

“They just get under your skin”

With the 1974 floods in mind, the Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary staff knew that a water level nine meters above normal meant the park would get flooded. Unaware of the Brisbane devastation outside their “bubble”, the staff worked tirelessly rescuing animals from incoming waters.

The animals at Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary, the world’s largest koala park, right on the Brisbane River, are like a second family for the staff. Everyone worked hard to rescue their family members during the Queensland floods.

Around 70 koalas were moved from their homes on lower ground. The staff knew which animals would get along. Some moved in with the elderly koalas, some ended up in the entrance shop. And the kookaburras didn’t seem to mind the sleepy visitors suddenly squashed into their cage. Snakes were put in boxes on the office lunch table. The kangaroos hopped to higher ground in their enclosure.

“It was a smooth transition”, says Jini Vale, worker at Lone Pine. “The koala girls are much easier to put together. Boys are harder to move, they have a higher hierarchy”.

The worst struggle was rescuing an echidna, which had buried itself in the soil. A worker dug it out by hand minutes before the flooding.

Dedicated

As the storm water ran down and met the floods in lower grounds it had nowhere to go. The ground was one and a half meters under water in some places.

“Watching this water was just nuts, very emotional”, says Jini Vale. “It was really scary, yet exciting”.

For the animals, however, this was pretty much normal. They are used to being carried and cuddled, especially the koalas from the cuddling area. They didn’t know their homes had gone.

“I’m sure they thought ‘why are we in here’”, says Jini Vale, holding her favourite koala, Guppy, who lives in a temporary home while the koala enclosures and cuddling area are being rebuilt. During the rescue Guppy stayed in the retirement home, which housed 22, compared to the ordinary ten.

Jini Vale was devastated seeing Guppy's home being washed away. In a few hours all animals were moved to safety, one day before the actual flooding on January 12th. Love and loyalty for the animals kept the staff, who came a lot closer, going.

"They just get under your skin. You never get rich, but in there", she says, pointing to her heart, "you are".

The next days were crazy. Without power or TV they didn't know the situation outside. Some worked two days with no sleep. After a few days the animals moved back and the staff cleaned up the mud together with volunteers.

Eight days after the floods the park opened again.

Washed away from home

Outside the Lone Pine bubble, wildlife was in terror.

"This poor snake and this poor frog had hopped on to a piece of polystyrene. Normally the snake would eat the frog. They were washed down from where they normally live and found in the Brisbane River", says Lesley Cains, volunteer administrator at Wildcare Australia.

"The floods were so widespread. Creatures were washed down all the way from Toowoomba to Grantham. Birds can fly to a safe place, but echidnas or potoroos cannot".

The number of suffering animals is undetermined. Many animals lost their homes and food sources. The difference between living and dying is sometimes a matter of luck. A koala, which manages to hang on to a tree high enough it doesn't get washed away, will be fine. But a kangaroo might get eaten by a dingo, which normally doesn't eat kangaroos. Grass for kangaroos is harder to find.

The platypus concerns Lesley Cains the most. Platypuses are egg laying mammals and live in the water, but can only hold their breath for ten minutes. If its burrow is flooded, the platypus will try to get to the surface for air. However if the currents are too strong it will get washed away, end up in an area where it can't get out of the water, and drown.

In the wrong habitat

Most animals can swim, but not forever. Cows were found out in the sea.

"If there is enough water to wash away an entire house, a cow will not make it either", says Lesley Cains.

Nature's dynamics are disturbed in many ways after the floods.

“Most animals live in an area where they can survive, in the right habitat. If they get washed into an area that doesn’t have what the animal needs, it will die”, says Lesley Cains.

Rubbish, nets and farmers’ tools came with the floods, too. Wildlife and sea life get tangled up in nets.

“Rubbish is a great danger for wildlife”, says Lesley Cains. “For instance, when the polystyrene that the frog and the snake climbed on to breaks up, the small pieces will look like food to some animals, but they can’t digest it”.

Generally when Wildcare Australia takes in an injured animal they know where to release it. Because of the floods they don’t know where the animals lived. Finding release spots takes time.

“You can’t just shove an animal up a tree,” says Lesley Cains.

Helping out

There is not a lot of possible preventive work for the animals in case of another flood. RSPCA, Wildcare Australia and Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary depend on donations.

“All appeals are to help people, not wildlife. People think there are stacks of kangaroos and stacks of koalas, but there aren’t”, says Lesley Cains.

For the next twelve months Wildcare will try to find release spots for animals they have taken care of. RSPCA is reuniting pets with their owners.

At Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary things are back to normal, almost. Guppy and her friends are cuddling visitors everyday; their new cuddling area is almost ready. Oh, but something unusual is about to happen. Jini Vale is getting married in the park, with her two favourite koalas as guests of honour.

“That’s proof of how much you love it. It wouldn’t be a wedding without koalas, you know”.

By: Josefine Hagström

Breakout boxes:

Wildcare Australia

You can become a rescuer with basic first aid knowledge, and for example go get an injured animal on a road, or take part in various workshops and be a certified carer. To be a certified carer you need to prepare your home for taking care of animals. Usually you are specialised on a certain animal. A bat specialist, for example, would get special gloves so that they can hold a bat without getting bitten.

Releasing an animal back to the wild

To prepare an animal for release, move it from home to a huge cage in your garden where it meets other animals. Leave the cage door open, and the animal will get out and come back to the cage a couple of times until it understands it is a wild animal. Eventually it will take off.



Lesley Cains with koala girl Guppy.

If a koala manages to hang on to a tree high enough, and the tree doesn't get washed away, the koala will be fine.

"It's a question of luck", says Lesley Cains.

