

THE PUSH TO SAVE SYDNEY'S Koala Habitat

On the outskirts of Australia's largest city live some of the healthiest koalas in the country. But many environment groups and locals fear for their future

BY *Diane Godley*

Tracey is driving around the local bushland areas of Campbelltown on Sydney's urban fringe searching for and collecting gum leaves. She does this every second day when she has a koala in residence. Today, she is foraging for not just any old koala-edible eucalyptus leaves, she is looking for brand new regrowth leaf tips because her furry visitor, Modi, is feeding for two. Inside Modi's pouch is a joey.



**Koala young
stay with their
mothers until
they are about
one year old**

Modi, who is sitting on a branch of a makeshift tree in Tracey's purpose-built koala aviary, came to be here after wandering into a suburban backyard occupied by two dogs. "The owner locked the dogs in the house and I was called," says Tracey, who does not wish her surname to be used. Fortunately, the dog owner reacted before too much harm came to the koala. "We believe Modi knocked her head when she was being chased by the dogs, because she was throwing her head backwards, which is a sign of concussion."

The WIRES (Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service) volunteer took her new charge to the University of Sydney's veterinarian teaching hospital to have her checked over and, to find out her identity, as she was tagged - meaning she had been rescued once before.

"This is in fact the second time Modi has been in my care," says Tracey. "Last October she was found in a suburban cul-de-sac, just one street away from a shopping mall. All the people living in the street kept a close eye on her until she could be captured, which took about a week.

"When I took her to the vet hospital, we discovered she had a joey the size of a jellybean in her pouch - so we

knew she'd just given birth. Females like to get well away from the males when they are giving birth so they're not harassed."

A destructive disease

After the vet found her to be healthy and chlamydia-free, Modi was released back into bushland near where she was found.

The Campbelltown colony is unique as it is the only disease-free koala population in the Sydney Basin. In some parts of Australia, up to 90 per cent of koala populations are believed to be infected with chlamydia - a sexually transmitted disease that can lead to blindness, severe bladder infections, infertility and death.

It is estimated that of the 1000 koalas treated each year in wildlife hospitals in New South Wales and Queensland, nearly half have late-stage chlamydia - which is not only untreatable, it means

the koalas can't be released back into the wild.

So how has the Campbelltown colony of koalas avoided the disease? "I think it's pure luck," says retired biologist and marsupial genetics professor, Robert Close. And if anyone would know, it is the professor, who ran a research programme of this population of koalas between 1989

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JOEYS NURTURED IN POUCHES

Like all marsupials, baby koalas are called joeys. The tiny animals are the size of a jellybean (2cm) when they are born, and don't have hair or ears, nor can they see. Immediately after birth, the joey crawls into its mother's pouch where it stays for around six months, until it has grown fur and ears, can see and waddle on its own.

and 2016 and found that the colony was not only chlamydia-free, it was expanding.

"It takes time to build up a colony, especially when starting with low numbers, such as the Campbelltown colony," says Professor Close. In fact, this population of koalas was only discovered in the early 1980s because there were so few of them.

"Some colonies have females producing three offspring in their lifetime. Our girls live up to 17 years and produce 15 offspring. That's when you start getting the compound interest factor."

Dire findings

Koalas are listed as a threatened species, which makes this expanding

colony of disease-free koalas very special indeed.

According to a United Nations-backed review published this year, nature is declining globally at a rate unprecedented in human history. One million species of plants and animals are under threat of extinction, and it warns this will have grave impacts on people around the world.

"The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever," says Sir Robert Watson, chair of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. "We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide."



Rescued koala Modi with her newly emerged joey

The report blames human expansion and exploitation of habitat for the dire findings. However, it also says that it's not too late to make a difference – as long as we start now, and at every level, from local to global. “Through ‘transformative change’, nature can still be conserved, restored and used sustainably,” says Sir Robert.

It's this kind of transformative change which is inducing George Brticevic, a passionate koala advocate and Mayor of Campbelltown, to take action.

Habitat loss

Mayor Brticevic encourages residents living near the colony to plant koala-friendly trees in their backyards to extend the natural habitat. And for the past three years, he has been holding tree planting days. This year, more than 3000 trees, shrubs and grasses beneficial to koalas were planted on a public reserve in a northern suburb of Campbelltown.

“The existing vegetation corridor in Campbelltown is not wide enough for the colony of 300-plus koalas [Professor Close puts the number closer to 1000], and as a result, they are making their way into residential areas where they risk being hit by cars or attacked by dogs,” says Mayor Brticevic.

“The presence of koalas in significant numbers in our area is a great privilege for anyone living here, but equally a big responsibility to ensure the long-term sustainability of the colony.”

But it's the long-term sustainability of the colony that has local environmentalists concerned.

The koalas migrate between two rivers to the south of Campbelltown. To get to the Nepean River, they leave the bushland around the Georges River, navigate a busy road, then cross a narrow wildlife corridor at Mount

Gilead, which is surrounded on both sides by cleared land.

What has community groups up in arms is the 2017 rezoning of the property at Mount Gilead for urban use. This has enabled a massive development proposal that, if approved, could see up to 1700 houses built in the wildlife corridor. Last year, a community group attempted but failed to overturn the rezoning of the Mount Gilead property in the Land and Environment Court. Today, the fight is to try and halt the new development. However, with high rates of population growth in Sydney, the housing estate looks inevitable.

"Any development in this area is going to have an adverse effect on wildlife," says Professor Close. "Of course, I'd prefer it not to go ahead, but it if can't be stopped, then we need to make it more amenable to koalas.

"My suggestion is to have small eucalypt species, about three to four metres, planted in the [housing

estate's] backyards. That would allow koalas to move freely from garden to garden.

"Dogs are another issue," he says. "Koalas need access to dog-free places, but if you could control the dog size in the development, allowing only small dogs, that would help the koalas a great deal."

And then there is the threat from cars. Along with the new development will come the widening of a major road, which will also increase the speed of traffic.

"If we could control speed and dogs

and increase plantings, it would help the koalas. And anything that's done for the koalas will aid other lesser known animals in the area that are just as vulnerable, such as platypus, gliders, antechinus, wallaroos and swamp wallabies."

Meanwhile, Modi, who is asleep on a branch in her koala aviary with her joey, Julie, is oblivious to the battle to save her habitat. **R**

**CONTROLLING
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WOULD HELP**

A Side Note

Did you know that *enneacontakaienneagon* is actually a word in the English language? And the meaning of the word is just as bizarre as the word itself: it's a shape with 99 sides.

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