

# SMART TRAVELLER

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Built using mud brick and timber, the Great Ocean Ecolodge is off the grid, drawing energy from the sun, and harvesting water from the rain.

## Conserve Their Energy

COSY UP WITH TIGER QUOLLS AT THE GREAT OCEAN ECOLODGE IN AUSTRALIA | BY SONAL SHAH

I woke up to sunlight streaming into my room through large French windows. Within minutes, a strong wind buffeted the leaves of a gum tree outside, bringing with it clouds rolling in from the coast of Cape Otway in southern Victoria, towards the Otway mountains. Moments later, the sky was overcast, then pouring. I huddled into my blankets, feeling as snug as a possum in a hollow—appropriately the name of my room at the Great Ocean Ecolodge.

Each room is named for an animal home, and the ethos of the guest house is that it should sit as lightly on its 165-acre surroundings as any burrow or nest. In fact, for owners Lizzie Corke and Shayne Neal, the rustic lodge is secondary to the Conservation Ecology Centre they founded here in 2000, as recent graduates.

The lodge, which is solar-powered and runs on rainwater, opened in 2004 to fund the conservation centre's research, wildlife rehabilitation, and

habitat restoration programmes. However, nothing about it felt like an afterthought as I stepped into the cosy main area full of books and bird's nests. A wood-stove heated the sitting room, with a chimney that carried warmth to other parts of the house. Resisting the temptation to sit next to the fire, I followed Shayne outside instead.

The sun shone briefly over a field behind the lodge, where a mob of eastern grey kangaroos grazed, bounding silently towards the cover

of a stand of trees as we neared. At the entrance to a forested area, a koala slept, hugging a manna gum tree branch. As I followed Shayne into the forest, it began drizzling again, the rain dripping off musty brown stringy bark and messmate trees, onto the lush undergrowth. Shayne described the burn cycle of this ecosystem, and about the erstwhile Aboriginal fire regime, which created mosaics of new and old forest, attracting different species.

The species at the heart of the centre's recent conservation work is the tiger quoll, or spotted quoll. The largest marsupial predator on mainland Australia, it is a bit smaller than its island cousin, the Tasmanian devil. We circled back to an enclosure, which houses two tiger quolls, both sheltering from the rain when we arrived. Lifting up a hollow log, Shayne revealed a large brown marsupial, with its distinctive white spots.

Once thought to be locally extinct in the Otways, this top apex predator has been sighted a few times in the region over the past couple of years. Well camouflaged, solitary, and mostly nocturnal, quolls are difficult to study in the wild. Catching them requires sedation, as their jaws, second in strength only to the Tasmanian devil, could take your fingers off. Instead, the centre has trained local dogs to scent quoll scat, using them to find the animal's communal pit-stops, and

trained dog-owners to gather data related to sightings.

This also has the effect of spreading information about tiger quolls, which helps fundraising efforts. "It is human nature," Shayne said, "people need to be able to see them." At the top of the native food chain, the tiger quoll was once an important stabilising force in the local ecosystem, and could be key to understanding the population dynamics of its prey, as

well as their herbaceous food sources. "If you deal with the apex predator," Shayne said, "there are follow-on effects for other species."

Leaving the animals to sleep in peace, we turned towards the warmth of the lodge. The fire was roaring, and breakfast had been laid out, with flaky croissants, home-made cereals, and jams. If the tiger quolls feel even half as well provided for, they'll hopefully stick around a long time yet. ●



The endangered tiger quoll (top) is distinguished by his spotted tail; Little jars of homemade jams (bottom right) accompany breakfast at the Great Ocean Ecolodge; The guest house is full of illustrated nature books and curios (bottom left).

PHOTO COURTESY: MARK CHEW

PHOTO COURTESY: LUCIA GRIGGI (TIGER QUOLL), SONAL SHAH (BOOKS & JAM)