



SAVING KOALAS: A FAMILY LEGACY

As Queensland's relentless urban sprawl threatens to wipe out our koala colonies, power couple Graham and Jude Turner are turning a luxury retreat into a safe haven for this unique marsupial

FRANCES WHITING



I am walking quietly through the Queensland bush; blue gums and ironbarks, bush flies and simmering heat, the sharp, sweet scent of eucalypt. In front of me, a tall man in a broadbrimmed hat is waving what looks like an old-fashioned television antenna above his head, while hanging from a strap at his side, a Very High Frequency (VHF) receiver unit intermittently emits a "beep".

As the beeps become louder and more frequent, the high-pitched tones discordant in the (save for the buzzing flies and chirping cicadas) silent bush, the man's stride grows quicker and more purposeful. Then he stops still, and looks up into a grove of eucalypts, craning his neck and peering into the branches. I gaze upwards also, then, for no reason – although I will later claim I knew exactly what I was doing – cast my eyes downwards. And there, in my lowered eyeline, sitting about two metres away in the fork of a tree, is a beautiful, ash grey, fluffy-eared koala staring at me with an expression that says what can only be described as, "What?"

It is difficult to describe the excitement of that moment, the instance of coming across a koala in its native habitat, but suffice to say it is a rippling sort of thrill that feels very unlike that experienced when seeing one in captivity.

This feels a little emotional. And somehow comforting, that in this day of shrinking habitats and razed koala corridors, it is still possible to stumble across not one, but several *Phascolarctos cinereus* in their natural surrounds. And it also feels, here in the stinking 38-degree heat with the odd scream of a cockatoo overhead, very Australian.

It's a feeling that Queensland tourism entrepreneurs and philanthropists Graham "Skroo" and Jude Turner, best known as the founders of Flight Centre, and the Spicers group of Luxury Retreats, hope to share with guests as part of their latest venture, the recently completed Hidden Vale Wildlife Centre. Based at their Spicers Hidden Vale Retreat, at Grandchester in the Lockyer Valley, about 80km southwest of Brisbane, the centre is part of the Turner Family Foundation's \$18 million broader and ongoing conservation project.

The project, in partnership with the University of Queensland, conducts research and teaching into the breeding and care of Australia's endangered and vulnerable wildlife and habitats. It also, through land ownership, protects those habitats. In the case of Spicers Hidden Vale, that's about 3100 glorious hectares for all creatures great and small. The Turners' commitment is believed to be one of the largest family contributions to conservation in Queensland's history, a legacy investment that Jude Turner hopes will pay off for generations to come.

"Turning the tide on extinction takes time," says Turner, 65, "and there are no short-term solutions. To make it happen, we felt we had to build the Wildlife Centre, which cost about \$5 million, and to keep it funded and running for at least 30 years we've worked out the back-up required, otherwise it's just talk. It turned out that commitment comes to at least \$18 million, probably more."

At the Hidden Vale Wildlife Centre, this translates to six, huge, secure and climate-controlled aviaries/enclosures, a veterinary clinic, a lecture theatre, study spaces, and two research laboratories. Post- and undergraduate students from UQ walk the hallways checking on their own particular projects, including a 150-strong breeding colony of tiny marsupials the fat-tailed dunnarts, and the welfare of five extremely cute mahogany gliders that play in the enclosures all night and snooze in accessible nesting boxes all day.

Among the property's other residents being studied are the eastern bristle bird, the spotted-tail quoll, the glossy



FIELD WORK: Dr Andrew Tribe, Hidden Vale's vet and wildlife manager, with a UQ student; (opposite page) Skroo (named for co-owner Graham "Skroo" Turner) poses for the camera. **Picture:** (above) Michael Mann

black cockatoo, the square-tailed kite, the brush-tailed rock wallaby and, of course, the koala.

This particular one (the koala still eyeballing me from her fork in the tree) is called Mara, says the man with the waving antenna – otherwise known as Hidden Vale's veterinarian and wildlife manager, Dr Andrew Tribe. Tribe, 66, who was senior lecturer in wildlife at UQ for 24 years and senior veterinarian at the Melbourne Zoo from 1985 to 1991, has been at the centre since its planning stages, in 2016. He has come to know the koalas that live and travel (between one and 5km a day) throughout the property and its surrounds very well, although he seems to have a particularly soft spot for Mara, a female that's had two joeys in the past three years. "Isn't she lovely?" he grins, and then, with the VHF receiver beeping madly, he's off again to find another one of Hidden Vale's koalas – Jimbo, perhaps, or Flanners ... or Skroo, or Jude, or any one of the 25 or so koalas contentedly munching through the eucalypts.

PUTTING KOALAS ON THE MAP

Guests at Hidden Vale, a sprawling estate scattered with luxurious cabins, a swimming pool, an award-winning restaurant, Homage, and the largest privately owned mountain-bike park in Australia, can now join Tribe, or Spicers land and environment general manager Ben O'Hara, on one of their one-and-a-half to two-hour "Koala Safaris". For \$75, with all money going back into the Wildlife Centre, Spicers guests can take the short stroll from the Retreat to the Wildlife Centre, then set off by car in small groups (a maximum of six people) for some koala spotting.

And unlike some other wildlife safaris, where sightings can be sporadic, or non-existent (I once spent a futile six hours bobbing around on a boat trying to spot a humpback whale), guests are highly likely to spy at least one koala among the gum trees, thanks to Tribe's trusty antenna, and a very healthy resident koala population.



“This is Mara [with one of two joeys she's had in the past three years]. Isn't she lovely?”

HELPING HAND: (clockwise from left) A Hidden Vale staff member with koala Mara (and joey), 2018; the Turner family (from left): Matthew, Jude, Joanne and Graham; the Hidden Vale Wildlife Centre.

sustainable for the koalas,” he says. “And then, when the land is cleared, we put cars and dogs on it. Our koalas are in danger every single day.”

The precarious position of the state's koala population is well-known – in 2012, the Federal Government listed the koala as “vulnerable” in Queensland, under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. For an animal to be declared “vulnerable”, the Act's guidelines say there must be, among several other markers, a 10 per cent probability of extinction in the wild in the “medium-term future”. Despite this, land clearing continues in known koala corridors in Queensland, and while governments on both sides of the political fence make the right noises about the importance of the species, and throw around words such as “iconic” and “uniquely Australian”, O'Hara says it's people like the Turners – and increasingly the landowners around them at their various properties – who are actively making a difference.

HOME ON THE RANGE

There's a bigger picture at play in these picturesque surroundings. The Little Liverpool Range Initiative is part of an ambitious plan by the Turners to protect the koalas on the Spicers Property, then those in its neighbouring surrounds, the wider regions, the cities, the state, and ultimately, Jude Turner says, the nation.

“That's one for our children and grandchildren to keep pursuing,” she says, “but that's how we need to be thinking – not just now, but into the future.”

The Little Liverpool Range – a known koala corridor – encompasses roughly 44,000ha, from Hatton Vale in the north to Main Range, including Grandchester, Mulgowie and Thornton, in the south. The ambitious plan hinges on engaging the wider community along the Range to take on some of the Turners' initiatives, and introduce “koala-friendly” practices on their land and surrounds.

And, Tribe says, they've found plenty of willing listeners. “We have found in all our discussions and meetings, when we essentially say to the property owners, ‘will you come with us?’, they are really enthusiastic,” he says. “They want to work with us on things like controlling predator populations, eradicating introduced weeds, and preparing their properties for fire and tree planting to encourage and protect koala populations.”

“One fellow we spoke to had just sold the contract to clear some land on his property to a timber company, so his hands were tied, but he said: ‘Look, once all this is cleared, let me know what I should plant, what species of gums is best for the koalas and where to plant them to give those koalas a safer passage.’

“Now that's a long way away for those trees to grow, but that's exactly the sort of long-term thinking that will help this species survive.”

In the meantime, while tours of the Wildlife Centre and the Koala Safaris are available to Spicers guests only, there are plans for a small campsite on an area of the property known as “Bubbling Springs”.

Here, guests will be able to pitch their own tents, or stay in permanent campsites, and take part in the safaris.

But that's another long-term goal, and for now our small group is off again, following Tribe and his antenna to a tall blue gum, where a young buck sits atop a branch, surveying his surrounds and managing to look both ridiculously cute and noble at the same time. “That's Charlie,” Tribe says. “Isn't he an absolute beauty?”

He really is, the sort of beauty that's priceless. ■
spicershiddenvale.com



The ultimate aim of the project is to develop and sustain the existing koala group on the Hidden Vale property, which in the future could serve as a “source” population in the wider, Little Liverpool Range area. Hidden Vale's koalas have unusually low levels of clinical chlamydia, the sexual transmitted disease so prevalent in many koala populations, and they are mostly young adults, making them ideal candidates for a breeding program.

But first, Tribe and O'Hara say, they must find out more about the koalas' numbers, reproductive rates, mortality rates, movements and dispersal patterns.

“So far we have fitted 24 koalas with radio tracking collars on the eastern half of the property,” Tribe says. “We put a GPS collar around their neck, which emits a signal at 10am and 10pm to base stations on the property. We need these stations to be up relatively high so we can get a clear line to the koala. We can then look on our website to see where they are.”

The website uses Google Maps of the property, and on it, the site's familiar red location pins (usually used to pinpoint addresses) indicate where the koalas are. One area often seems to have a cluster of these pins; Tribe says it is Spicers' own koala “hot spot”, and it is there we will later find Mara.

“We also put anklets on them with Very High Frequency [VHF] transmitters, and each koala has its own frequency, which is then picked up by the VHF receiver, which, as you heard, beeps louder the closer you get to the particular

koala you are looking for.” In other words, before setting off with guests on a safari, the Spicers team is able to use Google Maps to pinpoint each koala's rough whereabouts on the property, and then use each koala's specific frequency to locate a particular marsupial. So my spotting of Mara was less “koala whisperer” and more science.

Tribe says the lightweight collar and anklet do not appear to bother their wearers.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

There is much we do know about this much-loved, uniquely Australian animal, and much we don't, O'Hara says. On the “do know” side is the fact that Queensland's koala population is dwindling, and while the population estimates vary wildly, depending on whether they are sourced from government or conservation group numbers, O'Hara says a fair, ballpark figure in southeast Queensland would be about 30,000.

In August 2016, the World Wildlife Fund Australia and the Australian Koala Foundation released a report that found 84,000ha of critical koala habitat in Queensland had been cleared between 2013 and 2015. The figure – obtained by overlapping Queensland Government maps of vegetation clearing with Queensland Koala Habitat mapping in the two-year period – does not surprise O'Hara at all.

“The clearing of land is relentless and ongoing and non-