

# The story of Azam and Yazhi

## By Roads and Maritime Services/Pacific Complete and Friends of the Koala

Pacific Complete (PC) have been implementing a Zero Harm policy for Koalas on the Woolgoolga to Ballina Pacific Highway Upgrade which they are taking seriously. During the Phased Resource Reduction Koala Monitoring Surveys, several koalas were identified near the proposed alignment. The RMS, PC, and project ecologists, Sandpiper Ecological, have kept FOK informed of their locations, and to ensure avoid or minimise impacts, regular joint site inspections have been undertaken.

The project ecologists in conjunction with FOK have identified a number of koalas with clinical signs of disease, and/or potentially exhibiting signs of stress. Some of these koalas have been subsequently rescued, and all but one was euthanased. There remains a few more still to capture, and several we need to keep an eye on. Two of the koalas in close proximity to the project footprint that required particular attention, are known as Azam and Yazhi. This is their stories...

**Azam's Story** – During the pre-clearing surveys, an adult male koala was observed by the Sandpiper ecologists occupying habitat within, and on, the eastern fringes of the project boundary, just north of Old Bagotville Road. He appeared healthy and although being monitored, was left to move on of his own accord. After a couple of days moving in a small area with limited food trees, the ecologists contacted Friends of the Koala rescuer, Maria Matthes, to assist in undertaking a visual health assessment.

Azam had found himself in the recently burnt vegetation between the Old Bagotville Road fencing and the proposed alignment clearing. Approximately 354 hectares of native vegetation burnt resulting in an reduction in available suitable foraging habitat east of the alignment. A number of his feed trees had been cleared and he had been feeding in the remaining feed trees. The distance to the gaps in the fence and habitat west of Old Bagotville Road were about 250 metres away.

On close assessment, Azam appeared to exhibit signs of being stressed, hungry, slightly mal-nourished, and possibly had mild cystitis, with some staining on his rump (Fig. 1). In collaboration with Pacific Complete and Sandpiper ecologists, Friends of the Koala, decided due to the behavioural and health concerns, that an attempt to capture Azam that night was necessary. While waiting for the pen trap to arrive, Azam started to come down the tree, and with some gentle encouragement from Maria he continue to descend. With the project ecologists and Pacific Complete staff keeping Azam's attention, Maria was easily able to walk up to Azam and safely rescue him.

Following his rescue, Azam was transported to the Friends of the Koala Care Centre in Lismore where he had a preliminary assessment. Azam was approximately 4 yrs old, weighed 6.6kg and had a body condition score of 6/10. He was in pretty good condition. He did not have cystitis, with rump staining being the result of loose scats, most likely stress related. He was hungry, straight away eating the fresh leaves provided. Following a feed, Azam let out a loud bellow, most happy to have a good feed.

FOK's Koala Care Coordinator, Susannah Keogh, described Azam as "one chilled out dude". When he wasn't chilling he was giving the girl koalas a hard time, bellowing away. Following two weeks of rehabilitation at the FOK Care Centre, Azam's health had improved, his tests came back Chlamydia free, and he was ready for release. With agreement from Jali Local Aboriginal Land Council, and support of the Ngunya Jargoan IPA

rangers, Anthony Cook and Maddie Collins, Azam was successfully released within suitable habitat in the IPA. A limitation of the RMS' approval conditions is that they do not allow radio-tracking of koalas such as Azam. So Azam is on his own and hasn't been sighted since his release. We hope that the habitat he was put in was less stressful for him than where he had been, and that if the northern side of Old Bagotville Road was part of his home range prior to the fence being erected, that he will undoubtedly find his home again.

Koalas like Azam, are why it has been important for FOK to work closely with RMS, Pacific Complete and project ecologists. We can be almost certain the if Azam wasn't rescued and released away from the unsuitable environment he was found in, his health would have continued to decline. Azam's story demonstrates the importance of the work done by FOK and the success that can come from collaborative efforts.

**Yazhi's Story** – As part of early Phased Resource Reduction Koala Monitoring Surveys, an unhealthy female koala with a dirty bottom and conjunctivitis was recorded in late May 2017. In June, during a joint site inspection between FOK, and Pacific Complete, an unhealthy female koala with cystitis and chronic-severe conjunctivitis was observed, likely to be same individual (Fig 2). Maria Matthes, in conjunction with Susannah Koege, made a critical assessment that she was a priority for rescuing. Apart from her obviously having chlamydia and likelihood of her being blind, she was living in an environment where some of her food trees were proposed to be removed, and trees would be cleared and mulched around her. This was considered likely to be a terrifying ordeal for a blind koala. She was given the name Yazhi, meaning Little One, because she looked small in the tall trees.

Unfortunately the attempt to capture Yazhi was unsuccessful and she managed to escape by moving through the canopy into the adjoining tree. The tree she had moved into was not suitable for trapping or a tree-climber to assist in the rescue. Like many koalas that have had their vision impaired either through severe conjunctivitis or being blind, they know their habitat well, often making their capture and rescue more difficult. The next day she had moved on.

Despite Sandpiper ecologists keeping an extra eye out for Yazhi during the following Phased Resource Reduction surveys, and the RMS commissioning Sandpiper to undertake targeted surveys for Yazhi, with her welfare a priority for all, she failed to be seen again. Then, during pre-clearing ecological surveys in late October, Yazhi was again observed, in the same tree she was first seen, just outside the project boundary. Sandpiper established the pen trap and monitored the trap during the day and Maria took the night shift. After two nights, Yazhi climbed into the same neighbouring tree as before. Although not an easy tree to put a trap around with a large spreading shrub underneath, it was decided that rescuing Yazhi was critical, and a second trap was set up.

After seven long days and nights of waiting and hoping, Yazhi entered the trap in the early hours of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November. She was transported to the FOK Koala Care Centre in Lismore for preliminary assessment, prior to being immediately transferred to the Currumbin Wildlife Hospital.

Yazhi was 6 years old, and despite having chlamydia, was in good condition. She had moderate cystitis, massive cysts, and was determined to be blind behind the conjunctivitis. Unfortunately, following assessment by the vet, her health condition meant she had to be euthanased. While very sad for everyone involved, Yazhi was likely to be in pain and suffering from the effects of the disease. Rescuing Yazhi was an enormous commitment from FOK, RMS, Pacific Complete, their contractors and ecologists, and one that we would all do again in such a situation.

Roads and Maritime Service/Pacific Complete would like to acknowledge and thank Friends of the Koala, particularly Maria Matthes, for her time, effort and assistance not only in the capture of the above mentioned koalas, but her ongoing dedication and passion in conserving koalas.