

CONSERVATION AND PROTECTION OF KOALA HABITAT

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ABSTRACT: Continuous Improvement – how is this possible in today’s ever growing world? Maybe we have to continuously get better at what we do to just keep up? My presentation will hopefully outline how we (IKPS) made a difference and how it’s possible for us all to contribute to the conservation of wildlife in our backyard. Conservation and protection of koala habitat means a future for all wildlife.

INTRODUCTION: The Ipswich Koala Protection Society Inc. (IKPS) was formed in October 1994 by a handful of concerned residents and was originally known as the Woogaroo Koala Protection Society because of the area of concern. It was called a koala group basically to trade on the popularity of the koala, using it to create an ‘umbrella’ affect, whereby saving koala habitat also saves the habitat of a very large number of other wildlife species. Little did we know that the need would outgrow this area and in May 2000 the name changed to Ipswich Koala Protection Society. Still the need grows – what started as a fairly small group of local residents with the aim to protect native wildlife in their local backyard has grown and evolved into a 300 strong membership with approximately 50 registered wildlife carers, several specialising in koala rehabilitation and hand raising orphans. IKPS now has two dedicated wildlife ambulances averaging roughly 20,000 kilometres a year on koala rescues alone, rescuing in excess of 180 sick, injured and orphaned koalas, as well as countless numbers of other wildlife. We are not confined to the boundaries of Ipswich, sometimes travelling hundreds of kilometres per rescue. Last year we travelled 700 kilometres round trip for one koala we named Myrtle and then another 700 kilometres to release her after successful treatment for severe conjunctivitis. There are no plans for another name change although it has been suggested that we become South East Queensland Koala Protection Society.

Several years ago we established a base at Mt. Forbes, a rural suburb just outside of the Ipswich CBD, and not long after developed a Rescue & Rehabilitation Clinic on the property. We are fortunate to have a specialised wildlife veterinarian as a member on call for us 24/7. The property is registered Land for Wildlife with the local council and also listed with the Wildlife Land Trust (International Humane Society). We have planted over 300 koala food trees on the property which is snuggled in amongst essential koala habitat that is home to a healthy population of koalas and many other native animals and contains a large stand of *Melaleuca irbyana* which is listed as “critically endangered” and protected under Federal, State and Local Government legislation.

Although our aims and objectives have not changed over the years, our role has grown to include media releases, writing submissions and working closely with Local, State and Federal Government bodies and their representatives. We have participated in documentaries for ‘Animal Planet’, Japanese and French film crews and been recognised in a moving portrait which was released at the opening of the new National Portrait Gallery in Canberra and featured in the ABC’s “Unsung Heroes” documentary. We have come to realise that it is not enough to rescue and rehabilitate sick, injured and orphaned koalas for release to the wild. If they have nothing to go back to our efforts are pointless. With education and by creating public awareness to the plight of koalas and how critical it is that we conserve their habitat, not just in South East Queensland but nationally, we may just make a difference – this is our first step towards “continuous improvement”.

KOALA STATISTICS: 1750 – before Europeans settled Australia some ten million koalas thrived along the east coast of Australia. Nearly two thirds of forest/koala habitat has now

been removed by human activity for whatever reason. The impact of clearing in South East Queensland alone has had a devastating impact on the decline in koala populations. The greatest loss is in what is known as “the Koala Coast”. The Koala Coast is located 20klm south east of Brisbane and covers an area of 375klm and encompasses portions of 3 local Government authorities. It is regarded nationally as one of the most significant populations because of its size and genetic diversity. In a 2008 study of the Koala Coast, the estimated population was 2279 koalas (DERM 2009). Based on estimates for 2005-2006 this represents a decline of 51% (EPA 2007) in less than 3 years and a 64% decline in 10 years since the original 1996-1999 estimate of 6246 koalas (Dique et al 2004). As with all population surveys the methodology used in these studies involves a margin of error (+ or – 500 koalas). However the long term downward trend since the original survey is statistically significant showing a 68% decline between the 1996-1999 survey and the latest 2010 survey (DERM 2012).

In March 2004 the koala was listed as a Species “vulnerable to extinction” in the SEQ bioregion under the Queensland Nature Conservation Act 1992, so why are numbers still spiralling downward and out of control?

Habitat clearing – when “people” realise that this alone is the cause of more than 80% of mortality in koalas we might be able to ensure that our children, grandchildren and future generations will still be able to see koalas in the wild.

LISTING: In April this year after numerous delays and much debate, koalas were “listed” as vulnerable in Queensland, New South Wales, and the Australian Capital Territory by the Australian Government. This listing means the Australian government could impose conditions on future plans which would interfere and impact on koalas and their habit e.g. mining, housing development, and industrial development. Will this listing make a difference or is it already too late? If the listing comes with exemptions it is a pointless exercise. If koala habit is not afforded the same, if not more protection than koalas, numbers will continue to decline at the same rate or faster than in the past. The battle for the protection and conservation of koala habit will continue to be an ongoing challenge. Over the last 18 years that IKPS have been rescuing koalas we have found that the numbers have remained the same, but the areas where koalas used to be prevalent now appear to be locally and functionally extinct. There have been many changes to planning policies and concerns about koala numbers, but we have yet to see any decline in the number of koalas coming into care. On average IKPS picks up approximately 180 koalas each year and since 1997 when we started hand raising koala joeys, have successfully raised and released to the wild 152 orphans. This figure does not include the ones we couldn't save. We have records for almost 3000 koala rescues and sightings. Of course we also rescue and rehabilitate all wildlife and I have lost count of the number of birds, possums, gliders, wallabies and kangaroos etc that has been rescued.

INFRASTRUCTURE/DEVELOPERS/URBANISATION: Apart from the many koalas and other wildlife we've put back, IKPS's greatest achievement to date has been influencing the realignment of the Southern Freight Rail Corridor. This is a rail line planned to carry freight from Melbourne to Brisbane. In 2008 the Queensland Government announced the preferred route alignment for this corridor which would then lock in this land to be purchased by the State Government to ensure availability if the need arose in the future for such infrastructure. Unfortunately they didn't have a clear understanding of the area, data or mapping that identified the existence of koalas and koala habitat or the knowledge that the freight line would cut a path of destruction through the middle of core koala habitat. After numerous meetings with representatives of Queensland Transport and Rail, hours of pouring over mapping and statistics of koala rescues, releases and sightings (and a few tears) they (representatives of the State Government) went back to the drawing board and remapped the area using data provided by IKPS and the former Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM) koala data base. Our mapping and data is professional,

accurate and of the highest standard, but we were not sure that we could possibly win especially as one of our State politicians pointed out that we were neither “environmental scientists or ecologists”. Imagine our surprise when on 26th November 2009 the then Minister for Transport announced in a media release that “**they (the Government) had listened to community feedback and because of the existence of koala habitat and on the advice of DERM about the significance of this koala habitat, approximately 12 kilometres of the alignment was relocated to avoid intersecting an area identified as high value koala habitat**”.

Our greatest challenge is still ahead – this same significant koala habitat now mapped and recognised by the State Government is under threat of being decimated for industry and mining. 18 years of mapping, data collection and statistics show that the koalas in this and surrounding areas to be possibly the largest, healthy population in South East Queensland, with a higher density than the koala coast. A large number of these koalas live to a ripe old age free from disease. Human intervention and habitat loss is the number one factor impacting on the survival of koalas. South East Queensland’s human population is growing at an alarming rate and with urban sprawl comes loss of habitat, more cars, dogs, swimming pools, inappropriate and inadequate fencing – a lethal obstacle course for koalas.

SUMMARY: it is critical that records are kept and the importance of being able to support our arguments with accurate data and mapping has proven that we can make a difference – even without a degree or scientific background. IKPS were given the tag “koala experts” by State Government. We do not consider we are experts – just dedicated, educated, informed and passionate about what we do. Experience is sometimes the best teacher – we now have “koalafications”. My message to you is to never give up or think that you can’t make a difference. We certainly didn’t think we could but anything is possible if you stay focused, committed and start by taking small steps. Thinking it’s all too hard and the problem is too big stops many of us from taking any steps, but we can make a difference if we all work together towards continuous improvement for the conservation and protection of our unique country. And not just for a future for koalas, but for our own lifestyles and those of future generations. Without it, koalas will very possibly become extinct in our children’s lifetime.

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QPWS (Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service)
EHP Environment and Heritage Protection
IKPS Ipswich Koala Protection Society Inc.
RIC NATTRASS (Founder & Patron)

RUTH LEWIS: I have been a wildlife carer for approximately 23 years and started caring for flying foxes and then got "suckered" into kangaroos, wallabies and just about every other type of wildlife that needed a mum. I first became involved with koalas and IKPS 17 years ago. I became a volunteer at the Moggill Koala Hospital, which also became like a second home, and from there things snowballed. I am currently President of IKPS and as you will see from the attachment we have achieved quite a lot over the years. We managed to instigate and influence the realignment of a State proposed freight line which would impact on a very large koala population in Ipswich. Over the years we have kept accurate records, statistics and mapped every koala rescue in and around the Ipswich area. We travel approximately 20,000klms a year just on koala rescues.