



Photo: Centre for Wildlife Research, courtesy S. Brown

TRANSLOCATION

THE CON IN CONSERVATION BIOLOGY Allen Greer

When a population of a threatened species lies in the path of a development, proponents often propose to move, or translocate, the population to another location. And the courts agree translocation can be a 'solution'. The NSW Land and Environment Court, for example, determined in February that the Shenhua Watermark coal mine in New South Wales can relocate its 'in-the-way' koalas to another place.

Although proponents can always find 'experts' to back their proposal, translocation is biologically and philosophically flawed.

The probable outcomes of a translocation are always uncertain.

If the animals are translocated to a place containing an existing stable population, there will be no room. The net numbers of animals in the habitat will remain unchanged and the net 'adjustment' deaths will roughly equal the number of animals translocated.

If the animals are introduced to a place that has never had the species, the chances the translocated animals will 'take' where no population has managed to establish itself before is, at best, an informed guess.

If the animals are introduced to a place that once had the species but no longer does without determining what factors caused the local population to go extinct and whether those factors

are still in play, a translocation is just a hopeful punt.

Operationally, translocations are often done and the development begun before it is known if the translocation has 'taken'. If it hasn't, the proponent already has his development while the threatened species has one less population. There will be crocodile tears and assurances that "we tried our very best", but there will be no penalty and, of course, no going back.

Putting the shoe on the other foot and having the threatened species'

Above: Koala clings for dear life as his habitat gets bulldozed around him. Photo: Centre for Wildlife Research, courtesy S Brown

defenders nominate the consultant would no doubt raise the cry of “bias” among developers, as ironic as that would be. But there are two other ways of achieving a fairer consultancy. First, both developers and environmental defenders would have to agree on the consultant. Second, consultants could be put on a rotation list and when a proponent needs a consultant, assign the one that has rotated to the top of the list.

Translocations almost always involve an overseeing government department. But like consultants and their clients, bureaucrats twig the will of their political pay-masters and self-regulate to self-perpetuate.

There is a new philosophy about nature in translocation as a conservation ‘solution’. It is that species and populations are now moveable whenever the ‘need’ arises. This is despite the fact species and populations are the product of, and are valued for, being evolved entities in historical continuity with a natural place. The end point of this new ‘species on wheels’ philosophy is that the translocation of species and populations to ‘naturalistic enclosures’ in faraway places is okay. Translocation is no longer a temporary solution to riding out the ‘rot’ for a better day. It is now part of the rot.

About Allen Greer

Allen Greer is a biologist who writes about science and nature. He wrote the *Biology of Australian Lizards*; the *Biology of Australian Snakes*, and the online *Encyclopedia of Australian Reptiles* (now discontinued). He has also written and currently maintains the online book-length *The Tasmanian Devil. Its Biology, Facial Tumour Disease and Conservation* (sugargum.wix.com/tasmaniandevil). He has written essays and opinion pieces for *Australian Quarterly*, *Australasian Science*, *Australian Financial Review*, *Crikey*, the *Drum*, *Hobart Mercury*, *National Times*, *New Matilda*, *Nature Australia*, *Public Sector Informant*, *Quadrant*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian’s Higher Education Supplement* and *The Scientist* and over a hundred Letters to the Editor. He has no institutional affiliation or other conflicting interest.

The Australian Koala Foundation is the principal non-profit, non-government organisation dedicated to the conservation and effective management of the wild koala and its habitat.

The Australian Koala Foundation is totally opposed to the concept of translocation. They will continue to oppose all koala translocations until there is a national policy with robust ethical approvals and oversight in place. Translocations facilitate and sanitise the destruction of the landscape, moving the koalas out to pave the way for land clearing, urban and industrial development, and roads, with no long-term interest in the ultimate fate of the koalas displaced.

They are particularly concerned with the following issues:

- Current translocation practices doom the animals involved. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest translocations can be associated with significant koala mortality. There are many, many examples of translocations gone wrong – in Victoria, translocations with 80 to 100 percent mortality of moved animals (this entire program was subsequently disbanded); in Queensland one study showed up to 30 percent mortality; another 58 percent mortality. These are appalling figures, and could be higher still given the level of secrecy which surrounds many of these programs (sometimes called ‘research’ programs, but often conducted to allow unfettered development).
- And just where are these animals going to? Translocated koalas need to be moved to entirely vacant habitats. Moving koalas into already occupied habitats causes major social disruption; resident koalas reject translocated animals forcing them into danger on roads or into the path of dogs, or the translocated animals push out the existing residents.
- New habitats (so called ‘offsets’) simply will not be ready to receive new koalas for decades. Koalas simply cannot be expected to wait 10 or 20 years for the trees to grow.
- It is our experience that calls for increased koala translocations severely underestimates the commitment required to monitor the longer-term health and welfare of translocated koalas. Most projects may have started out with the best of intentions, but before too long difficulties become apparent. Inevitably costs rise and the whole project is ended prematurely. It is imperative that steps be taken, for example financial bonds, to ensure funding is available for the whole term of the exercise.

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