7th February, 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
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It is ironic, perhaps fitting that I would write on the second anniversary of Black Saturday as it was on this day that I began my work with koalas.

My Background work in koalas

I volunteer one day a week at the Southern Ash Wildlife in Victoria which is run by koala expert Colleen Wood. My full time job is a tax accountant at a local accounting firm. I live in Tanjil South and have done so all my life. I have never seen a koala in my area despite the fact that I live literally "among the gum trees". I have no science to provide you with and no "formal" reports. There is no funding for the shelter to care for the koalas and so there is no money or time to be able to formally study and document the plight of the local koalas. Consequently everything I write to you is from my personal observation and from my heart.

I began volunteering on the horror of Black Saturday as I had known about Colleen's work and expertise in koalas since the Moondarra fires of 2006 in Gippsland. Knowing that there would be many koalas in trouble from the horrific fire at Callignee I arrived at the shelter to help. The shelter received 101 koalas during the bushfires (including the now iconic "Sam" the koala). The koalas suffered varying degrees of burns. One of the most moving stories was a young female joey found in the hunched over burned body of her mother. The mother had wrapped her arms around the joey and hunched over her thus sacrificing her life to save her joey. (The joey had minor burns and was successfully released 12 months later). This is the character of these wonderful animals.

Callignee is in the Strzelecki Forest which is home to the genetically unique Victorian koala known as the Strzelecki koala. A large proportion of it was desicrated during Black Saturday. Unfortunately most of the forest is owned by Hancocks Logging company and is presently heavily logged. Consequently the koalas are felled along with the tree. Numbers killed are not known but from my volunteer work we receive about 3 koalas a year from being felled from trees. We don't think this would reflect the actual numbers killed as they are difficult to see amongst the gums.

The Strzlecki koala is so important due to it's unique gene pool. It is a larger, robust and truly magnificent looking koala.

I work every Monday at the koala shelter and the threats that I have witnessed first hand are:

- **road hits**
- domestic dog attacks – usually from **dogs** not restrained at night
- very ill koalas after being sterilised with microchip and re-**located**.
- **cow** attack (the cattle kick at the koala resulting in severe injury)
- tree felled
- found at bottom of trees, **dehydrated** (we assume drought related)
- bushfire
- displacement from **habitat** destruction
- lack of funding to help the shelters (blood tests for kidney damage from dehydration and/or chlaymidia cost around $230 each time – paid out of the shelter's own pocket – simply not sustainable)

The koalas admitted to the shelter have increased incredibly over the past two years. Most prominently we are receiving displaced koalas (up trees in middle of median strips of busy highways or in country towns – a Mum and joey were rescued in this exact circumstance only last Friday night – see "Australian Animal Rescue" FaceBook for footage). This is a combination of habitat destruction from housing estates or, we are wondering, perhaps they are still dispersing from the Callignee fires due to lack of re-growth of forest which is also heavily logged.

Another "patient" was firstly vet checked last week from the Childers area (fringe of Strzelecki forest) where the caller's dog had grabbed the koala. The koala managed to escape and climb up a tree. However upon retrieval (several days later when spotted) it was found the dog had torn the female's pouch away. The wound was already maggoty due to the hot weather and she was deemed not viable.

In particular we are seeing the koalas literally "drop from the trees" around the Sandy Point area. Calls come in at least weekly of a koala seen in the daytime on the ground. The koalas from that area have abnormal features. Different face structure, small eyes, very weak muscle tone and, more often than not, severe dehydration. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the koalas in that particular area are under severe threat. As we have no funding to scientifically record this it is impossible to know the reason why. They are rarely able to be rehabilitated due to their weak muscle tone (i.e. unable to climb successfully) and severe dehydration and are thus usually euthanaised.

I feel honoured and privileged to be able to volunteer at the shelter and do all that I can to keep these remarkable creatures remain viable for the future however futile. I am constantly, constantly amazed at how each one that enters the shelter has it's own personality.

Words on paper and submissions such as this simply cannot do justice to the remarkable animal that our iconic koala is. I wish that all on the committee could have spent the incredible time that I have with these animals. It takes a very long time to rehabilitate a sick or wounded koala (and even longer for burns) but the reward is seeing that magnificent creature rapidly climb to the top of a huge eucalypt upon it's eventual release. Without sounding cliché or just plain crazy I truly believe the koala has an ancient wisdom that our environment needs to be sustainable. I understand it is

without science and I am just one individual….but please….I implore the committee to consider the koala's status as vulnerable at the very least. We have to be the voices for these creatures.

I have only given a few examples of what is daily life at Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter and, sadly, becoming way too frequent.

Please contact me verbally for any confirmation.