

We The People

Program 173

An Australian Icon on Borrowed Time



Good day to you. A few years ago I was shopping in Robina and came across a bloke in Woolworths with a small table and electric hot plate cooking sausages. Along with the caramelised onions the aroma was magnetic just as it is when the neighbor puts on a BBQ on a summer's evening. Of course I bought a sausage sanga because the added incentive was a bushman's sign proclaiming help for the Koala. Turns out his name is Peter Steele and he lives on the Gold Coast and nearly single handedly is doing his bit for the Koala. He told me that of the original 8 million Koalas across Australia the count is now down to just 40,000 and in steep decline especially in SEQ. I was shocked and checked the facts later and he was of course right. I have been in touch with the Australian Koala Foundation in Brisbane previously and the good work they are doing to save this national icon. The Koala is on borrowed time and its news all Australians should weep about. The Prime Minister says we have enough forests locked up and don't need any more and that one statement lost him a lot of support including mine.

Now fast forward two years to last week when I again found Peter and his BBQ down the track at another Woolworths and this time we spoke at length. I am a lover of nature and wildlife and always have been so there was every reason I would want to hear his story and I have since. I asked him why he does this and his answer is surprising. He says all his life "he was a selfish lawyer" and now in later years he wants to put back and has seized on the Koala's plight to do something to help. Peter is nearly 80 years young, tall and wiry and fit as a mallee bull. Soon he will abseil down a high rise on the Gold Coast to gain vital publicity for his Koala endeavors, such is his dedication.

Now Peter Steele has done more. He has a small organisation with big goals called the World Wildlife Sanctuaries. It's a *not for profit* organisation and no wages are drawn by his small team. It's done for the love of it. They have acquired over 400 acres of land near Kyogle just over the border in NSW and this is the first of many sanctuaries he hopes will flourish, even after his time. The land is being held under a charitable trust for the benefit of Koalas and Australian wild life in perpetuity. Peter's plan is to move whole communities of critical endangered Koalas to the sanctuary in a manner that ensures their survival. One of the challenges in relocating Koalas is that when moved carelessly as Councils do, many perish in the first 12 months through stress. Peter is not wealthy and when you speak with this humble man he lights the room up with steely determination which is uncommon.

Now this bloke has given a personal guarantee as collateral for the sanctuary and yet his willpower is unabated along with his courage. To make this work his mind operates in overtime to dream up media and business leverage on how best to gain funding and support. One creative thread is to run a carbon calculation over a business and then dedicate that portion of forest at his Boorabee Park sanctuary which will negate the carbon footprint of that business. This is an outstanding plan and perhaps unique in the world. By the way Boorabee is aboriginal for Koala.

Friends, our magnificent Koala is in dire straits and the remaining pockets of these beloved marsupials are falling below critical mass everywhere as gene pool islands become too small. The various remaining populations are stressed by man, cars, dogs and suburbia and of course the loss of vital habitat. Have no doubt this is marsupial genocide and death by a thousand cuts and we the people need to help save these quintessential Australian icons. Maybe the federal government could divert funds from overseas wars and the futile attempts to find phantom aircraft in the Indian Ocean and use that money to help the koala. I make the point as we waste so much on token international politics and power games when that's old world and not necessary. I wonder what is happening when the Federal government can't even pass effective legislation to save the habitat of the dwindling national Koala population. Why is it so hard and why doesn't government act and why in particular don't the Gold Coast and Tweed Councils care.

Until next time this is Kent Bayley