

CHAPTER 3

KOALA AND OTHER MATTERS – THE 1910s

'Some years ago, the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia found that almost the whole of the skins of the koala were being sent for sale to the United States of America – many of them during closed seasons in Australia, when the killing of the animal was forbidden.'

David Stead

KOALA

The preservation of the koala and the re-establishment of the animal in at least some of its native haunts in the Eastern States of Australia were among the major objectives of the Society since its inception in 1909. The Society was successful in obtaining official protection for the koala, first in 1911 and 1912, in New South Wales.

David Stead always insisted that 'koala' should be pronounced 'k'ola'; he also frequently referred to it as the 'native bear' which of course is a misnomer as the koala is not a 'bear.'

Although the battle to save the koala began as early as 1909, action was still being taken in the 1920s and 1930s, and in fact continues even into the 21st century.

The Story of the Great Slaughter was the heading to an article by David Stead accompanying the Annual Report for the year 1927. In 1927 the Queensland Government declared an open season of one month during which the koala could be killed for its skin. No less than 584,738 koalas were actually recorded as being killed during that time, although many of the skins would have been collected earlier, in expectation of a new open season. Although the koala had been protected in Queensland by law from 1919, by 1927 there was an illicit accumulation of hundreds of thousands of koala skins. During that declared open season of one month, the dealers were able to openly sell and export their myriad bales of skins. Also, there was over the years a considerable export of 'wombat' skins from the port of Sydney. No woman would want to wear a coarse wombat skin and as suspected the so-called 'wombat' skins were in fact koala skins. Probably about 2,500,000 skins had been sent out of Australia in this way.

At a meeting of the executive of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia on 5 September 1927 it was decided to appeal to the Prime Minister to enforce the Federal Proclamation of 1923, which prohibited the exportation from the Commonwealth of the skins of native animals 'unless the consent, in writing, of the Minister of State for Trade and Customs has first been obtained'. The Society was not aware, however, that permission to export koala skins had been granted by the Minister (Hon. Herbert Pratten) as early as 13 August 1927, understandably the fact that this permission had been granted was not publicised. In the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia's Annual Report for the year 1927-28, page 4, is an extract from a letter written by D. G. Stead to the Prime Minister of Australia, Hon. S. M. Bruce, dated 8 September 1927. 'In effect,' he contended, 'it was simply an invitation to the dealers to get their stock of skins out as quickly as possible and even to add to them in the meantime'.

In 1930, the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, under David Stead's presidency, informed the United States President, Herbert C. Hoover, that koala skins, usually labelled 'wombat', were still being imported into North America and implored him to prohibit the importation of both koala and wombat skins into the United States. Hoover acceded to this request and, in doing so, effectively brought to an end the export of koala fur under the guise of other species. This action, perhaps more than any other, ensured that the koala was given some hope of survival. In 1933, Australia's Federal Government showed its support for state government initiatives in koala conservation by passing laws.

In his article, *The Story of the Great Slaughter*, David Stead claimed full credit for the Society in this matter of the koala:

'There appears to be no doubt now that had it not been for the ultimate action taken by this Society, the abominable traffic in koala skins might have gone on indefinitely - all skins exported being 'traced' to the one short open season of one month, and the experience of several years ago (in the case of the export of the alleged wombat skins) would have gone on and on till the last poor koala had made his final bow to the world'.

THE PLUME TRADE AND TRAFFIC IN WILD BIRDS

A problem equal in concern to the fur trade was the widely spread 'feminine craze' for adornments of wild bird plumage, notably of the white heron or egret, and the birds of paradise. The first leaflet issued by the Society was released before the close of 1910. It was entitled *The Tragedy of the Osprey Plume* and 5,000 copies were obtained with hopes, as the 1911 Annual Report stated, 'that the distribution of these leaflets will have some effect in awakening the pity of those women who still persist in wearing such plumes, it is to be hoped in ignorance of the terrible cruelty and wholesale slaughter of old and helpless young birds which such a fashion entails'.

An 'osprey' is technically a large hawk, *Pandion haliaetus*, a fish-hawk. But generally, and in the early reports of the Society, it refers to a 'kind of feather used to trim hats'. The osprey plumes were taken from a variety of birds with suitable plumage, but the egret was commonly sought after, especially for its breeding plumage. Lyrebird tails were also harvested in large numbers.

The Society was greatly concerned at the growth of this trade and took action in a number of directions, principally through the state governments, the Federal Government (in the matter of prohibiting import and export of plumes), in the course of educational lantern lectures and by the publication of the illustrated leaflet mentioned above.

Queen Mary, approached by the Society, made a public statement expressing her detestation of the practice and saying that she did not and would not wear any plumage of any wild bird. Lady Denman, wife of the then Governor-General of Australia, said that not only would she not wear such plumage, but she would make it clear to her women guests that they would not be welcome if they wore these feathers and even went so far as to require any such guests wearing them to remove them.

The Society's report for 1910-11 stated that as a result of representations made to him by the Ornithologists' Union in Melbourne, the Minister for Trade and Customs had proclaimed certain plumage birds and plumage prohibited imports and exports. However, later Annual Reports consistently referred to violations of the prohibition.

The Third Annual Report (June 1912) contained an account of the Society's appeal to all the leading members of the theatrical and dramatic profession at that time in Sydney, including the female members of the Melba Opera Company. Having heard that 'ospreys' were being frequently worn on the stage, a circular was printed by the Society and circulated widely. However, the report stated 'It is somewhat discouraging that, notwithstanding the cruelties disclosed in this letter and the Egret leaflet of photographs which accompanied it, only two ladies of the theatrical profession, Miss Ethel Irving and Miss Margaret Cooper, have shown themselves sympathetic, the former having given her written promise to do what she can to help the objects of the Society'.

In the Fifth Annual Report (for 1913-14) we read: 'At no time since, or even prior to the issue of the prohibitory proclamation, have so many Ospreys, Birds of Paradise Plumes, Goura Pigeon crests, etc., been seen on the heads of our women as this season, and the painful conviction is forced upon us that the smart woman to whom fashion is a fetish, sets aside, where fashion is concerned, all appeals to her womanliness and humanity'.

The Sixth Annual Report (July 1915) pointed out that since the importation of plumes had been prohibited by Customs Proclamation for four years past, exploitation of the local birds, particularly egrets, had increased. Careful enquiry by the Society's Council led to information being supplied to the Sydney Customs Authorities. The Honorary Secretary of the Society in the years up to and including 1920, Arthur Atkinson, was one member whose efforts as a vigilante never slackened to combat 'the infamous osprey craze'.

The State Act for the Preservation of Native Birds and Animals (which became law in January 1919), badly drafted and defective in many respects according to the Society's opinion, still made ample provision for prosecuting and punishing women having possession of osprey feathers, but rarely was action taken to enforce such provision. It was more likely a change of fashion that heralded relief for the birds, rather than the effectiveness of legislation, though the education campaign was effective to some extent, as it was in the campaign against the wearing of wild animal furs.

In the early 1920s the Society increased its activity against the traffic in wild birds. Unchecked for years, thousands of beautiful and useful insectivorous birds had been shipped to other countries for purely commercial purposes. Visitors from overseas, in particular scientists, were repeatedly warning Australians that unless effective protective measures were taken, many birds would become extinct.

A passenger on a ship to Europe in 1922 wrote a report for the Society in which he claimed that of about 7,000 native Australian birds on the ship, over fifty percent died miserably of cold and the unnatural conditions to which they were subjected. David Stead, working in Malaya for two years, wrote from Singapore telling of the abominable treatment there of Australian cockatoos and galahs, which he saw chained

by three or four inches of chain to small wire triangles eight inches in diameter. The birds were taken out once a day from their crowded cages and permitted to walk round this triangle on the chain for a short time. The Chinese dealer told David Stead that these birds were not a paying proposition as too many of them died.

After persistent representations to successive federal ministers, in which representations the Society's Council had assistance from Mr. A. T. Latham, Secretary of the Victorian Animals' Protection Society, Sir James Barrett and other bird lovers in Victoria, a proclamation was at last issued by the Minister for Trade and Customs, the Hon. Austin Chapman, prohibiting the exportation of wild birds except under minister's permit, other than a few species enumerated in the proclamation. This was reported in the Society's Annual Report for 1923-24, which added, 'with the exception of the Crimson Lory, which for some inexplicable reason was deprived of the protection of the proclamation, the species scheduled as 'exportable' are of the kinds which we are glad to say are of no practical use to the dealer'.

However, in 1926 the Council expressed regret and disappointment that the prohibition on the exportation of wild birds was not being enforced. Far too great a facility was being given for the issue of permits to export the birds, frequently in small numbers and ostensibly as pets. It was also reported that the sale of osprey plumes was still prevalent, although not on a large scale.

With the passage of the Fauna Protection Act in 1948 and the establishment of the Fauna Protection Panel, the Society nominated their Secretary Allen Strom as a member of the Panel and stated that the institution of this Panel had considerably lightened the burden of the Society. Most important was the action taken by the Panel to prevent export of fauna. In due course the role of wildlife protection was taken over by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, but the Society had played a significant part in protection long before legislation, which it had promoted, became a factor in preservation.

FAUNA PROTECTION ACT

In August 1911 it was decided that the Society should draft a Bill for introduction to Parliament to take the place of the current and complicated Act to protect native birds and animals. A Special Committee was appointed from the Council consisting of Dr. Hurst, Dr. D'Ombrian, Mr. W. W. Froggatt, Mr. Le Souef, Mr. D. G. Stead, Mr. Kearney, Mr. H. Dawson and the Honorary Secretary (Mr. A. W. Atkinson) and to this Committee Mr. Frank Farnell was added later.

The Bill was placed in the hands of Hon. John McFarlane, M.P., who, later on, suggested that it be placed in the hands of a member of the Ministry. The President in 1912, Mr. W. Froggatt, interviewed the Minister of Agriculture and placed a copy before him, pointing out that in other countries the Game Laws and Bird and Animals Protection Acts were usually the charge of a Branch of the Department of Agriculture. The Bill drafted by the Society was considered by the Council to be a very great improvement on all the existing Acts, as it did away entirely with the long lists of protected fauna and simply listed all noxious birds and animals, so that all not in the

noxious list were protected.

In the Society's Fifth Annual Report (1913-14) it was announced that the Bill was at last to be introduced into Parliament and assurances had been given by a Member of the Cabinet that the Bill would be pushed forward without delay. One section of the Bill proposed that wardens would be appointed all over the State of New South Wales, officers who would have power to call upon any person in possession of the skins of protected Australian animals, or the plumage of protected Australian birds, to account for such possession.

There was a long delay and the long promised Bill for the amendment of the law regarding fauna protection did not become ratified until 1 January 1919. It was nearly nine years since the proposed amending Bill was drafted 'at considerable care and trouble'. Unfortunately, the Society felt no elation at the accomplishment of the passing of this measure due to its inconsistencies and more than one fatal weakness.

In the meantime, during 1917, Victoria had passed an amending Bill for the better protection of the fauna of that State. This was a better enactment than the New South Wales one and more on the lines of the Society's original draft. In view of the weaknesses detected after the Bills first near-passage through Parliament, the Society drew the responsible Minister's attention to the new Victorian legislation, while emphasising the necessity for a thorough re-drafting before the proposed legislation went to Parliament again. A promise was made that this would be done, but all to no avail. The new Act came into force full of loopholes for the sanctuary vandals, the sellers of illicitly-obtained skins and plumes and the cagers of 'protected' fauna. This all added up to the necessity for the Society to start out again to urge the Government to patch up the Act once more.

It was not until 1930 that a somewhat improved Act was brought in, but still without any really effective machinery of administration. It was the enactment in New South Wales known as the Fauna Protection Act, 1948, which superseded all others, that led David Stead to say that it was far and away the best piece of legislation ever passed in any Australian State, aimed at the saving and perpetuation of the Australian fauna. 'This still does not mean that we are all satisfied with it,' David Stead added, 'for the true-blue conservationist is notoriously hard to please in such matters'.

THE BATTLE NOT WON

David Stead wrote in 1949:

'No story of the history and activities of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, however, cursory, would be adequate, without at least some passing reference to our forty years' fight for the Koala ... we need the very widest public support, if this animal is not to disappear from our country. This is not undue alarmism – I mean it literally – though there are still representatives of the species here and there, the Koala is definitely on the way out! It is our duty to save it and we must do it. It cannot be saved by the establishment of Zoos or Near-Zoos – however such are camouflaged before the public as 'sanctuaries' ... I repeat here a statement which I have made from time to time at meetings of the Society and elsewhere, through Press interviews and in our

own publication – one of the first essentials necessary to a proper scientific understanding of the position of the Koala in Australia is a strict census, to be carried out in each State – giving as far as possible, the present natural stock, stock known to have existed within a reasonable period, and, adding to this, a statement of the areas in which the Koala used to exist but from which it has now vanished ... Such a comprehensive investigation should be carried out under the aegis of the Commonwealth Government, but with the full interest and support of the various State Governments ... no biological survey regarding the animal has ever been made, and no scientific attempt whatever towards making a census of its present and past numbers’.

This was part of David Stead’s lengthy appeal on behalf of the Koala in 1949 and he concluded:

‘I excuse the length of this reference to the Koala by stressing this fact: the saving of this animal, with its accompanying forest lands – or at least a reasonable proportion of such – is of outstanding importance to all Nature lovers and conservationists in Australia. And even to many beyond Australia, as correspondence and printed comment has so often revealed’.

A report in *Australian Wildlife* on koalas (Summer 1/2005) indicates that the ‘battle is still not won’.

Having faced extinction in South Australia and Victoria in the early 1900s, koalas have since been returned to much of their former range in these states, as well as some areas where they were not recorded historically, as a result of protective legislation and active intervention. Surveys in New South Wales indicate that since 1949, populations of koalas have been lost from many localities, particularly on the southern and western edges of their distribution. Most populations in New South Wales now survive in fragmented and isolated habitat and many of the areas in which koalas are most abundant are subject to intense and ongoing pressures, in particular clearing for agriculture and urban expansion.

The loss and degradation of habitat is the most significant threat facing koala populations in Australia.

Koalas in New South Wales are very different genetically from koalas in South Australia and Victoria. In the early 1900s a small number of koalas were moved from the Victorian mainland to Phillip and French Islands in Western Port Bay. The purpose of this translocation was to establish new colonies where the threats from fire and human activities were less. These koalas bred very successfully and, because they were on islands, were not able to disperse. The result was that over-browsing of the available habitat became a major management concern. At that time, koalas were extinct in South Australia and numbers were very low on the Victorian mainland. Koalas from the island populations were used to re-stock mainland Victoria and South Australia, where koalas had once occurred, and were introduced to Kangaroo Island, where koalas had not occurred historically. Up until 1969 translocations also occurred from Kangaroo Island to populations on the South Australian mainland and translocations still occur in Victoria today.

As a result, the majority of today's wild koalas in Victoria and South Australia are the descendents of translocated stock. While this program has been successful in returning koalas to much of the area they originally inhabited (as well as some areas where they were not present historically), Victorian and South Australian animals have very low genetic diversity as a result of severe bottlenecks (periods of time when population numbers are very low) and the long-term program of active translocations. The result is that these koalas are showing characteristics which result from 'inbreeding depression,' such as albinism, the absence of reproductive features and abnormal sperm in males.

Koalas in New South Wales carry *Chlamydia*, a bacterial infection which usually lies dormant. Koalas are thought to display symptoms (such as urinogenital tract infection) when exposed to stress. This disease reduces fertility and is thought to regulate population numbers such that the animals do not become over-abundant. However, many koala populations in Victoria and South Australia, including those on Kangaroo Island and French Island, do not carry *Chlamydia* and have little or no resistance to the disease.

Some environmentalists believe the koalas of Kangaroo Island are vicious pests who are destroying the environment and murdering indigenous species and want to cull them as they believe they are wreaking havoc, stripping their favourite gum trees of leaves and destroying precious habitats.

The proponents of the culling of the Kangaroo Island koalas say that conservationists have tried to solve the problem by relocating some koalas to the mainland and even sterilising them. Now they say there is no alternative but a mass cull. The South Australian Government agrees, but says that it is out of the question: the country's image would be irrevocably tarnished, it argues, and tourism would go into free fall.

In the 1920s, things looked very different. Back then it was believed that the species was in danger of extinction because of hunting, disease, fire and extensive forest clearance. Eighteen koalas were released in Flinders Chase National Park, at the western end of Kangaroo Island, in an attempt to safeguard their survival. They thrived, they bred - and now there are unsubstantiated reports that more than 30,000 of them are chewing their way through the Island's eucalyptus trees.

With well-established koala populations all over the Island, the culling lobby reports that even a cursory drive reveals the trail of devastation left in their wake. A local eco-tourism guide reported that 'in a grove of red gums near the Cygnet River, koalas are draped lazily over the high branches, snoozing in the afternoon sun. One has a baby in its arms. It is an enchanting sight. But nearby stands a forlorn skeleton, stripped of leaves and dying'. 'Killed by koalas', he says.

In December 2004, National President Patrick W Medway AM and the Executive Director, Suzanne Medway, attended the Australian Wildlife Management Society's Annual Conference on Kangaroo Island, along with representatives of the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF), and together they were able to observe first-hand the status of the koala there. From their personal observations and enquiries, it was obvious that there is not an over-population of koalas on Kangaroo Island. They drove all over the island looking for koalas in the wild and were unsuccessful. In fact, after spending

over a week travelling around the island, they finally had to go to a wildlife sanctuary to see live wild koalas in trees.

In 2005 the Australian Koala Foundation called on the South Australian Minister for Environment and Conservation, the Hon. John Hill, to conduct an urgent review of the science underpinning koala number estimates on Kangaroo Island. AKF scientists had identified grave miscalculations and methodological problems in the research asserting the existence of 27,000 koalas on Kangaroo Island. AKF Executive Director, Deborah Tabart, said:

‘If we are to design effective koala management strategies, it is imperative that the science citing the accepted koala population number is accurate. Peer reviews should have picked this up ... the 27,000 population figure provides little more than a very crude guesstimate of actual koala numbers ... the methodology employed is scientifically irresponsible ... Our scientists have spent the last twelve years mapping four million hectares of koala habitat on mainland Australia so we know what we’re talking about ... the implications of these miscalculations and misinformation are severe and have led to calls for culling of the species’.

The AKF, established in 1987 and based in Brisbane, Queensland, is the world’s leading independent koala research, conservation and education organisation. It does not accept government funding and offers an independent voice for the koala on conservation and protection issues. In 2009 AKF has a sound support base, with 10,000 supporters worldwide.

In September 2004, the WPSA had written to the New South Wales Minister for the Environment, Hon. Bob Debus MP, exploring the possibility of translocation of koalas from Kangaroo Island to New South Wales. The Society had received a letter from Allen Stien of Grenfell on this subject. Bob Debus replied:

‘Thank you for your letter of 27 September 2004 Several similar suggestions to translocate koalas to various parts of New South Wales, particularly from Kangaroo Island, have been given considerable thought over recent years. However, there are several obstacles that would need to be overcome ... it is important to consider that koalas from one area can be genetically different from those in other areas ... In addition, koalas rely on a small number of eucalypt species ... koalas from Kangaroo Island [may] rely on trees which do not occur in New South Wales ... extensive testing of viable eucalypts would be necessary. Importantly, koalas face many threats, such as attacks from wild and domestic dogs, being hit by cars, loss of habitat and fire. Unless the factors that caused the disappearance of koalas from an area in the first place are addressed, they would prevent the successful translocation and establishment of a new colony of koalas ... A draft New South Wales Koala Recovery Plan has been prepared by the Department of Environment and Conservation and was publicly exhibited in 2003. Submissions have been reviewed and it is anticipated that a final plan will be submitted to me for adoption in late 2004’.

In response to the Bob Debus letter, the Summer 1/2005 article in *Australian Wildlife* (p.18) stated:

‘From our research, our Society believes that the introduction of a few new koalas into a new or foreign population actually INCREASES genetic diversity. Of course the whole argument about this and the possibility of introduction of disease is avoided if the introductions are into areas that are no longer populated by koalas, provided the factors which caused the earlier local extinction are controlled or removed’.

It would appear that a Recovery Plan was drawn up but to date there has been no practical outcome. Habitat loss continues to be a major drawback to recovery.

Meanwhile, independently of any moves by the various state bodies, the Australian Koala Foundation presented a submission to the Federal Environment Minister (Senator Ian Campbell) in July 2004, asking for the koala to be listed as a Vulnerable species. The AKF cited data from 1,109 field sites in its nomination to have the koala listed as ‘Vulnerable’ at a Federal level. This level of protection, says AKF researchers, is critical to ensuring a future, not only for Australia’s wild koalas, but also for the many other species that inhabit the continent’s eucalypt forests. The status of koalas in Australia needs to be upgraded to Vulnerable across its natural range as numbers continue to decline at an alarming rate. This, according to the AKF is a result of:

- habitat loss due to urban and agricultural development, as well as to logging
- habitat quality being degraded and adversely impacted by pressures such as: fragmentation; inappropriate fire regimes; salinity; tree disease; weed invasion and spread; loss of pollinators and seed dispersers; loss of vegetation structure; species imbalances; eucalypt hybridization; and genetic decline
- increased numbers of koalas being hit on the roads, attacked by feral and domestic animals and negatively affected by disease.

If koalas are not upgraded to Vulnerable as a matter of urgency, the AKF fears koala numbers will decline to such an extent that populations will be incapable of ever recovering. As this history goes to print, in 2009, the koala still has not been listed as Vulnerable nationally. It is listed as a priority species for assessment of its conservation status, but the AKF is still working on having it listed as Vulnerable. The Federal Government has set a date for its decision by 2010, but the AKF believes this is an unfortunate delay, even though the Government has a list of twenty species to consider. The AKF invites any concerned individual to contact them on www.savethekoala.com

At the Australasian Wildlife Management Society (AWMS) 17th Annual Conference in December 2004, (attended by Patrick and Suzanne Medway) Deborah Tabart, AKF’s Executive Director, made a statement which encapsulates the ongoing battle for the koala:

‘The issues of koala management, particularly in respect to Kangaroo Island and introduced and isolated koala populations can at times be a minefield of politics and arguing factions. However, it is hoped that a thoughtful, healthy debate regarding koala management activities will be generated from the proceedings, as well as a nexus of ideas and sharing of knowledge from all parties involved.’

Another group actively working on behalf of the koala is Friends of the Koala (FOK), licensed under the National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1974, to rescue and rehabilitate koalas since 1989. FOK's operations extend over an area of approximately 8,000 square kilometres and include the local government areas of Byron, Ballina, Lismore, Richmond Valley and parts of Kyogle and Tweed. Trained volunteers operate a twenty-four hour rescue service at the Koala Care and Research Centre, situated on the perimeter of Southern Cross University's Lismore campus.

The Northern Rivers koala population is significant both nationally and within New South Wales, yet little research by way of population studies (asserted in 2007), incidence of disease, etc, has been undertaken over the past decade. Only small parts of the region's vegetation have been properly mapped. Therefore the future of the koala on the Northern Rivers is grim, particularly towards the coast which is experiencing, in the 21st century, the greatest pressure for land-use change, be it residential, agricultural, industrial or for infrastructure.

David Stead wrote in the Society's 20th Annual Report (1928-29):

‘Details of a scheme for the re-establishment of the Native Bear in the eastern districts of New South Wales have been furnished to the members and the general public through a full-page, illustrated article, which appeared in the *Sydney Mail* of 23 January of this year, and which was reprinted and issued to members and friends While it is out of the question to bring the animal back to anything like its original numbers, we do hope to be able to restore it to the bush lands in sufficient numbers so that the populace (and especially the children) may be able to go out into the bush and see this lovable and picturesque animal.’