

Cheyne Flanagan

Clinical Director, Port Macquarie Koala Hospital

CF My name is Cheyne Flanagan. I'm the Clinical Director of the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital, and I've been working with koalas here for over 20 years, and worked with koalas prior to coming here. And they're just a really lovely species to work with. They're a mix of very feisty through to very gentle. Some of them are just like buddhas, very chilled.

BL How did you train to do the job that you're doing?

CF Well, I'm a wildlife biologist, which is what I was before I came here, there was a job advertised, and into the job I slotted and away it went.

BL Whereabouts do you work and, if you could describe for students, what the location and what the workplace is like on a typical day?

CF The koala hospital's located four hours north of Sydney, right on the coast. You can literally hear the ocean from here sometimes, it's very close, and it's in a lovely bush setting in the middle of Port Macquarie.

We admit and treat all the wild koalas that come through our doors with everything from being hit by cars to attacked by dogs, to disease, to loss of habitat. The daily thing here is, literally, the koala patients come in, we examine them, we do what we need to do with them and then we start treating them. It's all about holding the koalas, handling them, anaesthetising them, doing all the things we need to do to them, and once all the work's done with the koalas, it's lots of paperwork.

BL What kind of paperwork do you need to do?

CF Every bit of information on each koala is recorded. We have a full database on everything, everything to do with the animal, and that database, we've got 47 years' worth of data so it's probably the oldest database in the country of information on everything from pathology right through to, well, you name it, it's on there.

We also do a lot of training. We teach throughout the country. We do a lot of research and work a lot with government agencies, so, yeah, the day's always full.

BL I don't doubt it. I'm sure you often have your hands full. I have lots of questions I'd love to ask you, but what I'd like to start with is just to ask your perceptions of why people are interested in koalas.

CF I think all of us, when we were little children, we all had a toy that we really liked, and a lot of us had teddy bears, and an adult koala just sitting there actually has an appearance looking like a teddy bear, and, also, they're about the size of about an 18-month human toddler sitting there, so it really engenders the warm and fuzzies in everybody when they see a koala. Not that you could go up and pick it up and squeeze it like you could a teddy. The koala would probably kill you if you tried to do that. But I think that's what drives it, and because also they're what we call a pretty innocuous species, they're not going to attack you, they have no poison. There's



just nothing about them that's nasty. Yes, there's the myth of the drop bear and, yes, koalas have indeed jumped out of trees and landed on people, but that's more accidental rather than deliberate, so they're not a species that would want to harm anyone. They would much prefer to just chill and go to sleep than do anything nasty. They're just a peaceful animal.

There's a special way you handle wild animals. You've got to treat them as a wild animal. So, every bit of handling that's done with them is done very carefully and everything we do is done to minimise, stress is a big word and it's a word we don't really like using, but we do everything as a minimum so we're very non-threatening to them, or as non-threatening as we could possibly be.

All our handling is done without them actually knowing we're touching them because we use capture bags and we have these methods of working with them that's very quiet and careful, plus we do put them under an anaesthetic which makes dealing with them so much better and they respond very well to anaesthesia, so, therefore, it's all done and dusted before they even wake up.

For us, we respect the fact they're a wild animal and we want to keep them as wild animals and we're completely and utterly against patting and cuddling and squashing koalas because they're wild and they just don't like it. They don't like being touched at all.

BL From your experience, what is the biggest threat to koalas?

CF People. Simple as that. The human race is a threat to all wildlife in Australia, an worldwide. Every issue that goes on with wildlife anywhere is because of humans, no other question. I can't be more blunt than that, but that's a fact. You can't gloss it over.

While we continually breed and increase our populations, and while we continually build infrastructure to suit us humans, we are moving more and more into encroaching on wildlife habitat – and the COVID virus is a classic example of where us interfering with nature is coming back to bite us. All the issues that happen with koalas happen because we remove their habitat. That's what drives it all.

BL If there was one thing you could do help the koala, what would it be?

CF For people the most important thing they can do is acknowledge that we're removing their habitat and that we must reverse this. We really don't need to have so much acreage and we really need to change the way we build our homes.

We need to conserve forest, and what's left there now must stay there, and we need to increase it and rehabilitate degraded habitat, because what would be a world without koalas? You think about it. We can all live in concrete jungles, but what would be a world without wildlife? We must have them. Wildlife are there, they're important, but it's part of who we are and therefore we must learn to adjust.

BL I really agree with that. If we don't have wildlife, if we don't have wild spaces, then we're not really ourselves anymore.

CF That's right.

BL I completely agree with that. I grew up in the Canadian forest and I can't really see any way without wildlife. If you wanted to ask students, if you wanted to challenge students, to do something in their own local, or in their school, areas, what sorts of things could students do that are very concrete?

- 
- CF One very big thing, and it's going to make a lot of students go, 'No!', is we are so reliant on technology and we are so reliant on technology doing everything for us. I would like to see students learn to go back to basics. This COVID thing has really done some good things. It's made people aware that we need to grow our own food, and nurseries right across the country are discovering this that they're all sold out.
- So we need to be less reliant on technology, we need to grow more food, plant more trees. And this is something that everybody can learn to do, is not be such big consumers, but learn to make your own and learn to grow your own, and all of that will reduce carbon emissions and reduce the need for removal of so many forests. We have to change the way we live, we really do.
- BL I agree, and many of the students will want to be change-makers in terms of being advocates, and others will want to do something practical or hands-on. Is there anything you would like to say about this summer and about the work of the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital after the bushfires, and during the bushfires, this summer, or is that topic you'd rather not go through?
- CF No, no, happy to, I mean, we were all seen all over the world when it was all happening.
- BL Tell us a little about this summer then.
- CF Well, before the summer was the drought, and this is the longest drought in recorded history, because it plays a major role with what has happened with the fires. As conditions became drier and hotter, the animals that were living in these environments were really starting to suffer from major chronic dehydration and one of the things that affects animals, when they have chronic dehydration, is it sends them into renal failure. The kidneys don't cope. So, we already had all these animals all over the country, not only just koalas, but other species as well, but particularly koalas, who were already suffering from the effects of drought.
- Bear in mind that koalas get the vast majority of their daily moisture needs from eucalypt leaf, so if trees are already under stress from drought, they're not getting the moisture needs that are important to them and, therefore, they're already in a very poor state if the fires hit.
- Then the fires hit and in a lot of cases, well, so many were wiped out, it's just not funny, we've potentially lost thousands of koalas. Those that did survive came into care with dehydration issues and burns, and in a lot of cases it was just too much for them. You know, we had people say, 'Why couldn't you save this one or that one?' These animals were already severely compromised from drought and then the fires were just too much.
- So, it was a major battle to keep a lot of these animals alive and also, depending on the level of burns, if the burns are really bad, we are not going to subject that animal to a lifetime of pain. Anyone working with human burn patients will tell you that they have a lifetime of pain and lots and lots of surgeries. We're not going to do that to a wild animal. They wouldn't cope anyway, but, for us, we only treat burns where an animal has a chance of good recovery and a return to the wild because if they can't, we're not going to hold them here permanently, disfigured and in pain, for their whole lives, so we had to make some pretty awful decisions and especially knowing these animals were in dire straits anyway, and the numbers were declining so badly, to have to put down animals because you knew they didn't have a future was just really hard when koalas are already struggling.
- BL I understand what you're saying too that they need to be wild animals, and to be able to be wild animals, for the rest of their natural lifespan.
- CF Yep, and no matter how much we can offer them beautiful fresh leaf and lovely cosy accommodation, you know, a lot of them still die because they don't cope with being in



captivity. I mean they sit there very quietly, looking like they're okay, when in actual fact they're really suffering.

So, when you work with these animals for a long time, you get to know what's okay and what's not, so, yeah, we had to make decisions, but at the same time, when all this was going on, we are funded by the public visitation here, they come here to see the hospital, and during the month of November last year, which is normally a very quiet month, we had 50,000 members of the public came here because they were so concerned that they'd never see the koala again and they wanted to come and help, plus we had incredible support from all over the world. The stuff, we're still getting stuff sent to us, still, after all this time, and the outpouring of support from people all over the world, saying that they just couldn't bear a world without a koala, you know, 'here's something to help you', it was just gob-smacking. It helped us through the horrible part, knowing that we had the support worldwide from people. That was really heartening to know that people care, they really care.

BL It keeps you going, doesn't it?

CF It keeps you going, but, meanwhile, it's very hard, the things still go on. We have released pretty well all the koalas that we knew would be released. They've all gone now, so we've put them back.

We've had really good rain, which is a bit of an irony, but perfect, and all of the koalas have gone back to their home ranges, but the hard thing is, because so many of their cohorts, so many in their population, perished in the fires, it's sort of like two-thirds of a town was wiped out and all that's left is a few residents of the town, and that's exactly what's happened with these populations. So when we put these animals back, it was very difficult (because we always put them back to literally to the tree they came from), but if we put one koala back at the tree he came from, and then another one a kilometre away, they wouldn't know that there's another koala there, because they have to call to each other. They might live by themselves, but they're also very social. They have to know that the rest of the population's around, so we had to basically reconstruct populations with what we had left and put them how they would have been, as in male and female ratios. So, we basically created new towns, a new population, when we put them back.

BL There's an ongoing task there too which I'm hearing behind what you're saying which is to help maintain ongoing genetic diversity and ongoing breeding populations so that we can repopulate the koalas.

CF That's what the amount of GoFundMe money that we received is going to build a very big koala breeding facility and research centre, and with that we hope to breed what we have kept here, and a few others we will probably bring in, and we're going to breed and hopefully repopulate a lot of these sites.

But there's no point in repopulating these sites if we continue to have hotter, drier conditions over the next x-amount of years because we will revisit these fires again. It's a bit of a fine line we walk on, but we need to change carbon emissions so that we don't have these heat events. And this is what I'm talking about, how we need to change how we function with technology, because the more technology we have, the more we consume, the more CO₂ emissions happen. There's a whole lot involved in this of course.

So, to breed and repopulate, we want to do it with the security of knowing that we're not going to have these major fires events again and, unfortunately, I think we will.

We will be buying land where we can protect them to some degree, where we'll be able to keep x-amount on protected land, but, you know, that's not going to, if we've lost potentially up to 8,000 koalas in New South Wales, for us, that's going to take 50 years to achieve that amount of animals. Maybe more.



BL And I think if you were to ask whether or not we could go for 50 years without a bushfire, I think everybody would have a pretty negative response to that and, you're right, that's the point, is that climate change and bushfires are linked and so we need to work on climate change.

CF That's the track we've got to go up. Not only for wildlife, for us.

BL One of the other interviewees said, 'If we can't save the koala, we can't save ourselves.'

CF That's about right. The koala has become the flagship species for this country because, as you've just said, if we can't save them, well, what hope have we got, and there's a number of other species that live in the association with koalas.

There's two species that come to mind straight away that are quietly sliding into extinction, but nobody talks about them, and one is the Greater Glider and the other is the Yellow-Bellied Glider, and both of them are arboreal species as well and they live in the same habitat as koala. They're going extinct, right now, so we're hoping to become involved in a breeding programme with them as well at some point in the future, but there's thousands of species that live in the same environment as koalas.

I'd really like to say to all the children out there that you are the wildlife warriors of the future and I know it's a big thing to put on you, and it's a big pressure, but we have great hope in children of today and the passion with people, and the children, and we would like to encourage as many as possible to go into the science field, into the veterinary field, and into the wildlife field, because you are the saving grace for us. Please go up the science track.