

Using Carer Statistics for Conservation

Initially this paper was prepared as a response to a proposal to centralise WIRES record keeping. For me it is imperative that wildlife records are kept by the local branch, so that they can be accessed for conservation purposes, whether it be providing information to the development assessment process, or by helping demonstrate the value of an area for protection or acquisition. I understand that this centralising proposal is no longer current, but hopefully this paper will still be a spur to other groups to collect, collate and use their data in this way. Such constructive use of the information will help safeguard it from misguided attempts at organisational efficiencies.

I work as a freelance wildlife management consultant. Most of my work is assessing impacts on wildlife, particularly threatened species, from proposed developments. To do this effectively I need to know what animals are in each locality. I use the NSW Wildlife Atlas, ask locals, check past fauna reports, and use my local knowledge, but often the best source of information is WIRES records. Time and again the existence of these records allows me to "save" habitats by recommending modifications to developments. I can feed these records directly into the local environmental planning process, and without them it is hard to stop the destruction. In particular, our Coffs Harbour koala records directly inform the local Koala Management Plan. It is also important that records stay local because they are mostly meaningless to non locals.

Coffs Harbour WIRES threatened species list (calls attended) for the period 1/7/03 – 31/3/04 reads: Grey-headed Flying Fox 308, Koala 88, Squirrel Glider 6, Wompoo Fruit-dove 4, Rose-crowned Fruit-dove 2, and 1 each of Stephens Banded Snake, White Tern, Grey Ternlet, Sooty Tern, Bush Hen, Osprey, Sooty Owl, Green Turtle and Common Bent-wing Bat. This is just a sample of the records which come in.

As you can see, Coffs Harbour gets lots of koala records. In 1995 I collated these and presented them to an AKF conference in a paper entitled "WIRES Koala Records Tell a Story". Recently I took records for the last 4 years and collated them in similar ways, for comparison and to see changes.

These data can't be used by non locals, as they can't know all the local details which allow the figures to be interpreted. They would get it wrong. For example, WIRES did not record reports of koala sightings from the public until 1994/95 (only koalas with problems were recorded), so direct comparisons between then and now would be misleading. Since the first survey, Toormina has been developed as East Boambee, so allocation of records to particular localities is problematic. Also, the allocation of a record to category such as "enquiry" or "unsafe place" is done on the whim of whoever is on the phone roster that day. Where necessary, I have reviewed and reassigned records.

However, we can draw some conclusions of enormous significance for how we manage local koalas. The big issues from the analysis are the huge increase in sick koalas, particularly in developed areas, the real decline in reported dog attacks, and the steady rate of road accident despite action at most black spots (most recent road accidents occur on the Pacific Highway and Hogbin drive – this fact will be used to force action from authorities).

As another example, last February I carried out a koala assessment for a development in Sawtell Road which would have removed a number of koala trees. Some old scats were found. The Wildlife Atlas had two koala records in the square kilometre where the development was proposed (exact locations are not usually given), but WIRES had 14 records in just the last 3 ½ years (and many earlier ones as well). This was more than enough to demonstrate the habitat and movement corridor value of the remnant trees in the area, and to obtain some protection from development.

When looking at the likely effects of a development on other local threatened species I need to know what fauna may occur on or near the site. Only species listed as threatened can be used to modify or prevent damaging proposals. I can survey for fauna, ask neighbours, ask NPWS (Wildlife Atlas) and search WIRES records, as well as speculate as to what might live there. Often WIRES records are the best, or only ones. These are not usually accessed by consultants, many of whom are more interested in their image and bank balance. However, they have to check the Wildlife Atlas because the determining authorities will usually require it. I often find that the Atlas doesn't contain records from our carer group. There are various reasons for this, but it is a major omission.

An example is the Squirrel Glider *Petaurus norfolkensis*, for which the following records are currently held (WIRES records for 2001 – 2003 inclusive only). For those who know the area the contribution from WIRES records quadruples the known local range of this species, and suggests extraordinary habitat variability.

Date	Location	Source	Comments
April 1992	South Urunga	Atlas	Large planning survey
August 1996	West of Moonee	Atlas	Forestry survey
January 2001	Repton	WIRES	2 cat attack orphans, confirmed
March 2001	Boambee	WIRES	Cat attack, doubtful record
December 2001	Glenreagh	WIRES	Juvenile in barbed wire, confirmed
December 2001	Glenreagh	WIRES	Adult F. in barbed wire, confirmed
January 2002	Repton	WIRES	2 cat attack orphans, confirmed
March 2002	Oyster Creek	Atlas/WIRES	Killed by dog, apparently confirmed
September 2002	Cook Drive area	Atlas/WIRES	Confirmed
October 2003	Nana Glen	WIRES	Confirmed, 2 juveniles, cat attack.
October 2003	Macksville	WIRES	Not confirmed, F. with 2 young

It has to be said that for many threatened species the Wildlife Atlas has much more comprehensive records than WIRES, but nevertheless WIRES records can fill in gaps, and frequently come from areas where no formal surveys have been carried out.

I believe that each wildlife carer group should have a threatened species officer who arranges for all records of listed threatened species to be forwarded to NPWS in the correct format, with all relevant information. A suitable arrangement should be agreed with the local NPWS office for confirmation of all identifications which may be debatable. This would help save habitats in all areas where carer groups are active, and contribute enormously to local wildlife conservation.

ABSTRACT

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I work as a freelance wildlife management consultant. Most of my work is assessing impacts on wildlife, particularly threatened species, from developments. To do this effectively I need to know what animals are in each locality. I use the NSW Wildlife Atlas, ask locals, and use my local knowledge, but the best source of information is WIRES records. Time and again the existence of these records allows me to "save" habitats by recommending modifications to developments. I can feed these records directly into the local environmental planning process, and without them it is hard to stop the destruction. In particular, our Coffs Harbour koala records directly inform the local Koala Management Plan. Each carer group should have a threatened species officer who provides all confirmed threatened fauna records in a compatible format to the NPWS Wildlife Atlas.