

# **Port Macquarie Koala Hospital and the University of Sydney: a model for carer-vet engagement to benefit wildlife welfare and conservation.**

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## **Introduction**

There are significant benefits to veterinarians and wildlife carers working together, both for the benefit of rescued fauna, and for furthering species conservation. The Port Macquarie Koala Hospital and the University have had a long and mutually fruitful relationship that, over some 30 or so years, has matured and evolved. Here we review the relationship, its benefits, and milestones along the way that have had most impact in developing the relationship to what it is today. By retrospectively placing our history in the context of a model for community engagement, we hope to provide a model that might help other groups to more rapidly achieve similar beneficial relationships.

## **Past and present:**

The Koala Hospital began operation in 1973 and was considered the first wildlife hospital in Australia even though little was known about the wild koala in this country. Help to build the original facilities came from community organisations such as Apex, Rotary and Lions. For a number of years the Department of Agriculture and local veterinarians endeavoured to assist with the increasing amount of koala patients suffering from disease, many of which was unknown to science and other issues that the koala faced.

Interest in the welfare of the wild koala increased, plus interest from local, national and international visitors as to the plight of the koala. The hospital was expanded in 1986 and in 2005 a much bigger facility was rebuilt. In 2018, the Koala Hospital is at the point of expanding again due to the pressure of all the work involved in trying to halt the decline of the NSW koala population.

The Koala Hospital is now not just a wildlife rehabilitation facility but is a hub for research and a tourist destination that educates over 100,000 members of the public per year, from Australia and around the world, in koala conservation issues. In addition to providing care to koalas from the region and across NSW, the hospital has a leading role in training other care groups through workshops and manuals; assisting koala management through advising and conducting projects to assist local and state government and industry in koala management planning, and building a national koala conservation community through collaboration with diverse research groups and running national conferences attracting delegates from universities, government, and the koala care sector.

## **Key stages in success**

***Outreach and consulting*** - doing for each other: the relationship started with a shared interest in koala welfare and conservation, and Prof Paul Canfield doing koala post mortems in the founder's (Jean Starr's) garage. Sustained activity and continuity was key - through a stream of PhD students collecting samples for their PhDs, there was a continuity of investment on both sides, there was time for mutual understanding and respect to develop, opening the way to ongoing PhD involvement and a two-way flow of expertise by way of: advice and support in clinical protocol development; "eyes and ears" carer perspectives to inform research; and necropsies to give feedback to clinical decisions.

***Involvement and collaboration*** - planning together: a move from providing services and expertise towards training and building capacity of each group. An extended period of on-site research provided the opportunity for hospital staff and veterinary research staff to better understand each other's perspectives, concerns and areas of expertise. Hospital staff were trained in necropsy and clinical assessment; veterinary researchers were trained in husbandry and rehabilitation and local conservation issues. Joint input to planning of research and protocols led to more applicable and feasible research that considered needs and concerns of both groups.

***Shared leadership*** (KPS and KHH) - leading together: the relationship has grown to one of mutual support towards common goals. Both groups have complementary programs in education and support of koala veterinarians and carers; and fostering cooperation across researchers, veterinarians and carers and local and state government. The relationship marries the need for an evidence base for clinical and management decisions with in-depth observations, intuition and understanding of issues for koalas in care or in the wild.

*Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium. Principles of community engagement. Rockville, MD: US Gov. Printing Office. 2011 Nov 15.*

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