

Conserving a regional koala population - Friends of the Koala's journey of holistic engagement

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ABSTRACT: North-eastern New South Wales is renowned for its rich biodiversity which includes the iconic koala. The region is also under intense pressure to accommodate and service a growing human population and a diverse range of viable agricultural enterprises.

Friends of the Koala has been working to conserve the Northern Rivers' koala populations for 20 years. Its activities are associated with habitat restoration, animal health and welfare, research into healthy and diseased koala populations, education and advocacy.

This paper examines the group's capacity for partnerships and innovation which has ensured its survival and is enabling it to deal with the challenges of declining habitat and increasing numbers of diseased and injured animals. Some of the issues which face an entirely voluntary group, as well as its ambitions, are outlined. Ethical and businesslike internal processes, as well as participation in the broad conservation effort are advocated.

We will conclude with an analysis of some of the issues which face an entirely voluntary group in working for the survival of a regional koala population and put forward some possibilities for the future.


Introduction

Friends of the Koala is an independent, relatively small rehabilitation group contemplating its future. We have 270 members, about 90 of whom are active, and we are all volunteers. As our name suggests, we focus on one species, the koala. Apart from rescue and rehabilitation, our core business encompasses habitat, advocacy and scientific involvement. We have operated a Koala Care Centre and Plant Nursery for over a decade.

This paper presents an overview of koalas on the Northern Rivers, and the development of Friends of the Koala, including the impact of operating a central care facility. Some of the improvements in the group's performance over recent years are outlined. A strategic direction for extending its engagement in conserving the Region's koalas is considered.

Northern Rivers Region

Friends of the Koala operates across an area of approximately 10,300 square kilometres which extends from the Queensland border south towards Iluka. It extends west from the coastline into the Great Divide, over six local government areas. The Region is the most biologically diverse in New South Wales and the third most diverse in Australia. The human population of 228,000 is increasing. Government is planning accommodating and servicing over 60,000 extra people by 2031.



The Koala

In New South Wales the koala is listed as a *vulnerable* species under the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* (NSW). Most of the State's koalas occur in the north and most are under intense pressure.

Northern Rivers' koalas are widely distributed in scattered populations of medium to low densities. They predominantly occupy secondary or marginal habitat. A few remaining localised areas of primary habitat support high density populations. Habitat fragmentation and degradation is moderate to high. Local scale mapping is limited to a few areas.

Koalas come into care from across the Region. Understandably the numbers are higher from those districts which are more heavily populated by people. We believe that koalas on the Northern Rivers display a particularly high incidence and diversity of disease. This may be an outcome of habitat disturbance and destruction. Chlamydiosis is commonplace. We also see koala retrovirus, cryptococcosis, leukaemia, and cancers. We have even had a diabetic koala.

Friends of the Koala's Formation and Early Years

Friends of the Koala was formed as a habitat group in 1986 because of community dismay at the loss of mature koala habitat in a Lismore suburb.


During 1989 several members were encouraged to train as koala rescuers and rehabilitators. The group did well in those early years, forging alliances and attracting excellent media coverage. A steady stream of active members worked on habitat and animal welfare issues as well as rescue and rehabilitation.

National Parks and Wildlife Service, Northern Rivers offered generous support, including administrative advice, secretarial assistance, operational training, scientific and research input and meeting accommodation. The plant nursery business was established, propagating koala food trees for free distribution to landholders, and on-selling a range of native trees and shrubs. As well as promoting native flora for all wildlife, the plant nursery established an income stream. Since the early 1990s nearly 100,000 koala food trees have been supplied free of charge to Northern Rivers' landholders. Profit on the sale of native plants now covers approximately 18% of the group's operating costs.

Koala Care Centre

With the model of the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital in mind the Committee decided in 1993 to build a Koala Care Centre. The search for a suitable site, raising the funds, planning the facility and the actual construction phase took nearly three years. The Koala Care Centre and Plant Nursery opened during 1996 on the campus of Southern Cross University.

Whilst carers generally agreed that centralizing care provided advantages, when the reality was presented to them a few simply could not adjust to the evolving model. The reason most cited was inconvenience for people who lived just out of town to come in for rostered duty. The gaps became difficult to manage. Withdrawal of external support may also have been significant. Around that time National Parks was restructuring its wildlife management function. Relations with the University now that the Care Centre was operational became less prominent.



What had happened? The effort of planning, financing and constructing the Centre had taken its toll. Service levels, particularly in the areas of rescue and rehabilitation and research activity, became sluggish. Administrative practices atrophied. Individuals fell back to operating within their comfort zones. Mechanisms for information-sharing and transfer slid into personality-based transactions. Despite immense pride in the facility and the group's high public profile, active membership stagnated. A change in management practices was required.

Organizational Re-building

These days management knowledge and experience are more broadly available. The past five years has seen its steady application across Friends of the Koala's administrative, training and service standards. The process is ongoing and entails the dedicated commitment of many individuals. We started with formalizing meeting procedure and out of session communication and then looked at the group's structure. We defined and documented positions, delegated authority, supervisory and reporting accountability. Hardly rocket science, but it required will and resources to work through each operational aspect.

Recruitment was a priority. Whilst some active members have stuck with the group, the overwhelming majority have been recruited during the past five years. We aspire to best practice in managing our volunteers - having invested in recruitment and training, we certainly want to keep them.


Inclusiveness, change management and continuous improvement are concepts which have become ingrained in the way Friends of the Koala does things. Documented policies and practices are in place. We work on a triennial plan. This has encouraged us to diversify our funding sources to include federal and state government grant programs, philanthropic organizations' grant programs and regional sponsorships. Promoting our profile across the Northern Rivers is ongoing.

The purpose of re-building any not-for-profit organization is to improve service delivery. Friends of the Koala had not kept up with some of the advances that had been achieved in the treatment and care of koalas. Home and centralized care also needed re-thinking.

Care Practices and the Australian Wildlife Hospital

Focussing on raising care and rescue standards has entailed internal and external input. A new generation of members was out and about, visiting facilities specializing in koala care, attending conferences and inviting others to share their knowledge with us. The course of change we embarked on involved intense periods of consideration and gradual implementation of new regimes which have improved our practices.

The real breakthrough came with the opening of the Australian Wildlife Hospital at Beerwah in Queensland in March 2004. The Hospital's mission extends assessment and treatment of koalas even into Northern New South Wales. Generosity of mission is only part of the invaluable service that the Hospital has provided. Perhaps more important has been the generosity in knowledge sharing, encouragement and otherwise supporting our learning.



Whilst our local vets provide wonderful service, it is enough to say that treating koalas is not their core business. One of the many positive aspects of our relationship with the Australian Wildlife Hospital is that it is not just Friends of the Koala members who are gaining knowledge and confidence. Our vets are also learning. They are now dealing with more knowledgeable rehabbers and they receive feedback from referral cases which is increasing their assessment skills. Nor is their growing interest in koalas financially penalizing their practices beyond the time they so generously give. The Hospital bears the costs of diagnosing and treating the animals admitted.

Ramsay, a two year old male dog attack victim, brought in to care in late March 2005 was a landmark case. On the Hospital's advice our local veterinarian put him on intravenous fluids, which we now use regularly with koalas which tolerate them well. Antibiotics and pain relief were started and a drain was put in the puncture wounds in Ramsay's hind leg.

Being a trauma case requiring close observation Ramsay was placed in home care where he was eating well and displaying reasonably normal behaviour. His carer worried that he was not responding to the antibiotics as fast as he should. The local vet could offer no further advice so Ramsay was referred to the Hospital. Feedback was that he had a hernia, a result of the dog attack. There was blood in his lungs and trachea and his PVC was so low he was almost in need of a transfusion. After an operation and several days on intravenous fluids he was returned to us for the last stages of his rehabilitation. Ramsay's improvement was rapid and he was released three weeks later.

Wow! We were so excited to get a dog attack victim back into good health for release and so quickly. We immediately took on board the importance of thorough assessment under anaesthetic for every koala and referral to a specialist facility where appropriate.


Changes in Local Care and Assessment Practices

All koalas taken into Friends of the Koala's care are now assessed under anaesthetic, either by a local vet or at the Australian Wildlife Hospital if the condition requires specialized assessment or treatments.

Assessment by a local vet may include:

- ultrasound
- bloods tests (which a local pathology service provides free of charge)
- x-rays on request
- swabs for chlamydia (we use the Clearview test)
- checking teeth for age
- checking the mouth for ulcers and any other problems
- providing pain relief when indicated
- placing on intravenous fluids koalas showing signs of shock or dehydration.

Deciding where to place the koala is made by the Care Co-ordinator after initial assessment. Koalas requiring 24 hour observation and care, i.e. orphans and koalas on drips go into home care. More routine cases, usually those with conjunctivitis or cystitis as a result of chlamydia infection are cared for in the Care Centre.



Critical cases are immediately transported to the Hospital. Many Northern Rivers koalas have benefited from the ever increasing refinements of treatments and surgical innovation taking place there. Our efforts have the added value of contributing to research, some referrals being part of the investigation program into koala retrovirus (in partnership with the University of Queensland) and chlamydiosis (in partnership with Queensland University of Technology and the University of Sydney). We are pleased that the University of Sydney's Koala Infectious Disease Research Group (KIDRG) is becoming increasingly interested in the Region's koalas.


The depth of diagnostics that the Australian Wildlife Hospital can undertake and the specialist knowledge of its vet team has accelerated knowledge and learning within Friends of the Koala. Many of our rehabbers have regular opportunity to observe and discuss diagnoses, prognoses, treatments, and so on during visits - their participation is encouraged. Rescue and rehabilitation practices are constantly evolving in line with the Hospital's recommendations. Rehabbers are more confident in what they are doing; best of all, confident when a koala is really ready for release.

Individual success stories like Ramsay's are now numerous. Collectively they demonstrate that we are achieving better outcomes. Preferably, every koala brought in to care undergoes a full veterinary assessment prior to release. Being completely confident about its health status, we know that we are giving that animal the best possible second chance for survival.

Where to from here?

Early last year we took time out to do some strategic planning. It was only a day but it is taking us a long way. A dozen or so members turned up, new as well as old, and a good cross section of hands-on carers, habitat, and advocacy members.


A few of the recurring themes from the day were:

- the increasing number of animals coming into care
 - managing and training higher numbers of volunteers
 - diversifying funding sources
 - optimizing the Care Centre's education and financial potential
 - more readily accessible specialist veterinary services
 - upgrading the Care Centre to hospital status
 - upgrading the Plant Nursery to small business status
 - paid staff
 - dealing with the ever-increasing planning and land-use issues across the Region
 - changing community attitudes.
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We have made a great start on the action plan we drew up from the day The Care Centre's indoor rooms were refurbished late in 2006. Together with the outdoor runs, the Care Centre can now comfortably accommodate approximately 15 koalas at any one time. We have restructured arrangement of the Care Centre Roster (including leaf collection) to share the increasing operational load. Supervisors' meetings have been introduced to ensure consistent and timely information flow

We have been successful with a number of grant applications (one a brand new replacement van for the collection of leaf). Several new corporate sponsors have come on board. We have volunteers in place to receive visitors to the Care Centre six days a week and a policy to ensure this does not encroach on koala welfare. We have developed in conjunction with the NSW Department of Education and Training, the *Northern Rivers Koala Friendly Schools Project*. We have extended our relations with environmental groups so that we are better informed of local issues involving koalas and their habitat for our advocacy work. We have also renewed our determination to emphasise in our on-going promotion the economic potential of koalas and the Care Centre in the Region.

The *biggies* – upgrading the Care Centre and Plant Nursery, accessible wildlife veterinary service and paid staff are taking longer than some would like. The issues to be dealt with include land tenure, (whilst we own the improvements, we do not own the existing site); financing and managing the construction of completely or partly new facilities; attracting an appropriately qualified and experienced wildlife vet and support staff; securing an income stream to maintain salaried staff; ensuring that income generation does not compromise the welfare of koalas in care; and finally, managing the group and on-going service delivery while the transition to what would be, in effect, a business enterprise, is taking place.



Conclusion


Friends of the Koala's twenty year journey has not been without hiccup and it is far from finished. The group's confidence in pursuing change and its resilience in riding out the sometimes unforeseen consequences of those changes have strengthened its effectiveness.

Every wildlife rehabilitation group, large or small should be working towards introducing mainstream management principles in to the way they do things. It is no longer sufficient for volunteers to be well-intentioned, we must also be accountable. Our organizations need to be ethical and businesslike in their processes.

Friends of the Koala's focus on planning and land-use issues and our habitat repair work have ensured that we work closely with local government, Greening Australia and the Landcare movement, regional environmental groups, and a wide variety of public and private sector agencies. In our view this breadth of operation is essential for wildlife rehabilitation groups to play a meaningful role in wildlife management.

The timely relationship with the Australian Wildlife Hospital has been vital to Friends of the Koala's capacity to deal with the increased number of animals coming in to care. We all need to be outward-looking, scanning our operational environment for advancements in knowledge and practices. Experienced wildlife veterinarians are valuable resources, as can be professional ecologists, scientists, and academics. Becoming involved in scientific research and studies adds value to our work and to the lives of the individual animals with which we work.

We trust that Friends of the Koala's experiences will stimulate and perhaps assist other groups which may be contemplating change in their own organization. Rehabilitation of individual animals for release back in to the wild is one aspect of the conserving effort. Unless we have a reasonable understanding of the health status of our wildlife populations and the habitat to accommodate them, the value of animal rehabilitation in species' survival is limited.



Conserving a regional koala population, Lorraine Vass and Barbara Dobner



BIOGRAPHY:

Lorraine Vass is President of Friends of the Koala, Inc. She came to wildlife rehabilitation post retirement, joining the group during 2000. Starting as a volunteer at the Koala Care Centre, she then assisted her husband in rescue and home-care.

Realizing that her managerial skills and exposure to political processes would be of far more value to the group's work than her dubious aptitude for hands-on rehabilitation, Lorraine nominated as President in 2002. She is also the foundation Secretary of the NSW Wildlife Council, Inc.

Barbara Dobner is Friends of the Koala's Care Co-ordinator. She has line responsibility for all koalas brought into care under the group's licence. A hands-on wildlife rehabilitator for around 13 years, Barb has belonged to groups in South East Queensland and New South Wales. She has worked with a wide variety of species and has held numerous committee positions.

There being no wombats on the Northern Rivers, Barb figured koalas were there next best thing. She joined Friends of the Koala in 2002. Barb's strengths are her inability to so no, her broad experience and extensive rehab networks, her capacity to ask if unsure and an educational focus derived from her paid job of primary school teacher.

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