

THE WORST ANIMAL WELFARE CRISIS THAT NO-ONE'S HEARD OF



Animal welfare impacts of tree-clearing in NSW

There is an alarming lack of recognition that tree-clearing is a major animal cruelty issue in NSW.

An estimated 5 to 10 million vertebrate animals are killed each year in NSW when trees are bulldozed, but the animal welfare impacts are almost completely ignored under current laws. This mass suffering and loss of life puts tree-clearing up into the top ranks of animal welfare issues in NSW, and possibly also Australia (Box 1).

The number of native animals suffering is increasing. Destruction of bushland habitats for wildlife in NSW has escalated following repeal of tree-clearing controls in 2017, nearly tripling in one 110km x 210km study area in northwest NSW, and nearly doubling in three other study areas around Narrabri, Dubbo and the Hunter Valley.¹

TREE-CLEARING ANIMAL WELFARE CRISIS “LARGELY INVISIBLE”

Habitat destruction causes mass suffering, injury and death of native wild animals to the point it must be considered cruel.

However, because it is largely invisible and occurs far from the public gaze, public recognition of the wild animal welfare crisis is low, compared with relatively high public awareness of the welfare issues for pets and livestock (Box 1).



KOALA KILLED ON THE ROADSIDE IN CAMPBELLTOWN, NSW IN 2018 © RICARDO CARLO LONZA 'HELP SAVE THE WILDLIFE AND BUSHLANDS IN CAMPBELLTOWN'

¹ <https://www.nature.org.au/media-releases/2019/03/destruction-of-koala-habitat-now-widespread-in-nsw/>

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BOX 1

WILD ANIMAL WELFARE IN CONTEXT IN NSW



Caged laying hens in NSW:
2.5 million²



Sheep 'mulesed' every year in NSW:
7.5 million³



Numbers of wild native animals killed by
tree-clearing annually in NSW:
4.9 -10 million⁴



Number of wild native animals saved or
helped by WIRES NSW 2011-17:
436,187⁵

When trees are bulldozed native animals living in them may be killed outright or maimed from being crushed or falling to the ground. Those that escape may be hit by cars or attacked by dogs. Even if they make it to remaining habitat, there is usually no room for them there and they suffer and die due to overcrowding, deprivation, conflict, stress and disease.

This report exposes the hidden crisis of the impacts of tree-clearing on wild animals in NSW and recommends steps to alleviate this crisis by closing the gaps in law and policy that allow wildlife welfare to be disregarded.

²We multiplied the number of laying hens in NSW 4.98 million in 2016-17 by 50% to derive this figure. According to RSPCA roughly half of egg production is from battery hens. SOURCES: RSPCA 2016. The welfare of layer hens in cage and cage-free housing systems. Australian Bureau of Statistics: 7121.0 - Agricultural Commodities, Australia, 2016-17 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@nsf/DetailsPage/7121.02016-17?OpenDocument>)

³Mulesing is the surgical removal of skin folds around the crotch of sheep to prevent flesh flies laying eggs. According to Animals Australia, 20 million sheep are mulesed every year nationwide <https://www.animalsaustralia.org/issues/mulesing.php>. There are ~27 million sheep in NSW out of a national total of 72 million (See ABS source previous footnote). Pro rata therefore about 7.5 million animals are mulesed in NSW.

⁴Taylor, MFJ, Dickman, CR (2018) Native animals lost to tree-clearing in NSW 1998-2015. WWF-Australia.

⁵This study.



FEMALE WALLAROO & JOEY HIT BY CAR IN MINTO HEIGHTS, NSW IN 2018 © RICARDO CARLO LONZA 'HELP SAVE THE WILDLIFE AND BUSHLANDS IN CAMPBELLTOWN'

LOSS OF LIFE

Based on areas cleared and average densities about 5 million mammals (excluding bats), birds and reptiles lose their habitats annually as a result of tree clearing. This includes:

- over half a million mammals, including koalas, possums and gliders, dunnarts and quolls
- over 600,000 birds, such as cockatoos, treecreepers, thornbills, robins and flycatchers
- 3.8 million reptiles, including snakes, goannas, dragons, skinks and geckos.

We also estimate that this figure is likely to have at least doubled to about 10 million animals lost annually, following the 2017 repeal of the *Native Vegetation Act* based on the increases in clearing rates we have observed.⁶

INJURY AND SUFFERING POST CLEARING

LACERATIONS AND BROKEN LIMBS: Tree-clearing causes traumatic injuries which inflict a high level of pain and suffering and a high likelihood of death. These include fractures, lacerations, external and internal haemorrhaging, and organ damage from direct crushing (by machinery, falling timber, earth and rocks) or from falling out of trees as they are knocked down (nestlings and juveniles).

Mobile animals such as birds and macropods may suffer traumatic injuries as they flee and are exposed to traffic, entanglement in fencing and powerlines, higher than natural levels of attacks by dogs, cats and other predators, or even by livestock.⁷ Higher than natural levels of injuries may result from fights with other animals due to crowding into remaining forest patches.

BURNS: In rural areas, log piles may be burnt after clearing. Any animals sheltering in those logs are likely to be burnt to death or suffer burns as they escape the fire.



X-RAY OF KOALA WITH LEG FRACTURE FROM VEHICLE STRIKE, APRIL 2017 © ENDEAVOUR VETERINARY ECOLOGY

⁶ Taylor, MFJ, Dickman, CR (2018) Native animals lost to tree-clearing in NSW 1998-2015. WWF-Australia, Sydney

⁷ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-16/close-up-of-rescued-injured-koala-harriet-with-her-joey-taylor/8626000>

INJURY AND SUFFERING POST CLEARING

DEPRIVATION AND EXPOSURE: Deprivation suffered by animals due to clearing includes suffocation, starvation, dehydration, heat exposure and heat stroke. Burrowing or small animals, or those lying stunned or injured on the ground during clearing, may be buried alive and suffocated or trapped under timber or earth as it is moved around by machinery. Small animals suddenly left in a treeless environment may be unable to reach other habitat in time to avoid predation, starvation, dehydration or heat stroke. This is a high risk for young and orphaned animals, including pouch marsupials and nestlings. Starvation or exposure also occurs when animals flee to other habitats, where they would often face overcrowding, conflict and exclusion or expulsion.

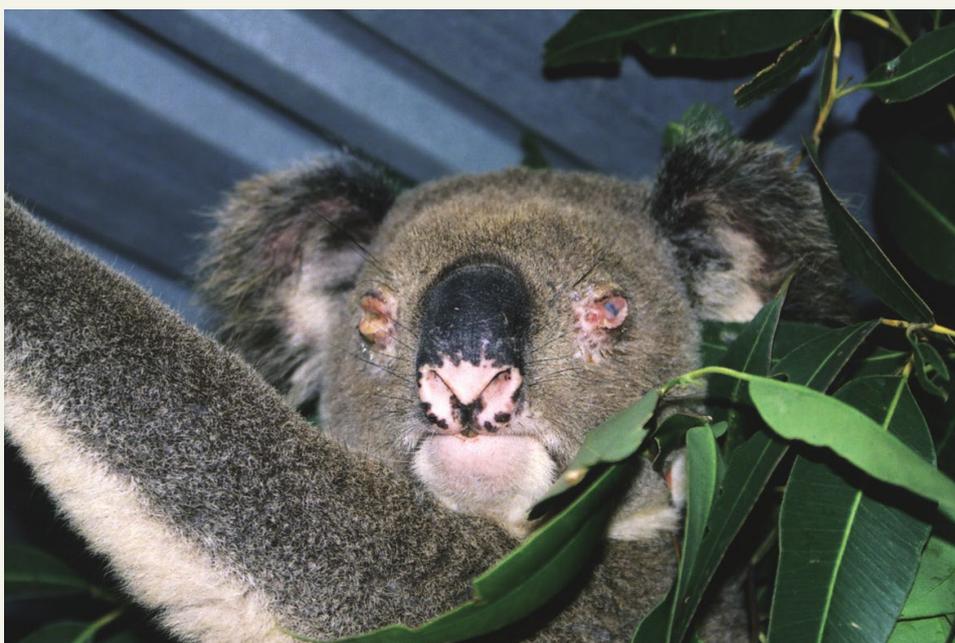


Image: Eastern Pygmy-possum joey rescued by WIRES late last year near the edge of a road on the Mid South Coast weighing just 6 grams. She was in care until she was 16 grams and then released successfully back to the wild.

© WIRES

STRESS AND DISEASE: Even in the absence of traumatic injury and pain, animals experience mental anguish and stress from losing shelter and food sources, and by being forced to flee.⁸ If they arrive uninjured at suitable new habitat, they can still face stress from overcrowding and conflict with resident animals. Koalas are very attached to their favourite trees, and have been known to return to a felled tree to try to climb it.

The vertebrate stress response becomes debilitating if it reaches overload. At that point, immunity may be compromised, resulting in infection and illness.⁹ Traumatic injuries, especially lacerations, greatly increase the risk of infection. Animals that survive their injuries are likely to suffer secondary infections. Food shortages, exposure and stress also lead to increased disease risk.



KOALA EYE INFECTION © LYRIS WOODS, WIRES

⁸ Koolhaas JM et al. 1999. Coping styles in animals: current status in behavior and stress-physiology. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 23, 925-935.

⁹ Hing S et al. 2016. The relationship between physiological stress and wildlife disease: consequences for health and conservation. *Wildlife Research* 43, 51-60.

WIRES ANIMAL RESCUES IN NSW

WIRES (NSW Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc.) is Australia's largest wildlife rescue organisation. WIRES mission is to actively rehabilitate and preserve Australian wildlife and inspire others to do the same.

WIRES recorded 436,187 wild native animals suffering known or possibly human-caused impacts passing through their rescue system in the six years 2011/12 to 2016/17, and for which locations were recorded. Of these 95% were terrestrial. Just 20 native animals that tolerate suburban environments well account for 70% of all of these rescues or encounters (Figure 1).

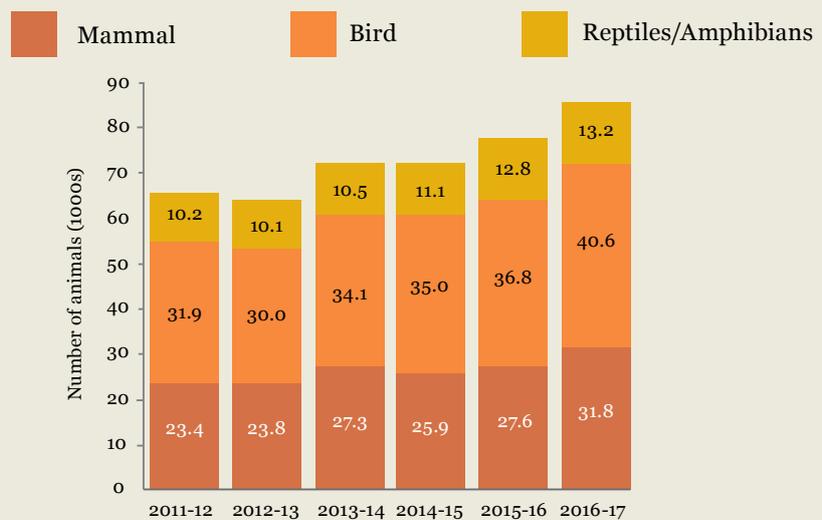


Figure 1. Numbers of wild native terrestrial or aquatic mammals, birds and reptiles or frogs treated by WIRES in NSW from 2011 to 2017 with known locations, and known or possibly non-natural reason for rescue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen laws regulating tree-clearing: The reform of most urgent importance is to greatly curtail the destruction of bushland habitats and native wildlife known as tree-clearing or landclearing. Stronger legal controls are critical to drive down rates of destruction, regardless of who is doing it or why.

Mandatory wildlife salvage: Wildlife salvage should be mandatory for any tree clearing which is permitted, including pre-clearing surveys of native animals and the relocation of animals at risk to suitable habitat with proven capacity to absorb the immigrant animals. Wildlife salvage experts should be professionally trained, certified, independent and bound by a code of practice. Those destroying habitats should be required to fund regeneration of formerly lost wildlife habitats, so that there is net gain in wildlife habitats. Currently, offsets are not genuine since they result in net loss of habitats.

Support wildlife rescue services: Wildlife rescuers, hospitals and veterinary clinics need greater financial support, especially in under-served rural areas.

