

Jim Kinkead

President, Tregeagle Landcare group, Northern Rivers of NSW

BL What is your role in saving the koala?

JK My role is volunteering with Landcare groups and networks in promoting koala habitat protection and restoration, collecting data, and participating in starting koala projects.

[In addition to Landcare] this includes working with Friends of the Koala, which are a local volunteer organisation that look after sick koalas, promote good vegetation for koalas, and also working with local schools in establishing junior Landcare groups where kids can establish little nurseries, grow koala trees, plant them out and even sell them to people that want to plant them on their property. So, it's my role in Landcare.

Landcare is a community organisation that involves local volunteers that want to repair the natural environment. Usually they consist of people from within the community, farmers, conservationists and scientists, who could work together to improve both farms and natural ecosystems.

BL So it's knitting together people in the community who are really interested in making sure koalas are still here for the future.

JK Yes, and the message goes from the kids and their parents get involved in the junior Landcare groups at school as well, which is great, and they do more than just koala stuff. They have tree plantings on the school grounds, they run their little gardens where they provide food for their canteens, or they just grow food to sell or to give away, that type of thing.

BL Is there a typical project, or a typical day, that you'd like to describe or tell me about, maybe a tree planting day or maybe a moment that you find is representative of what you do?

JK There's lots of different things we do, but probably one in this context would be, we established the junior Landcare group at a local school, we had the Friends of the Koala come along, we had the Tregeagle Landcare group, and from that we applied for a small grant that allowed us to build a little nursery and the idea was to get some seeds for the kids to grow. They were koala food trees, put them in the nursery, grow them to a certain stage that they were ready to go out to be planted in the environment. That was such a great, successful project, and the kids got really enthusiastic about it, and probably every couple of weeks there would be some planting, or something happening around that. They know the system of watering, the requirement to water every day and all that sort of stuff. So it was a great learning curve for them.

And then they also got invited along to project launch days where we had specialised speakers that talked about koalas, the importance of them, the land care environment. We had specialist people there running little education programmes for the kids on the day to get them to learn about koalas, their scats, how to identify them and all that type of thing.

BL Do you have older kids mentoring younger kids?

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- JK I don't think so, in that formal sense. But I think it's like anything, the younger ones are learning from the older ones, and I know that the younger kids get really enthusiastic, and as the older kids get to Year 6 they start to think that they're a bit above that and they want to go to the next level so to speak. I think there's natural mentoring, but we don't specifically, in the groups they establish they make sure they have a mix of all class ranges.
- BL I'm only asking because the students who are listening to this are going to come up with their own project and some of them might decide that this is Junior Landcare and perhaps a mentorship might be something they want to do.
- JK Yes, and you can establish a junior Landcare group at your school. We help you do that. It's not that Landcare runs it, we help you establish it, and it can be in whatever format that you want that just promotes land care and the environment depending on what your school's needs are.
- BL What do you think attracts people to koalas?
- JK They're fluffy and they're cute.
- BL Very true. What do you think people get right about koalas?
- JK I think koalas are a national icon. They appear on the television quite regularly, and kids see them, and they are, they're a beautiful little animal, and I suppose what they get right about it is the beauty, and they're cute and they're cuddly bears, I think that's what they get right about them. I'm no expert, that's my generalisation of what I see.
- BL What do you most people get wrong, in your opinion, about koalas?
- JK There's lots of experts, and everybody seems to form an opinion, but I think a lot of people don't realise that koalas, like any animal, have likes and dislikes. It's not like you can just grab a koala and shove it in a eucalyptus tree and it's going to live there and like it. They do have likes and dislikes for the same type of gum tree, so that's a really interesting concept that I found, which makes the relocation and the care of koalas really challenging in some respects. But I think that koalas do have the ability to change their likes and dislikes. Well, they have to, [in order] to survive.
- BL Not every tree is a perfect tree for a koala, but, also, a koala might change their mind about the food they want, presumably depending on the climate and the time of year and other things, such as drought.
- JK Yes, other environmental factors, and they also have rest trees which aren't gum trees. They'll sit in a Macadamia Tree, a Camphor Laurel Tree, just like you and I ... nice place to...
- BL I sit in Macadamia Trees all the time.
- JK We don't sit at the kitchen table all the time! <laughs>
- BL Tell me a little bit why you care about koalas.
- JK Koalas are an easy entry point into caring for the environment. I got initially involved in caring for koalas because I had a property that had prime koala habitat, and I had koalas on it, and I used to walk outside and see koalas, and it evolved from that basically.

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- JK You don't get that opportunity very often, so I was very lucky.
- BL Then what happened? How did your involvement grow?
- JK My involvement grew about learning about how to manage and look after koala habitat ... making sure there was access to trees, and there were trees for koalas to get in, which meant weed management, which meant getting funding through grants and working in partnership with other environmental agencies, like local government, the National Parks and Wildlife, the Office of Environment and Heritage, government agencies, to improve the habitat. And then talk to your neighbours about the similar thing and making corridors so koalas can travel. That was probably what got me interested and kept me interested.
- BL You mentioned weed management. What's so wrong about weeds? Why do they cause a problem?
- JK Weeds cause a problem because, probably two major ones, they suppress the natural regeneration of trees and native species, of which koala food trees are part of. They also grow around, for example lantana is an ideal example, they grow around trees and the koalas can't get to the tree to get up the tree. They prevent the access to the tree.
- So managing that, to make sure koalas, because koalas will take the easiest access they can get. In a perfect world they just jump through the treetops, but they've got to get down the tree and they've got to travel to the next and making their access easy by removing weeds that prevent them is one of doing it, through weed management.
- BL If you could make one change, or do one thing, big or small, to help save koalas, what would that thing be?
- JK I've probably got two. One in the sense of what you're doing, I think, is absolutely fantastic, in talking to children in the classroom about koalas, the environment in general, and educating kids on how they can help that situation.
- And the other is to have, at probably a higher level, a rewards system for people that own properties, and developers, to maintain koala habitat or establish koala habitat. A rewards system is really interesting because I work on the basis that, when it comes to the environment in current terms, people usually get a living off the land and their focus is on making dollars from what they're growing and selling. Whereas people that really just want to keep their land for biodiversity have not got an income source from that and it would be nice if there could be a policy or strategy developed by government that gives a reward to somebody that maintains their property in a particular way. Be that reward by monetary, education, it's a whole brainstorming concept that probably needs to be discussed, you know, assistance with managing their property.
- Then, with developers, I know you can have areas developed that are koala safe places that encourage koalas to come there. There's no dogs, there's no cats, they have koala corridors right through the development, and that can be, should be having the conversations about that, to show that as a positive. It may cost extra, but people will be willing to pay the extra to live in that sort of community.
- BL There's a theme beginning to emerge, and maybe some of the older students would like to investigate sustainable development living, real propositions for a sustainable development, and even getting towards changing the way the economy works from a resource equals profit, basis of supply and demand, to resource needs to be conserved as well as lived within on agreed terms.



- JK I think it would be a great question to ask the kids, or a project, to say what sort of rewards do you think people should get for having koala trees on their property or doing something like that. To see what comes out of them because they don't have any pre-conceived stuff.
- BL Is there one thing you would like to say to encourage kids to about what they can do to help save the koala?
- JK I think understanding the koala is probably the first thing they need to do. To have a list of what they think a koala is and how it impacts on the environment, and then have a list to say these are what the scientists think the benefits of having koalas. I think doing that comparison for them would be a really positive step in expanding their knowledge.
- BL Do kids have a role in conserving our environment?
- JK They do. They're critical because they know that a lot of us adults don't get it right. They have a big role because they are the future.