



Golf courses are ideally placed to provide habitat, sanctuary and food sources for koalas, as well as act as safe 'super highways' for them to travel through

# Koalas on the green

Kate Torgersen looks at a unique initiative on the Gold Coast which is seeing golf courses play a key role in providing safe havens and food sources for an Australian icon.

**W**e all know how valuable our golf courses are to the environment, especially within urban areas, but this initiative I am about to tell you about is showcasing how golf courses can play a critical role in the long-term future of our many vulnerable flora and fauna species.

Earlier this year I was introduced to David Cuschieri, an interior designer from the Gold Coast. You may be wondering how an interior designer can be helping the environment on golf courses...? Well, David and his wife Heidi are also volunteer wildlife rescuers and carers and have come up with an initiative called 'Koalas on the Green'.

The initiative came about after they attended over 100 callouts to sick and injured koalas around the Gold Coast just last year. When a koala is rescued and rehabilitated by wildlife hospitals, according to Department of Environment and Science regulations they

must be released within five kilometres of its rescue location. And where can you find an expansive green area among the ever-growing urban sprawl... a golf course!

Not only are koalas battling with urban developments, but we also witnessed the devastating bushfires that occurred last summer. It is believed that the bushfires decimated around one third of Australia's remaining koala population, almost to the point that groups are calling for their conservation status to be upgraded from vulnerable to critically endangered. If there was ever a time to act, that time is now!

## PERFECT ENVIRONMENT

Why a golf course? Well, they provide habitat, sanctuaries, food sources and safe 'koala super highways' as David calls them, allowing koalas to travel safely, avoiding dog encounters, car strikes or being trapped by residential fences.

One golf course that has embraced the Koalas on the Green programme is Arundel Hills Country Club. This all came about when Charles the koala was rescued by David and Heidi from a property near the golf course in mid-2019. Charles was unable to see as he had chlamydial conjunctivitis and because of his condition would have most likely starved to death, been struck by a car or attacked by a dog.

After Charles was treated at Australia Zoo's wildlife hospital, the dilemma then became finding somewhere safe to release him within his home range. Arundel Hills was the perfect solution and he was released there to hopefully enjoy a more peaceful life. Releasing Charles at Arundel Hills was the inspiration for David to instigate the Koalas on the Green programme which involves planting food and habitat trees within golf course environs to provide sanctuaries, safe havens and food resources for urban koala populations.

Starting in November 2019, the pilot project at Arundel Hills has been a great success. Working closely with golf club, David and his team of volunteers have planted koala food trees in areas that do not compromise or interfere with the members or obstruct residential views. At first there were mixed reactions from members fearful that more trees would create more hazards. However, as time went on, there were very positive responses.

The programme was initially self-funded by David and Heidi before they successfully applied for a Commonwealth Government Community Environment Program Grant through the local member for Fadden, The Hon. Stuart Robert MP. As of the end of May 2020, the team has planted 240 trees and installed tree guards.

The trees that have been planted at Arundel Hills are specific eucalypts that koalas prefer. There are over 700 species of eucalypts in Australia, however, koalas only eat a relatively few species. Among those planted at Arundel Hills include:

- *Eucalyptus tereticornis* (forest red gum or blue gum);
- *Eucalyptus microcorys* (tallowwood);
- *Eucalyptus robusta* (swamp mahogany or swamp messmate);
- *Eucalyptus propinqua* (grey gum or small-fruited grey gum).

These are all endemic species and different species were planted in different areas around the course based on varying site conditions. A few *Melaleuca quinquenervia* (broad-leafed paperbark) were also planted in areas which were permanently boggy. These trees are mainly shelter trees and help to create connected wildlife corridors. Koalas will occasionally eat the leaves and blossoms of these trees too.

David and his team of volunteers regularly check the plantings, remove weeds and maintain them. After some issues with kangaroos foraging the new plantings, they are currently installing and experimenting with some more sturdy tree guards in one area.

The plan for the next 12 months is to undertake ongoing maintenance work to ensure that the trees survive. The trees will need time to mature before a positive impact can be seen, but in the meantime the initiative is creating greater environmental awareness not only among the golfers but also among the wider community.

"It is a shared responsibility to look after our communities and this includes our non-human residents as well," explains David. "Often golf courses are the largest tracts of private land in a suburb and as such they can provide vital habitat and corridors for all forms of wildlife."

"While we are focusing on koala's with this project, you can translate what we are doing to



The Koalas on the Green project involves planting food and habitat trees in out of play areas on the golf course that will eventually provide sanctuaries, safe havens and food resources for urban koala populations



other species as well. My advice to golf clubs would be to take a look at the wildlife in your surrounding area as you may discover that there is a unique species that you may be able to focus a similar project on. For instance, you may have sugar gliders or black cockatoos in your area.

"By focusing on a particular species, be it the koala for instance, it helps to create community focus. The clearer you can be with your message the easier it will be to inspire surrounding residents to become involved. Social media is also a powerful tool and it can be used to engage your community. They can report sightings of animals, posting images and locations on the golf course online, progress of the project and any future group planting events."



After being rescued from a nearby property last year, Charles the koala was nursed back to health and released at Arundel Hills

For Arundel Hills course superintendent and ASTMA member Brad Gundry, the programme has been nothing but positive for the club: "The Koalas on the Green programme is an excellent initiative that Arundel Hills is very happy and proud to be a part of. The initial response from our members was a very positive one as they share the same care for the koalas here as we do. As of this point there has been zero interference with the day-to-day running of the course.

"We have an amazing member by the name of Michelle Brown who cares for sick and injured wildlife here at the club who has been extremely helpful in showing people involved in the programme where the best places are for planting to take place. All in all the programme so far has been fantastic and hopefully the club and Koalas on the Green see some great results from it."

## BECOME INVOLVED

Since being in contact with David, we have been brainstorming how to get more golf courses on board, looking into funding options, utilising community groups and getting members involved. We already have a local Gold Coast course that has approached us to look at revegetating out of play areas to provide habitat and food sources for local fauna, as well as provide a facility for wildlife carers to harvest leaves, flowers and fruit for animals in their care. We are also looking at running programmes on golf courses in bushfire affected areas.

If you would like to know more about the Koalas on the Green initiative, contact myself (kate@envirogolf.com.au) or David through the Koalas on the Green website (www.koalasonthegreen.com) or Facebook page (www.facebook.com/koalasonthegreen).