

AUSTRALIAN KOALA FOUNDATION  
CONFERENCE ON THE STATUS OF THE KOALA IN 2002  
**How the Past Affects the Koala's Future**  
Ballarat November 2002

**"ENCOURAGING RESPECT AND ADMIRATION FOR THE GREAT CHARACTERS OF THE BUSH - AN ECOTOUR OPERATOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON KOALAS"**

by Janine Duffy, Echidna Walkabout

**Introduction:**

Seeing Koalas in the wild is feasible and should be advocated for mainstream tourism.

**About Echidna Walkabout**

We have ten years experience as ecotour operator dealing with international travellers primarily. Echidna Walkabout offer a range of tours throughout Victoria, including a day tour that focusses on wildlife (Kangaroos at Serendip Sanctaury & Koalas in Brisbane Ranges NP), and extended tours in East Gippsland that visit Raymond Island, Nowa Nowa & Mallacoota (and sometimes see koalas, but lots of other mammals as well). We have a strong focus on environmental responsibility and sustainability, while marketing to mainstream travellers as our primary market, with some (growing rapidly) specialised wildlife groups. We have seen thousands of tourists and their reaction to koalas over ten years and as part of our belief in sustainability we conduct basic koala research while on tours and intensive research at other times.

**Our research**

Begun three years ago, our active koala research started partly out of interest in mapping home ranges (eg: Scruffy!! Our first subject - we knew him for 7 years before we started the research, and over time knew his home range to the tree). The Koala subjects are recognised by their nose patterns (so no need for radio-collars, tags or any contact) and are named and introduced to tourists by name and with a short history/character summary (our guests really respond to this!) We spend on average 3 days per week all year in the research site (on tour), plus one whole week every season (during last year, I hope to keep this up this year). We are getting good location/home range info plus indication of number of babies per year.

The aim: to get long term behavioral/interactive info & monitor impacts of tourism.

**Impacts so far**

There has been very little noticeable change in the three years. Some positives: Some individuals recognise our voices, and seem more relaxed than when we first met, and are probably more relaxed with strangers if we are there. Others are always nervous, so we are developing a policy of not visiting these too often. Koalas that see us, and other people often, display little reaction upon seeing us (qu: does this mean they are less stressed?). Negatives: we are watching out for changes in home ranges or avoidance of us - nothing to report so far, but it is difficult until we have mapped all their home ranges, which will still take some time.

### **What tourists expect**

KOALAS IN THE WILD. This is not negotiable with many tourists. Seeing them in captivity does not count. (We have heard this so many times from tourists of all types, nationalities, ages and backgrounds). They don't seem to mind if they see fewer koalas this way, or if the koala is hard to see - just as long as they can go back home and say they've seen a wild koala. Strangely, a lot of tourists expect koalas to be more active - to climb, feed and jump through the trees like monkeys - while others expect them to be slow-moving like sloths. The point is, most people have very little understanding of animal behavior.

These expectations are given to them, mostly by Australians, through the media of nature shows/documentaries, postcards and tourism information which so often show many koalas on one branch, koalas being cuddled by people and fluffy, alert, perfect koalas posing for photographs.

### **What tourists think of koalas**

Most love seeing them in the wild & enjoy the challenge of finding them. The thrill of being the first in the group to find a koala will often stay with the traveller all day - their fellow travellers & guide congratulate them, a gentle competition sometimes begins amongst the group (which makes them all focus much harder on their surroundings), and it possibly satisfies a primal instinct in us! Tourists are most impressed by how close to the koalas they are (the area we work in has small trees) and how the koalas don't try to run away. Travellers who have seen koalas in captivity are pleasantly surprised at how alert the wild koalas are, in contrast to the captive ones. Travellers who have not seen captive koalas before expect them to be alert anyway, so they are not disappointed. Introducing the koalas by name has a big impact on people - they often refer to them later by name, and even send photographs back with names attached! As soon as a new koala is spotted, they start pestering the guide: "Who is this? Do you know this one?" Each koala has become an individual, a personality, not just another animal.

### **In the wild**

Is the best way to see koalas. It satisfies the travellers first priority and they can then go home and say they've really seen a koala. Importantly, the koalas maintain their dignity! Also, the wild koalas have some control of the situation - they can usually move away if they are uncomfortable. With wild koalas there is a greater chance of watching some exciting and natural behavior, and as I mentioned before, the thrill of finding a koala yourself is a memorable thing for most people.

Why is dignity important? I believe that we preserve what we love. Humans can love koalas because they seem cuddly and cute, but this is a myth and bound to be discovered eventually. Or, humans can love & respect koalas for their real attributes - their calm approach to life, their quirky sense of humour, their courage and their determination to get that out-of-reach juicy leaf! Their exceptional maternal qualities, their balance and ability high in the small branches of a tree, and their ability to learn are all visible IN THE WILD.

### **In the wild does work**

Of course it is not always easy. Wild koalas can be hard to find some days, weather can interfere, they can move out of their normal ranges. But there are ways of reducing the

problems. We research the koalas - home ranges, tree preferences and seasonal movements. We train our guides to know each koala and to know and contribute to our research. We allocate a decent amount of time on each tour to looking for koalas (in our area it is not feasible to reliably find a few koalas in anything under one and a half hours). When we don't have much time, we use koala spotters in advance of the tour group. This has several advantages - the spotter finds a few koalas, records them for our research, and then chooses which ones are best suited to the situation. So very nervous or sick koalas can be avoided altogether, and mothers with babies and koalas that are very low down can be approached more quietly and carefully by the group because they know in advance.

### **In the wild is worth it**

The challenge of finding wild koalas adds to the excitement of the tour. The memories of the experience are special, so koalas achieve a status that not many animals have. Seeing koalas in the wild encourages research, and even passive research is valuable.

### **Good tourism can benefit koalas**

Money should go to habitat & research. Tourism can benefit from private wildlife reserves, not just National Parks, which could mean more habitat is preserved for koalas and other wildlife. Tourism can raise the status and recognition of koalas overseas, which could create pressure on government to protect koalas. Tourism can be economically powerful and can support an economic justification for koala protection.

In essence Koalas are extremely valuable to the Australian economy already, though sadly this fact is not recognised by governments or bureaucracy. They could become even more valuable if we improved the way we market and deliver the koala experience. They are one of the easiest animals to enjoy in the wild - they are out during the day, they are large and visible, they are extremely attractive, and in some areas they can be numerous. Through its huge worldwide influence, tourism, if handled correctly, can inspire the admiration & respect for these animals that has been lacking in Australia.

Australians need to value koalas more. Africa has a huge Nature Tourism industry that delivers an exceptional, reliable experience across the board. At the moment, Australia is promising but not delivering. Every time we market our mammals to the world - in brochures, on television advertising, on postcards - we make a promise to a potential traveller. We suggest that a traveller will see these animals while they are here. Every time one of those travellers goes back home without seeing one damage is done to our reputation as a Nature Tourism Destination, and an opportunity to recruit another koala-, kangaroo- or bird-lover is lost.

I completely agree with the Australian Koala Foundation: Australians need to stop looking at the problems associated with koalas, and start looking at the positives of this amazing natural asset - the Koala!

Janine Duffy, written November 2002, revised January 2003