

## INQUIRY INTO THE RSPCA RAID ON THE WATERWAYS WILDLIFE PARK

**Organisation:** Koala Hospital - Port Macquarie  
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**Position:** Hospital Supervisor  
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Addendum

Eucalypt leaf in the koala enclosure

1) The eucalypt leaf in the buckets in the koala enclosure on 3/2/10 were in fact very long cut branches approximately 1.5 to 2 metres in length and held in place by metal chains. Branches of this length would struggle in mild conditions (as in temperatures less than 25 degrees) to maintain good leaf moisture let alone in hot dry conditions. Water has to travel a great length up that long stem to keep the leaves moist - bearing in mind that cut eucalypt leaf really sucks up a lot of water post harvesting.

The buckets of water (10 litre buckets?) were only a third filled with putrid greasy faecal filled black water that was some days old (having the same smell as the water in a vase of week old dead flowers has) . No eucalypt leaf is going to stay moist trying to survive with this poor quality water, the low level it was in the buckets and cope with the dry hot conditions in the enclosure at the same time.

Harvested eucalypt leaf has to have a fresh water change twice or sometimes three times daily to maintain 65% and above leaf moisture (see Exhibited Animals Act standards of care). The container of water must also have a level of water that can cope with the amount of branches placed in it ie: two one metre lengths of branches would require approximately a 5-10 litre container filled with fresh water and changed twice daily.

Koalas also require eucalypt leaf that is harvested fresh every day or at worst every second day (as per the Exhibited Animals Standards) plus they require a minimum of three species each day. The only leaf we saw on offer on the 3/2/10 appeared to be one species only.

*The lack of water changes, the low level of water, the putrid state of the water, and the lack of replacement daily freshly harvested leaf would account for the koalas not being able to get their daily moisture needs from the leaf in the koala enclosure. Old dry eucalypt leaf also does not offer a good source of energy and nutrition which would add further to their poor body condition.*

The fact that the Gunnedah koalas when in care at the Koala Hospital gained such good weight in a very short period is good evidence that offering good quality moist nutritious eucalypt leaf is paramount to good body condition. The eucalypt leaf in the Gunnedah area is no less in quality than anywhere else in Australia and work done by Dr Jeff McKee and Dr Stephen Phillips have shown that within the age classes of captured wild koalas in the Gunnedah area have shown that they have comparable weights, body condition and ages to any other koala populations.

## Unfurred "pinkie" foetus/joey

2) The koala K209 was observed to have a small unfurred foetus attached to a teat on the 5/2/10 (photo has been shown at inquiry but have attached). Initially we estimated the pinkie to be around 10-20 grams but after lengthy discussion, we feel it probably was more in the realms of 5-10 grams in size. The koala was consequently not treated for chlamydiosis at that time (the drugs possibly may affect the foetus) but her pouch was externally examined weekly. We did not handle her or interfere too much to remove the possibility of causing distress to her or her pouched young. K209 was placed in an outdoor quarantine enclosure from about one week after arrival. At the fourth week there was no evidence of a pouch young and the koala allowed me to examine the internal area of her pouch. Her teats had ceased lactation which usually takes around five days from the time sucking of young ceases. This would give an approximate time of death of the young at around the 5-7<sup>th</sup> March. As there was no evidence of a small foetus on the floor of the outdoor enclosure at any point in time it pointed to two possibilities.

\* as the enclosure is outdoors in a bush setting the possibility of a bushrat coming into the enclosure and eating the dead foetus is quite high (the Koala Hospital is located in a National parks and Wildlife Service nature reserve).

\* the mother may have consumed the dead pinkie foetus which would have been no more than 30 grams maximum at the time of death.

It is quite common in mammals for females to consume dead young. Cats and dogs have been observed to eat dead newborn puppies and kittens as do many other species. Cattle commonly eat their afterbirths post calving. It is a source of nutrition for the mother and it is also employed to hide any evidence of birthing from a potential predator.

In marsupials it has also been reported throughout Australia where mothers will consume dead pouched young. Wildlife carers have certainly observed this phenomena in ringtail and brush tail possums, sugar gliders and in macropods (kangaroos and wallabies). The fact that koalas have this image of "cute cuddly and furry" needs to be ignored, in that they are a wild animal the same as any other animal and can and do behave as wild animals should. ***Thus a koala is quite capable of consuming a dead pouched foetus the same as any other marsupial.***

At the Koala Hospital we have had occasions over the years where we have had females with tiny pouched pinkies in the intensive care wards (which is a tiled and bricked building and totally vermin proof that are set out in individual units). The females have been observed to have pinkies in the pouch one day and then nothing in the pouch the following day and absolutely no evidence has been found. One particular female koala of note (a bushfire burnt one) who was in a basket and had not moved out of it in a 24 hour period had lost her pinkie during the night and all we found were small blood spots on a towel the following morning where we feel she had consumed the dead young.

Other wildlife/koala carers and groups have also reported the same situations with pinkies gone from pouches over night and no evidence found the following day

(obviously in some cases we certainly have found dead pinkies on the floor or in baskets or still remaining dead in the pouch).

Below are a list of wildlife carers who have either witnessed a koala consuming a foetus, or have had scenarios as described above or researchers who certainly agree that it is highly possible for a koala to consume a small dead foetus. (These people have agreed to be acknowledged in this document)

Audrey Kooseman  
Chair of the NSW Wildlife Council  
President of Native Animal Trust Fund, Hunter Region

↖  
*(has witnessed a koala in care consuming a pinkie foetus)* ↗

Colleen Wood (carer of the now famous "Sam the Bushfire Koala")  
Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter  
Rawson Victoria

Dr John Butler (veterinarian who cared for Sam the koala and many other koalas burnt in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires)  
Morwell Animal Hospital  
Morwell Victoria

Tracey Wilson  
Koroit Wildlife Shelter,  
Koroit Victoria

Marilyn Blankly  
Beremboke Wildlife Shelter,  
Beremboke Victoria

Dr Stephen Phillips,  
Biolink Ecological Consultants,  
Uki NSW

Dr Damien Higgins,  
Koala Infectious Diseases Research Group,  
Department Veterinary Pathology  
University Sydney

Professor Fritz Geiser,  
Co-ordinator of the Research Centre for Behavioural and Physiological Ecology  
Department Zoology  
University New England  
Armidale NSW







### Heat Stressed Koalas

3) It is important to mention here that we had re hydrated all eight koalas either by oral, subcutaneous or intravenous methods in the first 24 to 48 hours after removal from the Waterways Wildlife park plus they were given moist high quality fresh eucalypt leaf to consume from Day One. Consequently only two koalas were observed to drink water from their water bowls for approximately one day after arrival at the Koala Hospital.

From around Day Two after arrival at the hospital not one koala was observed (the water containers were marked to record water consumption) to drink water from any water bowl. No koala was observed coming down to sit on the floor of the intensive care units at any time - all remained high up on their timber forks/runners.

All of the koalas, (with the exception of the extremely debilitated K206 who remained in the intensive care unit for the entire period) were moved to the outdoor bush setting quarantine enclosures by the second week of their time at the Koala Hospital and it was noted that they remained high up in the forks and runners of the enclosure and did not come to ground at any time. It was also noted that for the first three weeks of their time at the Koala Hospital, all the koalas ate to the point of stripping the offered leaf almost bare well within the 24 hour period with staff having to replenish/replace new leaf well before the normal change over to fresh new leaf every morning. The koalas finally settled down to a normal pattern of eating expected of adult koalas by about the 4<sup>th</sup> week. All the Gunnedah koalas readily accepted the coastal leaf (the hospital has always found koalas from other areas do not have a problem accepting "foreign leaf").

**On the week of the 23<sup>rd</sup> February, Port Macquarie experienced quite warm to hot dry conditions of approximately 35 degrees each day. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> February the temperature was 38 degrees at the Koala Hospital and not one Gunnedah koala showed any sign of heat distress at any point. Not one koala came to ground to get cool, not one koala drank from any water bowl for that entire week. They coped really well with the hot conditions as they were well hydrated, well nourished, had good shade and excellent air flow through their enclosure ie: they were given optimal conditions as you would expect from any animal housed in captivity.**

Even though Port Macquarie does have an amenable climate the Koala Hospital has recorded temperatures of 46 degrees one summer around three years ago. Not one koala in the hospital came to ground during that heat wave. All remained in the trees or forks at the hospital as again they were all given good moist leaf and shady ventilated enclosures.

What occurs with wild koalas is a totally different issue to what occurs in captive koalas. Animals held in captivity have the luxury of being given optimal quality conditions (as per the regulations of the Exhibited Animals Act),