grazed.

The project has had the blessing of the State Government through Mr Olsen, director of the Fisheries and Fauna Conservation Department, and Sir John Cleland, grand old man of South Australian conservation, who said, "It must be a great pleasure to all naturalists to know that a movement is afoot to buy back for the Portee wombats part of their ancestral home".

But so long has this help been coming that there are now fewer than 20 wombats left in the newly purchased piece of Portee Station.

"Back in 1963 we made an inspection and we found there were about 150 families in the area", the president of the

Natural History Society, Mr E. H. Hergstrom, said last week.

"At the moment there are probably only 15 or 16 individuals, and they're not in very good shape.

"We have been feeding them with special kangaroo pellets developed by the CSIRO, and we give them injections of vitamin preparations to keep them going, but what they really need is an area where they can live and feed and breed and just be hairy-nosed wombats again.

"THIS is why Portee will be so wonderful once we can get it operating.

"And now is a great time for this — it's not so much the appeal which will have saved the wombats but the breaking of the drought.

"Rain in the area over the past couple of weeks has brought the feed back and we think that now the Portee wombat is safe.

"If we can use the extra money for the new area offered by Mr Powers we will have a superb piece of land which will be a haven for the indigenous animals of the area".



Ernest, the hairy-nosed wombat, and friend Trudie Nicholson.

Once it is fenced, the area, which will be called the Moorunde Wild Life Reserve, will protect its wombat inhabitants from their greatest menace, now that the drought seems to have been relieved, the weekend shooter.

"I can't think why anybody

would want to shoot a wombat", says Mr Hergstrom, "but they do.

"The worst offenders seem to be Italian migrants. They call the animals 'Australian pig' and say they are delicious.

"If you ask me, some people will eat anything".