

## Kai Wild

Qualified arborist, Wildlife rescuer

- KW My name's Kai Wild and I work as a qualified arborist and I also volunteer as a wildlife rescuer. Wildlife rescue, that I'm involved in, could be releasing wildlife for carers, that's been rehabilitated, or it could be climbing trees to get injured wildlife out of trees, so it's all tree-based, basically, that's my niche.
- BL All tree-based, so you spend your days up a tree.
- KW Yes.
- BL Fantastic, I'm kind of envious. Tell us a little bit about Kangaroo Island and what you've been doing there.
- KW Sure, like everybody I saw what happened on Kangaroo Island, that two-thirds of the island was affected by fires, and I wished there was a way I could help, but I thought it was being covered and then, out of the blue, I got contacted by a wildlife carer, that I'd helped in the past, who'd been contacted by a wildlife rescuer that was on Kangaroo Island and who had noticed that there were koalas, that were burnt or starving in trees, that required a tree climber to access and, yeah, I found that out at 8pm one night and about six hours later, at 4am the next morning, I was driving to Kangaroo Island.
- BL And so you got from Sydney to Kangaroo Island, toute suite, basically.
- KW So I actually managed to just drive for about 20 hours straight and slept in my ute tray overnight and then caught the ferry over to Kangaroo Island and was able to begin using my tree-climbing skills, and my wildlife handling experience, to assist burnt or starving koalas, that day that I arrived, and then I would spend the next seven weeks assisting to rescue these koalas.
- BL You talked about your wildlife handling skills. Tell me a little bit about what it's like when you come up a tree towards a koala. What do you do? What are your thoughts and feelings and then how do you make sure that koala is transported safely to ground?
- KW It's all a very stressful experience, I would say. I guess in the context of, in bushfires too, you know, you're walking through these burnt landscapes with a lot of burnt animals around you as well, so it's pretty intense already. It's always an amazing thing to see a koala anywhere, but then to see it in this kind of landscape is especially special. You come across this koala, and it's in this fire affected landscape, so there's risks of the tree's rootplate being affected by fire, or just its structural integrity being affected by fire, so you've got to be really careful and really inspect the safety of the tree.
- Then you've got to consider the least stressful way of accessing and then getting this koala down to the ground and, as soon as you start climbing the tree that the koala's in, you've started to stress it to a degree. It becomes aware of your presence.
- We found that if you climb the tree next to the koala, if it's close enough, and often in a plantation situation it is, you can climb up that tree until you're at least level or above the koala



and then, with your flagpole, start encouraging it down its tree. And then, once it's below you, you can come down a little bit and you swing over into the koala's tree and that way you're above it and it can't go back up, and from there you just work the koala down, and there'll be someone on the ground, who also has a flagpole, and can begin flagging it down, once it's low enough, and then catch it and contain it and then get it back to the hospital.

BL You've mentioned a flagpole a couple of times, and I don't really know what that is, can you describe that to me and explain how it's used?

KW When I say 'flagpole', typically it's a five to seven metre long alloy tubular pole that can extend and we've found that plastic bags are really effective. Plastic bags are bad, but when you're trying to catch a koala they're very effective to essentially just kind of scare it really. The sound is very effective we've found as well.

BL So you're basically using the flagpole as a kind of herding tool, the koala moves away from the plastic bag and comes down then.

KW Yep, exactly.

BL Do the koalas, they're not going to know that you're there to help you, are they unhappy?

KW Absolutely. It's very stressful for the koala because the koala believes it's being predated upon. I'm someone who doesn't want to stress a koala out and it's a very stressful experience for both of us, knowing that the longer that this process draws out, the more stressful it is. And so, I guess, it's essential that you're really trying to make it as quick a process as possible from the moment it's being handled or stressed.

It depends what resources you've got. But when it's an unprecedented natural disaster or, arguably, unnatural in terms of climate change, but an unprecedented disaster such as Kangaroo Island, you have very limited resources and you don't have the luxury of having a vet come out with you, you have to use your judgement and get that koala back to the vet's. Then you also do, within the seven weeks that I was out there, there came a time where we had to say, actually, we're finding that these koalas have survived this and there's now enough regrowth and, although they're in these burnt plantations, they're looking, they're being found to be quite healthy and, so, therefore, it's not actually worth the risk of putting them through the stress of capture.

BL It's a really interesting decision process, like when you're working with injured animals of any sort, but probably more extreme because they've been through this fire and they don't want to be predated, or hunted, as a wild animal. In a good case, let's say you have a pretty good go with a koala that you do need to bring down and bring in to care, how long would it take to encourage a koala out of a tree?

KW In these trees, because they are plantation trees, they're single stem, there's not a lot of options for the koala to escape, so you could be looking at half an hour in a nice, straightforward situation where accessing the tree is straightforward. That's best case, I'd say.

BL We're really talking about a pretty extreme situation, this is after a fire. I just want to emphasise that for the podcast and for the students.

KW And, you know, worst case, you know sometimes if you're having an off day, getting that rope into the top of the tree, that can take half an hour itself, and then, yeah.

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- BL I'd like to hear how you trained to climb trees. I haven't spoken to an arborist in this project before and I think that would be something really great to talk a little bit about.
- KW My journey to becoming an arborist is a bit of a unique one. I got into climbing through environmental advocacy and activism actually, you know where we would actually use it to climb into trees, to occupy trees, to stop them from cutting down a forest or clearing a forest for a coal mine, things like that.
- BL And you lived in a tree for a while, didn't you?
- KW Yep. I spent a couple of months setting up a tree occupation in the Kalang headwaters which is home to healthy colony of koalas, and still is after the bushfires, it's one of the few places that is. That was certainly an experience and my arborist skills certainly came in useful there. It was a good few years, after I got into climbing for activism, you know. I had tried studying at uni, again subjects or courses that would work towards environmental advocacy, but I'm just not really the uni type, and I had some friends that were, basically, just environmental activists and also arborists, and they were very effective, and I love climbing, and I love trees, and I thought, I'm terrified of swinging through a tree with a chainsaw in my face, but I'm just going to have a crack.
- BL Awesome.
- KW Yeah, I studied, to become an arborist, for two years and it's definitely enabled me to become a more effective advocate for the environment actually.
- BL It's not something you might think of as being connected to environmentalism, but you're quite right, it's not always the university courses and the university people who are doing all of the work and that we do need this diversity of skills, so that's really interesting. I wonder if you want to have a little talk about what attracts people to koalas.
- KW Obviously they're really cute and they're so soft and I've heard people speak about them being kind of human shape, in that way, so you've kind of like literally got this little fur baby, and I think also the fact that they are perceived to be so kind of calm and gentle is very endearing. I don't have that experience a lot of the time and I think, you know, for me, I really respect the fact that they live and climb in trees. The fact that they've existed for millions of years is just a reason to respect anything, I think.
- BL Some people say they are a little bit like spirits of the bushland and some people express that as being an umbrella species and others just say it's magic when you see them.
- KW The way I see them now is that, yes, they are this umbrella species and they're actually an umbrella species for humans as well, you know, in the context of deforestation impacting on climate change. If we conserve koala habitat we're actually helping to conserve our own species now.
- BL So by helping them we are sort of helping ourselves in the longer term as well.
- KW Yeah, in terms of environmentally, but I think also just like emotionally and mentally and spiritually, I guess.
- BL It's almost a self-awareness reflected through an animal.

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- KW Yeah, I think a really significant moment for me on Kangaroo Island was seeing just all these different people, with different backgrounds, with different values and beliefs, just all being in this one place to help koalas, you know, and I haven't seen that happen before. It kind of really, to me, you know it was like this microcosm of what it could be like if we just all banded together to do something about climate change.
- BL It's incredibly hopeful, isn't it?
- KW Yeah, it really was, especially amongst this devastation and this horrifically traumatic event, it really shone through actually.
- BL Why do you care about koalas?
- KW I have a lot of respect for koalas, again, simply because they've managed to exist for millions of years sustainably and, again, that fact that they're these beings that live in trees and climb trees so well, and are just so well adapted to climbing trees. And as a tree climber I just really love and respect that, and admire that about them, and, yeah, they're just so, so, so cute. Undeniably cute.
- BL How much does a koala weigh?
- KW You know, I don't know how big your northern koalas get, but I know your southern koalas, and your Kangaroo Island koalas, know they'll get up to like 14 kilos, maybe slightly more. Your southern koalas, they're getting big and they are getting pretty hard to handle.
- BL That's pretty hefty...
- KW If you imagine just 14 kilos of muscle, with sharp teeth and extremely sharp claws, it's quite a thing to try and handle one out of a tree. You have to be very careful.
- BL Then we're in the realm of nightmare, you know, 14 kilos of teeth and claws. What type of protective gear do you wear?
- KW I just have my PPE for tree climbing and then it's really just how you handle them that keeps you safe and, to handle them well, it's better not to be wearing any gloves because you just lose that dexterity, so just bare hands, no other protection. It's just a given that I'll probably get clawed by a koala every time I handle it and it's just essential that I don't get bitten because if you get bitten it's quite likely that you'll need stitches and that'll really just take you out of action, so if you have bare hands, and handle it by the scruff of the neck, and support it by its bum, then you're pretty safe.
- BL Okay, so a bit like how you'd handle a kitten or a puppy, you know, that they're made to be handled in that way when they're young?
- KW A mother koala wouldn't handle its joey by the scruff, so I don't know that they're made for that, but that's the safe way to handle them.
- BL It was probably a poor choice of words. I get what you're saying, it's about safety in the moment. It comes back to this question we were talking about earlier, you know, how do you communicate to the animal that you're actually there to help it when there's no real way of communicating that.



KW I think I found that quite challenging, just knowing that people's perceptions of koalas are that they're these gentle beings, that aren't aggressive and that can't hurt you, and then for some people to see me just grabbing them really quite forcefully could be perceived the wrong way, I guess, but I do think that to ensure that you're handling this koala in a way that means it's not just going to get away from you, and prolong the stressful event, means that you're handling it correctly.

BL That makes sense, and, again, you're handling these koalas as a fairly extreme measure in a situation where if you don't help them they will starve or their burns will cause them to suffer.

KW Exactly.

BL So, we are saying, to someone who finds a koala, certainly don't go and handle it.

KW Absolutely. Let it be wild.

BL Let it be wild. That's a really great phrase, let it be wild.

What do you think are the biggest threats to koalas? We've talked a little bit about bushfire, but what do you think are the other threats or is that the biggest one in your mind?

KW One thing is that my first introduction to koalas was in 2010 when I studied native animal rehabilitation and as part of that I volunteered for six months at a koala hospital and, you know, pretty much all the koalas that were coming in were either dog attack, hit by a car, or chlamydia. All of these things, they all stem from loss of habitat essentially. The stress of the loss of habitat is something that worsens the impacts of chlamydia and that was definitely the moment for me that, actually, really changed my life, having this understanding. To know that you're putting so much effort and energy and resources into caring and rehabilitating these koalas, just to put them back into the same environment, that made them need the care in the first place, whilst not actually putting resources into protecting the habitat, just completely doesn't make any sense at all.

We're at this point, I feel, where it's incredibly important for the conservation of the species that we have rescue and rehabilitation of koalas, but I feel like it won't be too long before we've lost enough habitat that this incredibly important function that humans are playing becomes just absolutely useless and serves no purpose because there just isn't the habitat.

BL So a band-aid on a bushfire basically.

KW Yeah, absolutely, and right now there's politicians getting a lot of mileage out of just pouring money into rehabilitation and just ignoring habitat conservation and that is something that really needs to change, and I really hope that people can see the bigger picture.

BL What could students do to help really push hard for habitat conservation?

KW It's amazing how much just having a passion or a love for something can inspire that in other people and if students, just young people, caring about the fact that our wildlife faces this plight and talking about that to other people, talking about that to their friends and family, that's a powerful thing and that shouldn't be taken for granted, I believe.

BL I like that it shouldn't be taken for granted, that that advocacy, because it is advocacy, is important at all levels and all ages.

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- KW To me it's more important and you don't know where that passion or advocacy will take you or what impact it might be able to have down the track. Who knows, you might have the conversation that triggers somebody to have an epiphany that saves a forest that saves a species. You don't know.
- BL You're having quite an impact on social media. I follow you in Instagram and I know that some of your posts, and particularly your koala joey videos, you can get an awful lot of people really interested. Tell us about accidentally becoming a bit of a social media star.
- KW Yeah, it's funny, because when I was occupying this forest, in the Kalang headwaters, I did a little crowd funder to support myself while I was there. I tried to kind of explain to people why I was there in a bid to engage them to want to protect this place and I didn't do the best job really of telling that story and, I guess, acknowledging the financial support that I got for that as well.
- So, when I got to Kangaroo Island, I had this in my mind that these people are donating to your crowd funder and you've got to do a better job of keeping them up to date, and I just started doing a daily update and that was actually also really a therapeutic process as well which was very important. So I think telling that story on the ground and that coupled with I think anything that has koalas in it is going to be quite engaging, to be honest.
- BL It's been a gripping story. One of the days in January when the bushfires really kicked off and we all knew it was going to be a terrible day, like many people, I was pacing the floor, there's nothing you can do, and to be able to follow that someone was out there, with the skills that I don't have, doing stuff, that in itself has been really good for a lot of people.
- KW I had that experience, that you're describing, myself for a lot of the whole fire season where I just, you know, I volunteer with the SES, and I finally, at the end of the fire season, got deployed as a strike team and got to finally help somebody somewhere and that was such a powerful moment for me, to feel useful. But for the rest of the fire season I was just wishing so much that I had joined the RFS, that I could have been out there helping and I just felt so much despair and so useless, so I totally understand that.
- And, I guess, it was funny because I was doing a lot of just walking around alone through these plantations and in some ways I was kind of having these conversations, with all these people that were supporting me, in my head almost, thinking of what I would say in an update that evening and things like that and it was something that, perhaps that did come through. But that support that I felt that I had from so many people who actually in return felt okay in some way because they could see that something was actually being done on the ground.
- BL You're not only doing what you're motivated to do, what you feel is important for you to do in the situation, but you're also carrying other people's interest with you, you're ambassadoring for many people who want to do something.
- KW I think that at some point I acknowledged that that was something that was just kind of happening and it didn't feel overbearing or overwhelming, but I could see, and I understood, because I had experienced myself the despair that we'd all felt. It was nice to invite people along because, actually, for me to be able to do this, to be able to volunteer – you know, you have to have a certain level of privilege as a person to be able to just walk away from your responsibilities, to have had whatever education you've had, to have whatever physical ability you have, so to be able to do this. A lot of people would say 'That's so generous and heroic of you', maybe not those words, I don't know. But in fact I just feel like it's I am someone who's very privileged, and, you know, it's just doing what, basically, doing what we should do, I think, and so it wasn't too much of an ask just to like bring people along with me, I guess.

BL It's interesting you use the word 'heroic' and then don't, perhaps, indicated that you found that uncomfortable, because so many people who have done really good and interesting and big things, important work, don't see it that way. They see it as 'I just did this thing that was in front of me that I can do'.

KW That's how I feel.

BL I really see that, and I understand that, and I also think something you've touched on that a lot of students have talked to me about, which is when we talk about environmentalism and about conservation and sustainability, how do I deal with my anger and how do I deal with my despair and how do I maintain hope? My response has been that I've made a personal decision that every weekend, all winter, during the tree planting season, I will plant at least one tree, if not two. That's my response for hope, that everyone needs to find one. What's yours? What keeps you hopeful when this gets a bit much?

KW I find hope in other people that care about, seeing that they care. I think I find hope in seeing certainly that younger generations are much more aware and much wiser to what's happening to our natural world. I think I just cope and also find hope in just getting out there and helping and just doing very direct things to help because I feel like, you know, engaging with our political process can be very, kind of, soul destroying and very frustrating and so to be able to find ways of short-cutting that, to put pressure on industry or politicians to do the right thing, that's a powerful thing.

BL A word you used earlier, was just being useful, but it's even more than that, it's being useful and having a direct impact with what you're doing.

KW Again, there's being useful because it's, it's important I guess to have that awareness of being useful, because it's what's needed, and being useful just because it makes you feel good. I think you've got to really, one is helpful and one is not as helpful, and those are some things to really reflect upon and if you are going to be someone who is putting themselves in a situation where help is needed, that's just a conversation you have to have with yourself and everyone should have.

BL There's a little joey who's named after you. Tell us a little bit about joey Kai and how you're relationship runs.

KW I just got goosebumps. I think, I mean to start with, I guess, she's the closest thing, I don't know because I don't have kids, but you know I felt this really strong kind of protective kind of feeling about her, and I still do. It's very hard not to be able to be on Kangaroo Island right now, but she was just the first burnt orphaned joey that I found in the plantations, sitting there in a dead tree by herself and just seeing that, that's a very full on thing to see. And just by the looks of her, it just didn't look like she was going to be okay, and I got her out of the tree and, again like that process that we talked about, you know, putting her under that stress, she's in a bad enough way before I make her think that she's going to get eaten and even just in that process too, there's a risk that they lose their grip, or jump and they fall out of the tree too, so that's an incredibly stressful thing. I got her back to the vet's, just thinking that she'd need to be euthanised and, yeah, they checked her out and they said she's going to be okay...

BL She's in one of those areas where she's getting ready to interact with other koalas.

KW I just kind of slowly watched her go from being in this very little, like, you know, one metre by half a metre little kind of space where she was just simply recovering and eating and just sitting



on the ground for weeks, and then finally she got moved out into an outdoor enclosure and that was the first time she'd actually sat in a branch for weeks. That was a huge moment and, actually, that first night she was outside, she was too cold and so they had to bring her inside and keep her warm and then she was okay after that. Now, finally her singed hair's slowly starting to grow out, putting on weight, and it's looking like she doesn't have, or hopefully she doesn't have damage from smoke inhalation, she's been moved into an enclosure with, finally, with some joey buddies, and she's got a bit of attitude on her and she's not really too keen on other koalas, but I think it's actually, finally, they're a bit bigger and can handle her sass and I think the company's probably good for her as a joey.

BL Is there anything that you wanted to say that I haven't touched on?

KW I was thinking about the things that people get right about koalas is that, yeah, they are extraordinarily cute and special, but I think that people do have this perception that they're just cute and cuddly and quiet and a bit lazy, but in fact they've got this real, they are a wild animal, and have this real wild side and they can be formidable and really should be respected in that way as a wild animal and not just a cute and cuddly animal.