

Linda Sparrow

President, Bangalow Koalas

- BL I've got Linda Sparrow with me here today, and, Linda, I'd love to hear from you what your role is. What's your koala role?
- LS Okay, well, I'm president of Bangalow Koalas and, as well as that, I'm also a trained koala rescuer with Friends of the Koala that I'm a member of as well.
- BL How long have you been doing that?
- LS We've been going for four years now. We started roughly April in 2016.
- BL So, whereabouts do you work? Do you have a couple of places that you're based or are you out and about?
- LS Well, I run an office, a home office, so I run my business, which is advertising, and I run Bangalow Koalas as well, so I do both full-time, and that's up here in Bangalow in the Northern Rivers, but where we're covering, the area that Bangalow Koalas is covering. What started out just in Bangalow, we are now covering the Northern Rivers of New South Wales. So we've grown, as the trees that we've planted have grown, and we've expanded. Now our corridor is going from Byron Bay and surrounds and we're now heading out towards Tenterfield, heading up to the Queensland border and we're heading down to Grafton, and that's all from people contacting us saying they wanted to join our corridor.
- BL Is that landowners then contacting you and asking what you can do, what they can do, to help?
- LS Exactly. We started where we just did a letter box drop in the local area, Bangalow, just to get people to help us weed and clear out around the base of these established trees and then we did a joint planting with Byron Council, and from that there was some local media, and stuff like that, and ever since then people have contacted us, not us contacting them.
- BL So people have contacted you. That's really interesting, so you would probably say then that people are interested in koalas and in saving the koala.
- LS Oh, absolutely, absolutely. We are getting contacted all the time by people and, yeah, it's just amazing.
- BL Tell us about a typical project that you would do or an activity inside a bigger project. You've mentioned planting, I would love to hear more about that.
- LS What we're about, we're about creating this corridor. We're trying to link existing habitat and we're trying to create more habitat, so it's like creating stepping stones across the landscape, so what we're doing is we go, we might go to one property and plant their property and then their neighbours get interested so then we do their neighbour's, so a lot of the plantings we've one, we might be doing four properties in one street, and so we're trying to connect, where we can see there's habitat.

So I work with the council, so we can see where there's mapped habitat, where there's sightings, so where we know there's actually koalas. We won't go and plant on a property that there's no koalas anywhere near and there's no habitat.

We make sure that it's going to link up, so we're sort of linking up all these towns across the Northern Rivers and it's spreading and spreading and we're all about connecting habitat and fragmented populations of koalas so that they can actually move across and breed and so you get more genetic diversity, rather than having these small populations of koalas that start inbreeding, because they can't go anywhere else.

When we started four years ago, the ecologist from Byron Council, she said to me that they think the population of koalas here in Bangalow is quite unique, they're genetic diversity. That's why we're working really hard to get them away from the residential area. We're trying to plant on the western side of town to get them to move away from where we've got humans and cars and dogs, and all that sort of stuff, and so then they can connect to other populations that are in the neighbouring town of Possum Creek and Binna Burra.

BL Great, so you're basically trying to improve their night life.

LS Exactly.

BL It's really interesting, because it is critical, and I was just talking to a koala ecologist who was telling me about how koalas patrol their territory, particularly the males, and this idea that koalas don't sit in one tree is something I'd really like us to share with the kids.

LS Oh, look, exactly, in the mating season, where up here it's roughly July/August through to March, you've got the males, they're kicking out the younger males out of the territory, and also some of the younger females get kicked out. So they've got to go out and find other places to live and that's when you get the higher amount of road kill, because, especially in this Bangalow area. You've got the M1 going through, you've got some big main roads, and there are some hot spot areas where they're getting killed.

So we also are working with getting flashing signage up and other road signs which we've designed, and then we've fundraised, to get these signs out, so across, especially in the Byron Shire, there's a lot of our Corflute signs. They look like a road sign, and they're fluoro yellow so they really stick out, and people come to us and say, 'We're worried about koalas here', we give them signs, they put them up. There's a whole lot of factors going into what we're doing.

BL That's an interesting question, actually, I'd like to explore further with kids, is design responses, and designed environments, can often help wildlife just as much as they make human lives interesting or easier. We've all heard or seen pictures of these animal overpasses, or animal underpasses, to freeways, do those work for koalas or is that a problem?

LS No, they do, but the problem is those overpasses and underpasses, they have to be done before, they have to be taken into account right at the very beginning when the government and RMS are doing the design for those roads. It's not like you can do something like that after, so that's where you get a lot of wildlife fencing along the main roads, like the M1.

They'll have wildlife fencing there to try and stop the koalas crossing, but then what happens there, it's one of those really hard issues, because if you're up here, they put through the Ballina bypass, cut through a koala population, a big koala population, and then you're splitting up the population if you're putting up this fencing and stuff like that.

BL So that basically divides your genetically diverse population into half which makes it much less genetically diverse and then your breeding might start to fall apart, is that what you're saying?

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- LS It just means that they can't cross the landscape how they used to cross the landscape. You'll see pictures of a koala on the fencing along a main road and they're hanging upside down from it. They're trying to get over and you can't tell a koala 'No, you can't go that way', so if they want to go from one tree to another, and it means crossing a busy road, they're not that intelligent that they'll think 'Oh, I'll go an easier way', they just want to go straight ahead and so you've got all these other factors coming into why our poor koalas are in the state they are at the moment.
- BL Fair enough, really well put too, thank you. What attracts people to koalas, do you think?
- LS You have a look at a koala, how can you not be attracted to them? They're so cute and they're unique. When they're curled up in a tree they look like a small bear, hence why people incorrectly call them a 'koala bear'.
- It's really hard, especially when you start working with koalas, it's really hard not to fall in love with them. They can bite you, they can scratch you, when you're trying to rescue them, and they can be really sick, they will fight their hardest to avoid getting taken off the trees. I've got the bite marks, and the scratch marks, and they put up a big fight, they're strong little things, but they are adorable.
- BL That's a really good point to make. They're wild animals, they're not pets.
- LS Exactly. If you come across a koala, and it's just sitting on the ground, and it lets you walk up to it, and it lets you pat it, that's a very sick koala.
- BL Good point. I wanted to know how much a koala weighs, an adult koala, female or male would probably be different.
- LS It varies because it depends on the area and how old they are and all that sort of stuff, because the koalas up here, in the north here, they're smaller, and they're not as fluffy as the koalas you get down in Victoria and South Australia. Their koalas are bigger and their koalas are a lot hairier and fluffier than the koalas you get up here.
- BL Interesting. They're different strains of the same species, obviously, what are the different types called?
- LS It's the genetic thing that's happening down there. They're not as diverse, the koalas up there, so the koalas up here in the northern New South Wales, because there is a bit of crossover with the genetics with the southeast Queensland ones, because there's obviously a bit of a crossover and stuff like that. So, they're all the same, it's just that, down there, it's a bit like, to give an example, an echidna down in Tasmania and Victoria is actually hairier than the ones you get up here because they need it, because of the weather, because it's colder, so it's colder, they need thicker coats and stuff like that. It's just how they've evolved.
- BL Of course.
- LS You can see, if you ever go and have a look, there are things on that you can see, and it shows the difference between a northern koala and a southern koala, they're just much bigger and fluffier.
- BL I guess I was erroneously of the difference between a Red Kangaroos and Grey Kangaroos, but it's not that, it's to do with their climate, their habitat, their food source.

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- LS So, for example, northern koalas, a male might weigh, average weight, could be, say, 6.5 kilos and a southern koala could weigh twice that much. A female's about 5 kilos average, in the north, but in the south it's closer to eight and a half kilos.
- BL What do most people get right about koalas?
- LS Most people get, obviously, the main one is that they're only found here in Australia. They're unique to us, you can't get them anywhere else in the world. Their closest relative is actually the wombat. So that's the main thing.
- The thing that they get most wrong is, more often than not, when I get a phone call, or we get a call to go out to see a koala that people might think is sick or whatever, they'll say it's a joey, and you go there and 99% of the time it's an adult. It's just that when they call up into a ball, they just look like they're small, and especially if they're high in the tree, they look really small. If when it's curled up in a ball, and it looks smaller than a soccer ball, then that's a joey. Anything that looks, when it's curled up, looks bigger than a soccer ball, is an adult.
- BL I've never heard it put that way. That was why I asked how much they weigh because I was curious to see if people's expectations of how big a koala is are actually not quite correct.
- LS Yeah, and it varies. It varies on their health, their age, where they are.
- BL Why do you care about koalas, and it's obvious that you do, but what is it?
- LS Once I started rescuing koalas, I soon realised just how vulnerable they were, and they've got so much going against them. They're susceptible to the same sort of diseases that humans get. They have cancers, they have kidney failures, tumours, all sorts of stuff, they have all the same sort of stuff that we get, and then when you hear a koala cry, which I have when I have done some rescues, you never forget that sound. It's just the most heartbreaking sound and from that moment onwards I became dedicated to doing all I could to save koalas.
- BL That's the thing, isn't it? If you feel a connection with the animal too, and you can understand its pain, then why would you not help?
- LS Exactly, and they need all the help that they can get right now.
- BL Why do you think other people care about koalas?
- LS I think the most pivotal moment, where collectively people became more aware of the plight of koalas, was in the recent months with the bushfires. That brought it up there, right in front of everyone in Australia, and across the world, and people just saw how vulnerable they were. Not only vulnerable to drought, but to fires, and their very survival now depends on us and that's why Bangalow Koalas is working really hard to plant out as many trees as possible in the Northern Rivers so in the future they're going to have habitat, they're going to have homes, and they're going to have hope.
- BL That's really good. We've covered this a little bit, but is there anything else you'd like to say about what threats there are, or give me a list of the threats that you feel are most important.
- LS Habitat loss is the biggest threat, not only from the logging in native forests, but large swathes of farmland being cleared and developments across the state that continue to remove their

homes. You add to that dog attacks and car strikes and it all adds up to very stressed koalas and that then brings on disease.

BL What was your first moment that got you into koalas or was it becoming a koala rescuer that kicked you off? Was there something else?

LS It was a simple phone call from a friend of mine four years ago. It was out of the blue and this friend here in Bangalow just rang me and said 'Linda, I need your help in saving the koalas', and I just said 'Of course you do', and then it was about a 400 metre stretch of established koala trees that was along the boundary of this property and they were worried about the trees being, you know, the guy was a developer, and we just started, we did a letterbox drop, trying to get people to help weed along the base of it and there hadn't been, from the local community, many recordings of koala sightings in Byron to the Byron Council, so we did a letterbox drop with the Council asking people to record their sightings and then all these people started sighting them and, suddenly, it just went from there.

BL So there's a bit of citizen science involvement there as well.

LS There is a lot citizen science and, in fact, we're also now, after the fires, we're also taking into account the platypus. Just as of this week I'm doing another thing, getting people to record sightings of platypus so that when we do our plantings, and if there's riparian areas, so along the creeks and rivers and whatever, then we take into account, if we know there's platypus there, that we will look at planting to make sure we're helping them as well.

BL We use the term 'umbrella species' in a lot of the lessons and the education material because that's kind of how it works, that protecting the koala protects so many other species as well as the habitat.

LS Exactly, actually, in the trees we're planting, we're planting things for the Black Cockatoos, we're planting things for the flying foxes and birds and bees and possums and everything.

BL If you could make one thing happen, to help save koalas, what would it be?

LS If we could stop the logging in the native forests, and the land clearing, then the koalas have got a chance. That's why we've actually, our goal is to plant 250,000 trees by the end of 2025 and we want to plant 40,000 this year alone. If we could stop the logging then we can save our koalas and everything else that lives in those forests.

BL Kids who want to help do something to save koalas can get involved in lots of different ways, can't they?

LS Totally. A lot of our plantings, or most of our plantings, we might have three generations that are coming along. It's the kids, the parents, the grandparents, and the kids, you know, when they see road signs up for koalas they're telling their parents to slow down, and they're seeing the koalas. We do kiddy workshops. We go to primary schools, and pre-schools, and I do it with Friends of the Koala, and we teach them the difference between a healthy koala and a sick koala and what to do.

We started from nothing, we started just from a group of friends, and we've now got this massive huge goal of what we're doing and we've partnered with IFAW, the International Fund of Animal Welfare, and they're helping us do what we're doing. From little things, big things can happen.



BL All kudos to you for that. I love the comment that you started as a group of friends and now you have this huge impact. I think that's a really important message for the students involved in Koala Smart. That's what we hope, that many of them will be able to find their passion project that relates to conservation as well. Is there anything that we have not covered that you would like to add?

LS I think the most important thing is that we've each got to help save the koala. We don't need the government to do it if we've got all these grassroot level groups across the country and if we can motivate other people to want to actually protect the koala, and then they get someone else to, the kids are the future here. I'm doing my best to make sure there is a future for koalas and I think we need the kids involved in that.

BL It's their future as well as ours.

LS Exactly. The last thing I'd like to say is, if you can't save the koalas, you can't save anything. That's the true story because if we can't save that, if we lose koalas, then all the other species, that are not quite cute and cuddly and whatever, they've got no hope.