

Mark Wilson

Trees Officer, Friends of the Koala

MW My name is Mark Wilson and I work as a volunteer in an organisation in northern New South Wales, called Friends of the Koala.

We run the Koala Care Centre, which is a rescue rehabilitation centre for koalas, but we also run a plant nursery, which is a vital part of koala conservation, is providing habitat for koalas.

My role – I've got the grand title of Trees Officer – [is] where I basically run the plant nursery and organise tree plantings and then liaise with landholders in terms of what trees are suitable for particular properties, how they might go about doing a plantation, or establishing koala habitat.

BL So, how many tree planting days, or tree planting events, do you organise in a year, do you reckon?

MW Because we work with other groups as well, Landcare groups, and other koala conservation groups on the north coast, so probably, for example, this week, there's actually two tree plantings. And in the season, which is usually from Spring right through to Autumn, there's probably one every fortnight. So, yeah we're keeping pretty busy and getting lots of trees in the ground.

BL Do you know how many trees you plant in a year?

MW It will be close to 50,000, probably, in a year. Sometimes it might be a little bit more and sometimes a little bit less.

This year we had a bit of drought, and then we had a bit of bushfire, and now we've got some other issues in our environment that are slowing us down. But generally we try and look at, at least, 50,000 trees in the ground in one year, and that's just ones where we organise.

We also distribute trees to landholders who are doing all of this themselves and they're probably putting in more than what we physically plant ourselves because they're much more able to get out into their properties.

BL Do you grow the trees yourselves in the nursery?

MW Yes, most of the trees are propagated in our nursery. We now actually have six nurseries.

We've grown from one to six because we've just basically run out of room to store all of our trees. Part of koala habitat regeneration, or establishment, is not only planting koala trees, but other what we call 'habitat' trees. So that's things that koalas don't physically eat, but they rest and shelter in. So in the really hot climates like we get here, we plant somewhere around twenty percent of non-koala food trees into a plantation so that in the hot weather the koalas can actually shelter and rest in those habitat trees and keep a lot cooler, and then, in the mornings and evenings, they go out into the actual koala food trees and eat.

So, yeah, it's a mixture in our nursery of what we call habitat trees and food trees.

BL What sort of species are you planting, of trees?

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- MW On the north coast here we have about ten koala food tree species. We have a list of three that we call primary koala food trees and that includes Forest Red Gum, Tallowwood and Swamp Mahogany. And then we have a range of secondary trees which include things like Flooded Gum, Sydney Blue Gum, Grey Gum, Brush Box, Blackbutt, Iron Bark etc,
- We concentrate, again, on the primary species, but, like everything, we try and get diversity into a plantation, so we always make sure we get as wide a range of those species into any planting, but some of them are quite specific to particular geographical areas, or some to particular sites.
- So, for example, the Swamp Mahogany, as the name suggests, really is suited to very wet country, so if people don't have very wet country, then we don't plant Swamp Mahogany.
- So, it's all about picking particular species to suit the particular land that we're planting on. Either it's soil types or it's, you know, sub-tropical, or is it a little bit frosty, you know, in winter, so therefore we pick different species. Yeah, we just try and work with the landholder and our knowledge of the geography and the climate in each area.
- BL So you match the trees to the specific soil, climate, micro-climate, where they're going to grow.
- MW Yep, and in some cases, to the landholder's requests – because some landholders really like particular trees. We have some that like all the ones with white trunks and others like the ones that have rough bark. It's their land, that we're planting on, so we try and accommodate not only the koala needs, but the needs and the wishes of the landholder.
- BL How difficult is it to convince somebody to plant koala food and habitat trees on their property?
- MW It's not very difficult at all. Generally speaking, the landholder contacts us, so, really, they're the ones who have made the decision to plant.
- Occasionally we do, it's almost like a letter drop, we do a lot of mapping of koala habitat areas and so we look for gaps in terms of habitat.
- The critical thing with koalas is the whole concept of wildlife corridors. So, what we're trying to do is create corridors and so we do, you know, some GIS mapping etc, Google Earth, and we look for properties that might, basically, have no trees yet they're in the middle, could be in the middle, of a corridor. So, yeah, we've done a little bit of subtle persuasion in those areas. We can basically entice them to join the programme by offering free trees.
- We work with some groups that provide community planting as well, not so much right now because of issues that are going on, but we've had a series of plantings where we're getting up to 150 people turning up for every tree planting. So, we can really offer a landholder, 'Basically, you just give us the land and we'll provide the trees, the people to plant them, we'll water them in, and their follow-up maintenance'.
- BL That's wonderful. Do people get involved in growing the trees, when they're in the nursery, and propagating trees?
- MW Yep, definitely. We run on volunteers. We have no paid staff members, so the whole nursery runs on volunteers in terms of propagation, potting up, weeding etc.
- I do work with one primary school at the moment too. They have a Junior Landcare group and we do tree propagation in a small nursery, that I got funding for and built on the school grounds, and I've done similar things, not as an ongoing thing, but just one-offs, at other schools as well in terms of just improving awareness.
- We work with Landcare groups and sometimes a Landcare group will have a working day which will actually be in the nursery, so, instead of working on someone's property they'll say 'Today



we'll go into the Friends of the Koala nursery and we'll pot up a thousand seedlings', you know, which is quite easy to do if you get five or eight people.

So, yeah, it is a real community nursery in that sense that we're producing trees for the community and we often rely on the community to help out in terms of getting our production up.

BL That makes a lot of sense. Going back to koalas, what do you think attracts people to koalas? What is it about koalas?

MW I think they're just an iconic animal in Australia. They cause no harm. They're not an animal that is going to dig holes in your farm, or climb over your fences and eat your tomatoes in your vegetable garden. They're a very, as people say, cute and cuddly animal.

They're harmless in terms of they don't cause any real damage to the environment and I think people really understand they're at risk, you know, in terms of we look at the history of koala numbers, how few there are now compared to a hundred years ago, and people realise that we've got to do something.

We don't want to lose our iconic animal so it's very easy to convince people to plant for koalas, and the benefit too of planting for koalas is that we are providing habitat that a whole range of other animals will then make use of. So even though we pick up the iconic animal as our flagship, we are promoting natural regeneration, as well as planting, as well as providing habitat for birds, possums, you name it, other arboreal animals. They're all using that same habitat that everyone thinks we've only planted it for the koalas, but in actual fact we've planted it for the environment and everything is going to use it.

BL So there's a real knock-on benefit every time you plant a bit of bush.

MW Oh, indeed. Indeed, and, I think, that's the benefit of having the koala as your flagship, that we can generate a lot of interest, because if we were trying to promote other animals, who are not quite so photogenic and whatever, then we might have a harder job. But the fact that we've got a fantastic animal as our flagship animal, we can really promote and engage a lot more of the community because of that.

Also, we engage a lot of international people. We have some tree planting projects that actually involve people from overseas. We did one, probably about three months ago, where two American ladies turned up for the weekend just to plant trees. They caught the plane, they happened to be working for the airline so I suppose that made it easier, but they actually came just for the tree planting. They had two days in Sydney and then they flew home.

So that iconic animal is reaching far and wide in terms of interest and also people do understand that they're under threat and everyone is trying to do their little bit in order to help out.

BL That's a great opportunity to ask you what do you see as the biggest threat to koalas.

MW Definitely habitat loss is our biggest threat and we see that across all of Australia. We see it particularly up here on the north coast because the north coast is a lovely place to live, everyone wants to build houses up here.

Byron Bay, for example, all of that area which used to be a strong koala area, very few koalas left there now and the ones that are there are severely in danger of all of the things that come with living with humans – cars, dogs and disease caused by stress.

So, a lot of our projects now, in that area, are designed at creating corridors to get them out of Byron Bay and into the hinterland. There's lovely forested areas on the other side of the



highway, away from the coast. Koalas won't move naturally, but if we entice them by creating corridors.

So, we're doing a lot of work with, not necessarily landholders there, but more with councils, trying to set aside easements to create these corridors because, yes, it's a real problem.

Koalas generally live on the coastal strip, and generally we humans have chosen to live on the coastal strip, and that's not gonna change. So what we have to do is to basically try and create habitat inland and link that so that koalas have a natural corridor that they can use, and that's generally the case all across Australia that koalas are in areas that are being either developed for housing, for roads.

Massive problems in Victoria with koalas now living in plantations that have been planted and are now ready to be harvested, but there's no surrounding vegetation for them to go in to, so that was a major issue where they should have planned for that and should have created corridors that would never be logged to enable koalas to move. So, yeah, habitat loss, and what comes from habitat loss, is often disease and other illnesses in koalas because they get stressed and their body basically succumbs to a lot of the diseases that they get.

BL Do you think that humans and koalas can live together in the same area and, if so, what do humans need to remember?

MW Yeah, definitely. We have a fantastic development up here, called Koala Beach, in an area near Pottsville. That's an urban development that was basically put into koala habitat on the understanding that they wanted koalas to remain.

So they designed this whole development with no dogs, lots of speed humps, proper fencing to enable koalas to move in and out of properties, retention of as many of the koala food trees as they could, small parks and reserves with koala trees, and they've been monitoring the koala population now, over the last twenty years. I'm not saying that they've had a massive increase, but pretty much the population has remained stable.

So, by using, you know, small development changes to a normal housing estate, and obviously people who buy into something like that, they want to live with koalas, you know that's the whole reason to be there and so they abided to the no dogs and things like that which is often a problem in developments. They put these conditions on, but over time they would get watered down – people would introduce a small dog and then they get a slightly bigger dog and then other people say 'Ooh, I can hear a dog, that means I can have a dog'.

I think there are good examples of where development has been done, people have built houses, but you can still live quite happily with koalas and they'll live quite happily with us if we take each other into consideration.

BL It's about considerations, and maybe about responsibility too, for your own actions and the impacts of those actions.

MW Yep, definitely. Look, even in Lismore, where we're established, we're on the university grounds, where we have our koala care centre, we have a population of about 20 koalas that live there naturally.

We've done a little bit of supplementary tree planting, but it's fantastic just to see them living amongst students and the rest of the Lismore population and we get so many visitors who come just to see koalas in an urban area and it is about making sure that we look after them in terms of the dogs and speed humps and good signage on roads.

They're an animal unlike most native animals, like wallabies and things like that, that are very scared and they don't cope well with noise and things like that.



The koalas are quite oblivious to a lot of that and they will live quite happily with us if we take them into consideration when we do developments.

BL Do you think there's more of those sorts of developments planned or is that a trend?

MW Sadly, no. I'm not sure why. We have responded to a few development applications in the past about, particularly the one about no dogs, you know, trying to promote no dogs in the development.

Real estate agents absolutely hate it because they reckon it really limits their market and their ability to sell land. I'm on the other side of the fence. I would love to live in a development that had no dogs, and not be woken up by barking dogs all the time. But we struggle to get those sorts of conditions on developments.

As I say, it's the real estate market, and often the developer as well, the landholder, who could be persuaded by that of if they say 'Well, look, we might have trouble selling your land because we put these conditions on', so, yeah, sadly we don't see a lot of that.

We would love to, but I suppose our aim now is to look at, well, if we can't have the koalas there with people, how can we create a corridor or a green space, or something nearby, and, as I've said, plant corridors leading away into quite safe forested areas.

So that sometimes is even, well sometimes it can be even a better option, because if people are not going to abide by some of the conditions, really, it's much safer and healthier for the animals to be out into a bushland area.

So we will try and work closely with neighbouring properties around developments and design corridors and links. I think a lot of developments and councils now have that as a condition as well.

If they're developing anywhere near known koala habitat then a lot of the conditions are about compensatory planting and creation of corridors to enable animals to move out into safer areas.

BL Can you tell me a little bit about how Friends of the Koala began?

MW Friends of the Koala began in the mid to late eighties. When we started, we actually didn't even care for koalas. We were a tree planting group, so we've always had habitat creation and improvement on our agenda right from the beginning, because, as I say, that's all we did.

Every weekend we would be out planting trees and it wasn't until the early nineties, when someone in National Parks actually moved up here from Port Macquarie, after having had a lot to do with the Port Macquarie hospital, they moved up here and then persuaded our group to take on caring of koalas.

So, yeah, it was interesting that we've never lost that tree planting aspect of our work because we still always realise that the key to koala survival is habitat. Yes, we can have a koala centre or koala hospital where we can fix up, you know, sick and injured koalas.

But, basically, we're putting them back into that same environment that they came from and so, therefore, it is really a stopgap measure.

The longer-term survival mechanism that we have always aimed for is more habitat, as much as we can get, across all areas including areas that don't even have koalas now. We've radio-collared koalas that have travelled ten to fifteen kilometres so we know that they will move long distances to find food. It's not ideal, but particularly young, dispersing males looking for new territory.

So, we always tell people 'Yes, you might be a fair distance from a koala colony now, but you plant the trees and the koalas will come'.

BL Tell me a little bit about that work, to rescue and care for koalas at the koala centre.

MW Yes, the koala care centre, once again, is all run by volunteers, so we have dedicated groups of people working in various aspects.

Obviously the main one is the physical care for koalas that come in, and they come in for a whole range of reasons, including dog attacks, car hits, disease, chlamydia is the major disease that koalas get in two forms – conjunctivitis or cystitis. That’s often a stress illness that they get.

So, we have two teams a day, one on the morning, one in the afternoon, that basically care for the koalas in care. I think we have nineteen in there at the moment.

We have a team of people every morning that have to go out and collect fresh food for all of those koalas so we have about seven or eight plantations now that we manage often in conjunction with local councils or organisations like Rous Water. We keep all of our plantations to four to five metres so that we can reach the leaf, so we have teams of people that manage those plantations as well.

We then have other teams of people doing rescues. We have tree climbers as well who are trained to go up and catch them. We have traps that we can set at the base of trees.

And then, obviously, we have a whole range of people working in our nursery where we’re growing a lot of the koala food trees, as well as a lot of other native species, that we then promote into plantings. A lot of the non-koala food trees we sell and the funds that we get from them go back into the koala care centre and help us pay for our vets and medicines and ongoing running expenses. We have a rescue van, we have a leaf collecting van that all cost money to run.

We have about 90, 95 active volunteers doing all of those activities and then we have a whole range of people who work from home. So, we still have home carers, particularly for the young baby koalas because they can’t really be cared for in an enclosure. They have to be carried around in pouches and be kept warm and fed every few hours, so those young ones are still home cared for, so we train people up to do that and they basically look after a koala up until they’re about twelve to sixteen months old, physically in the house, and then we release them, usually as a group, we try and release them together, into a known koala area.

So, yeah, it’s a pretty busy and vibrant little group and we probably deal with about 400 koalas a year, so that’s pretty much one a day. A lot of those are just in-field assessments.

We get phone calls from the public, we have a 24-hour rescue line. People ring up and say ‘I think I’ve got a sick koala, it’s at the top of a tree, we probably can’t catch it’, so we monitor it, as I say, we can set a trap. If it’s really sick, we can send our tree climber up there and see if we can get it. Other times we get great cooperation from groups like Country Energy. They’ll send out their big cherry pickers and send someone up, particularly when we’ve had koalas hit by cars. People have seen them scramble up a nearby tree.

We know that the animal’s injured, we need to catch it as quick as we can, we can’t wait for it to come down, so, we get great cooperation from other groups within our community. Fire brigade, with their ladders, have been out a few times to help us, so, yeah, it’s a real community feel in terms of looking after the koalas.

BL If you could make one thing happen, to help save the koala, what would that one thing be?

MW I think my critical thing is about planting trees. I think if everyone could somehow be asked to plant a tree every year, we have a population of 26 million, is it at the moment, I’m not quite sure, but it would be fantastic to see if we could get 20 million trees planted every year and a project that involved the community, councils, in terms of providing land, there’s lots of council reserves, Crown land, national parks, a lot of degraded areas that could really do with people in there.



The whole concept of community plantings, trying to get government support, corporate support, and then involvement of groups like ours, groups like Landcare, which is across Australia, everywhere there's Landcare groups, and having this enormous tree planting concept, obviously focusing on the koala, but, as we know, that we're planting habitat for a whole range of animals.

So if we could have that as a real theme, you know, plant a tree this year. As I say, 20 million trees would go a long way to helping our environment.

BL That would be really impressive to see Australians getting out there and making that commitment every year. Is there a day of the year that you would say would be a great day to make your mark in planting a tree? If there's a kid listening to this and he says 'Well, is there a day that I can convince my folks to work towards planting a tree?' Anything you can think about there?

MW We work with schools now. World Environment Day (you would have to find the dates for me) but I think that's in June. World Environment Day is a fantastic day where, in the past, we've done a number of tree plantings on various schools on that day.

There is a National Tree Day as well. I'm not quite sure when that is, but, yeah, I'm sure that we could use one of the existing events that's already there in terms of promoting tree planting.

BL Maybe a student will come up with a project to designate the koala day in Australia and make sure everyone goes out and does their tree planting.

MW Actually, I'm pretty sure September every year is called National Koala Month and that was promoted through the Australian Koala Foundation and, once again, we often do a lot of promotional activities in that month and try and engage schools in tree planting during September which has been promoted across the areas that have koalas as National Koala Month.

BL What koala-fications do you have to do your job?

MW In terms of the qualifications you need, you don't actually need any formal qualifications to do the work that we do.

I, myself, have an Environmental Science degree and horticultural qualifications, but my whole working life I've never worked in those areas. I've always worked in administration and I've continued the koala work, which I've done now for thirty years, as a sideline. I didn't actually need those qualifications to do the koala work.

In terms of caring for koalas, and the work that we do at Friends of the Koala, we do our own in-house training. We don't require anyone with any qualifications coming in. The only thing I should say, though, is that, in terms of involving people from primary schools, and even secondary schools, we can involve them in activities in terms of tree planting and nursery activities, growing trees etc, but the actual caring for koalas is quite strictly controlled under our licence and that involves insurances and things like that. So there is one restriction that you have to be over eighteen, sadly, before you can cuddle those koalas. But there's lots of other activities that you can get involved in that will still help and support koalas in their conservation.

BL Fantastic, so students listening to this should have a think about planting trees or about getting involved in all of the different aspects that are related to planting trees, like gathering leaf for those who are caring for koalas, and...



MW And learning how to propagate trees, collecting seeds, sowing seeds, potting up seedlings, all of those activities can be done at any age, basically. As I've said, that's the vital part of koala conservation, is the habitat and that's really where we want more people involved in terms of everyone should be growing trees at home if they could. Particularly in the areas, like where we live here on the north coast, a majority of our, probably the children that are at the smaller primary schools are probably all on properties. They all have acreage and they all have capacity to be out there planting trees. Not so much the ones in suburbia, but they can still be propagating, not planting on their own property, but they can be growing trees which can then be planted somewhere else.

BL Are there any citizen science or tree planting programmes or organisations that you would recommend that kids in New South Wales look up to see if they can be involved in growing small tree groups?

MW Probably just the Landcare network. I think it's a fantastic organisation, Landcare, it goes all across Australia, and they're, really, like-minded people are in those groups because they really want to better their environment.

I think exploring what Landcare groups are operating in any area and the children can actually explore that and then they can be involved in tree planting activities through the Landcare groups, and helping out weed removal and tree planting and things like that. I think the Landcare networks are fantastic.

The other groups that, not so much tree planting, but awareness, National Parks, they run a lot of school holiday programmes, part of their Discovery range of programmes. Lot of awareness things, you know, taking children out on walks to identify plants, identify weeds, you know, what's a weed, what's something we need to get rid of, what's something we need to keep. So that when they go back to their own properties, or their own households, they can actually identify a Camphor Laurel, which is one of our major weeds on the north coast. If you know what it is, you can go out and start pulling them out of the ground.

A lot of those awareness things, they'll come through Landcare as well, but certainly the National Parks, they do a lot of good work through their Discovery range of programmes, which run throughout the year, but they really ramp up in the school holiday periods and lots of activities and things that provide good information.