

Learning lessons from bushfires for koala survival

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A University of Adelaide-led research project will study the clinical data of koalas injured in last summer's devastating bushfires to give them the best possible chance of survival and recovery in future bushfires.

It is estimated that tens of thousands of koalas died—up to 80% of the Kangaroo Island koalas and at least 30% in NSW—and many more were injured in the fires which swept across large areas of their habitats in eastern and southern Australia.

"Many of these bushfires occurred in koala habitat, and because koalas are eucalypt specialists and rely upon eucalypt trees for food, water and shelter, they are particularly vulnerable," says project leader Dr. Natasha Speight, koala health specialist at the University of Adelaide's School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences.

"These fires had a devastating impact on already vulnerable communities of koalas in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia.

"They were burnt or left dehydrated and hungry in the days following the fires, and their rescue and care largely relied on the tireless dedication of experienced koala rescue volunteers, and willingness of wildlife parks, wildlife hospitals, zoos and private veterinary clinics to receive hundreds of patients for treatment and care.

"They did an amazing job. Unfortunately we know it is very likely that there will be more fires in the future, and next time we want to help make sure these wonderful people have the best healthcare guidance at their fingertips."

With funding support from the Morris Animal Foundation's new Australian Wildlife Fund, the researchers will review how koalas were affected by the recent bushfires, based on clinical data recorded by wildlife and zoo veterinarians and rescue groups that treated the koalas caught in the fires in Kangaroo Island, Cudlee Creek near Adelaide, and near Port Macquarie in NSW.

"We will work closely with the key agencies that were involved in koala rescue and treatment from these regions including staff from Zoos SA, Kangaroo Island Wildlife Park, Adelaide Koala Rescue, and Port Macquarie Koala Hospital, as their hard work and dedication to koala welfare makes this study possible," says Dr. Speight.

"The findings will help identify risk factors and treatment outcomes for koalas related to burns, smoke inhalation, dehydration, and disease. This new information will be essential for caring for koalas impacted by future bushfires."

Provided by University of Adelaide

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