OUT *of the* ASHES

As bushfires devastated much of the country over summer, Kangaroo Island was hit hard – almost half the island burned. Anastasia Safioleas and photographer Christina Simons visited the island to document its recovery. Part One of our series focuses on the rescue and rehabilitation of the island's wildlife.

by **Anastasia Safioleas** *Contributing Editor*

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We stand at the base of a gum tree looking up into its leafy canopy. Plastic laundry baskets, the type found in most homes, at our feet. It's early March, and we're on South Australia's Kangaroo Island nine weeks after bushfires devastated the community, killing two people, destroying dozens of homes and decimating wildlife.

At 150 kilometres long and with more than 500 kilometres of coastline, it's a large island – and almost half was burned. Flinders Chase National Park, epicentre of the fires, is reduced to a charred landscape of ash and mud. Even the metal signs by the side of the road droop, overcome.

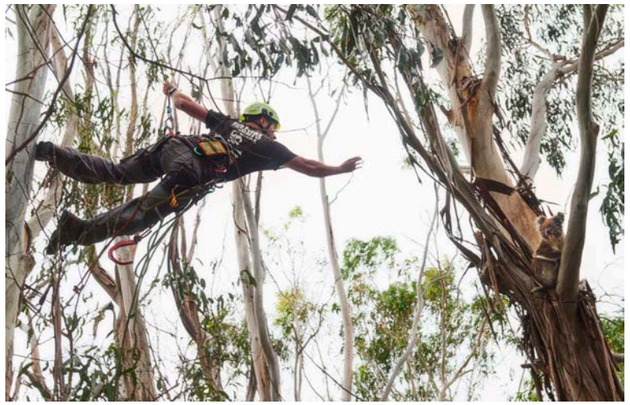
We're deep in a gum tree plantation off the main highway. Except for the occasional rustle of leaves, it's quiet. Every now and again we offer words of encouragement to a young man in a harness clinging to the gum's spindly branches, determination etched across his sunburned face. He's trying to reach a koala. The animal is no doubt wondering why he's in her tree, but it's important to get her down. The tree she calls home might be healthy, but it's surrounded by a thin cluster of greenery that quickly peters out into barren landscape levelled by bushfire. Left to her own devices, she'll eventually run out of food and starve.

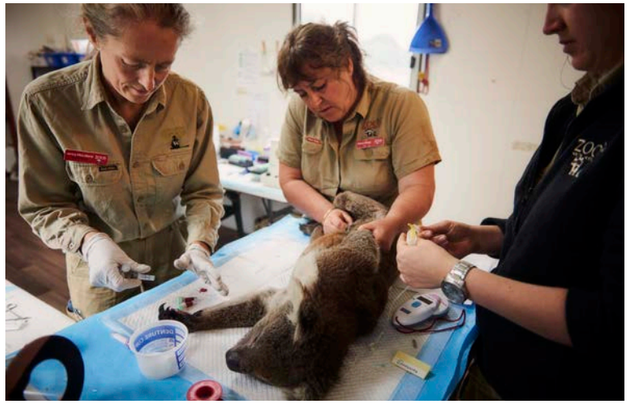
This type of animal rescue has become the norm since fires swept through the island in late December. Considered an ecological wonderland, Kangaroo Island's unique wildlife – the abundant koala, kangaroo, wallaby, wombat, possum, glossy black cockatoo, tiny pointy-nosed dunnart, green carpenter bee and even the world's last purebred Ligurian bee colony – suffered greatly. Staggering numbers of animals perished from burns, just as many from smoke inhalation. Before the fires, close to 50,000 koalas called the island home – today an estimated 5000 to 10,000 remain. Eighty per cent of their habitat has been wiped out. Nearly three months on, those animals that survived are facing a very real lack of food.

But Kangaroo Island is slowly rebuilding. Fences are being mended, surviving livestock tended to, razed homes cleared. The landscape is beginning to show some signs of regrowth. Blackened branches sport the occasional green shoot, some of the grass is growing back, farmers are talking about cropping again. Mental health is also in the forefront; there is much talk among locals about the first signs of PTSD. The coronavirus lockdown, however, has forced a temporary pause in the island's rehabilitation. For the island, like other bushfire-affected areas that rely on tourism, the lockdown is another cruel blow.

Standing with me at the base of the gum tree are members of Humane Society International (HSI). The animal welfare charity has maintained a steady presence on the island since the fires, playing a part in wildlife rescue efforts. Kai Wild (his real name) is the young man in the tree, his arms riddled with

GRUMPY BY NAME, CUTE BY NATURE





KAI WILD DROPPED EVERYTHING TO GET TO KANGAROO ISLAND, WHERE HE HAS RESCUED MORE THAN 100 KOALAS

VETS AND KEEPERS TEND TO AN INJURED KOALA

THIS FURRY FELLOW ENJOYS SOME RESPITE AND A FEED AT KANGAROO ISLAND WILDLIFE PARK

koala scratches. The Sydney-based arborist with a wildlife rescue background was so keen to help out during the fires that he dropped everything and drove his ute 19 hours to get here in late January. As soon as he stepped off the ferry, he set to work rescuing koalas – usually alone – working 10- to 12-hour days, scaling trees with the help of his climbing gear to get to the stranded animals. Other times, it's as simple as finding a hunched koala on the ground. He estimates he's rescued more than 100 koalas – but he's lost count of the number of dead wildlife he has found along the way. For Wild, his time on Kangaroo Island has been arduous, mentally and physically tough, and fraught with emotion. His social media posts from those early days often mention having a cry at the end of the day.

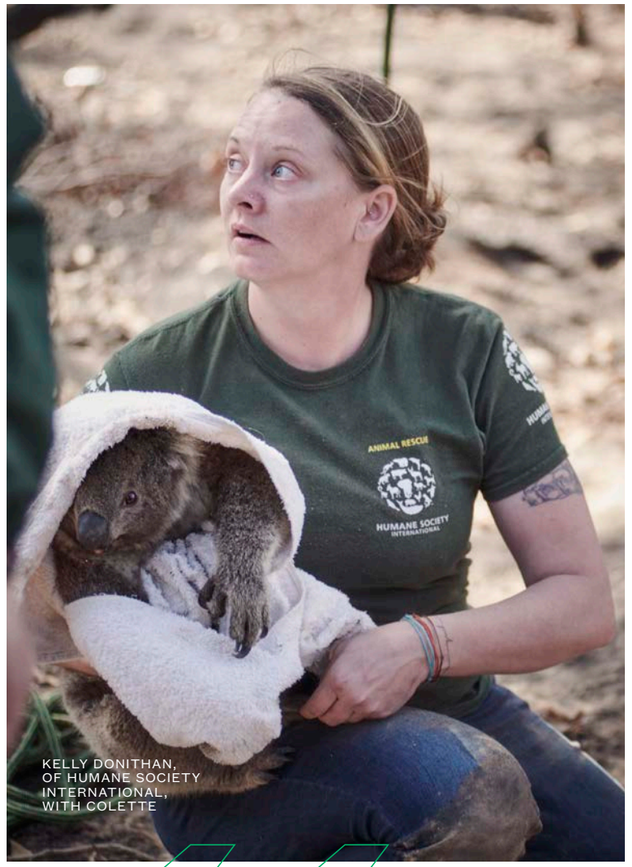
It takes much manoeuvring from tree limb to limb, but eventually Wild gets close enough to grab the koala by the scruff. He lowers himself with his precious charge to the ground and hands her over to HSI. They soon have her settled in the laundry basket – one placed over the other to form a makeshift hutch. Our next stop is Kangaroo Island Wildlife Park, just outside the small town of Parndana, located in the middle of the island. Here vets will give the koala the once-over.

Until recently, Kangaroo Island Wildlife Park was mostly a tourist destination, with only a few enclosures for the handful of injured wildlife that came in each year. But since the fires it has become a makeshift animal hospital, taking in more than 600 koalas in need of medical attention. Today, rows of newly built enclosures house numerous recuperating koalas. Keepers and vets – many volunteers from across the country – mill about, tending to patients.

We hand over our rescued koala to a keeper from Queensland's Australia Zoo and a vet from Adelaide Zoo. They give her the once-over – and name her Colette. It's common practice, naming the injured koalas that come in. Out in the enclosures you'll find Noisy and Nosey, Chuck Norris and Big Guy, Fat Boy, Smash Face and Feisty. There's also Grumpy, but more on him later.

Colette is checked for the usual signs of injury, including burned paws and singed fur. Out in the enclosure, I come across a keeper gently combing the fur of another koala, who continues to quietly munch on gum leaves. Singed fur prevents a koala from self-grooming – by running its claws through its fur – essential for keeping themselves waterproof. Left ungroomed, they are vulnerable to hypothermia. Thankfully Colette is given a clean bill of health and placed in an enclosure stocked with food. There's talk of releasing her the next day.

December's bushfires became January's bushfires, which turned the park into ground zero for many of the island's injured wildlife.



KELLY DONITHAN, OF HUMANE SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL, WITH COLETTE

> The island felt like a war zone. It was eerie. The roads were deserted, things were burning, smoking...

They were so inundated with animals needing medical attention that they were forced to house injured wildlife in the modest house of park owners Sam and Dana Mitchell.

According to park manager Billy Dunlop, it was chaos. Tall and with a youthful enthusiasm tempered somewhat by fatigue, Dunlop has worked tirelessly since December – both as a volunteer with the Country Fire Service and tending to the injured animals coming into the park. The volunteer firefighting effort on the island was massive, an unprecedented event for most of the nearly 5000-strong community.

"The island genuinely felt like a war zone," Dunlop recalls. "It was eerie. The roads were deserted, things were burning, smoking... The ferocity of the fire was not like anything I had seen.

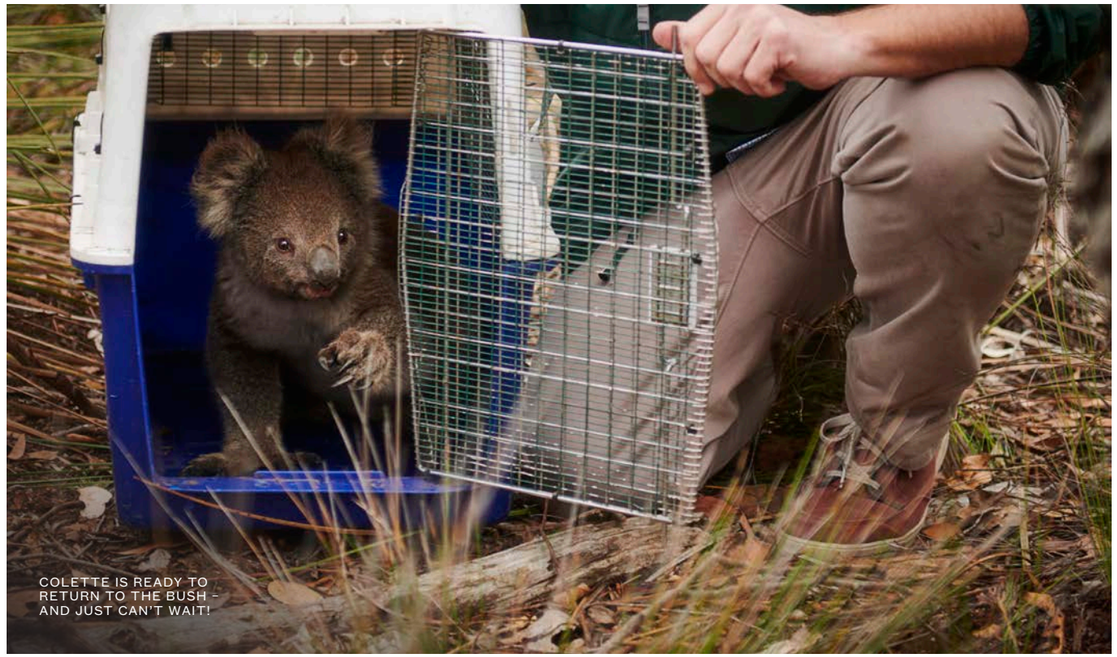
"Locals were bringing in animals they had found, firefighters and military personnel who had found animals, people who had found animals as they were driving along," he continues. This also includes the many brought in by HSI and Wild, together with RSPCA volunteers. "We were quite literally operating on koalas and other animals in our cafe. The park was closed, which during the busiest part of the year is a massive, massive deal."

Soon, every available building and shed was taken up with row upon row of baskets nursing injured koalas. It wasn't until South Australia Veterinary Emergency Management (SAVEM), the official first responders, donated a large tent that the park was finally able to set up a designated triage area. A steady stream of donations in the past few months has also allowed them to upgrade their facilities.

Evan Quartermain and Kelly Donithan, two of Colette's rescuers who are both from HIS, approach to check on her progress. Quartermain can usually be found working behind his desk at HSI's headquarters in Sydney, but since January has made numerous trips to Kangaroo Island. Massachusetts-based Donithan joined him for many of these visits, flying back and forth from her US home, the endless loop of long flights testament to her commitment. It's the first time HSI has deployed in Australia for a disaster. Their work is mostly in less-developed countries during the messy aftermath of hurricanes and earthquakes. As soon as they arrived on Kangaroo Island they were rescuing koalas, often plucking them from burning trees or finding them huddled on the ground for protection.

"It was the most traumatic time of my life," Quartermain says quietly. "You can't prepare for the amount of death we saw. We were seeing thousands of dead animal bodies a day. It was a lot to see. It was...overwhelming."

Softly spoken Donithan, her arms marked by koala scratches, also speaks of the devastation. The first time she ventured out onto a plantation, smoke from still-raging fires was thick in the air. On one particular day spent dodging fast-moving blazes to get to injured animals, she remembers scooping up a possum she found huddled on the ground. "As soon as I picked him up, I could feel the heat on him. He was burning from the intense



COLETTE IS READY TO RETURN TO THE BUSH – AND JUST CAN'T WAIT!

heat," she recounts. "I tried pouring water over him, but I knew what the fate for these animals would be... We tried to get to them soon and provide relief, even if it was euthanasia."

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The next day Colette is approved for release. With Dunlop, Quartermain and Donithan, we drive to a flourishing plantation full of koala food. The mood is cheerful – the release of a recovered koala is cause for celebration.

"I got to the point where I would say 'Here's a koala – if it makes it, tell me, otherwise I'm not going to ask'," says Dunlop. "We were expecting a 12 per cent survival rate [at the park] and we've done a lot better than that; it's around 30 per cent."

For koalas, recovery can be problematic. Dunlop outlines the many ailments and conditions that can continue to affect their health, even when they are looking well.

"It was so sad at the start to get a carload of 30 koalas and potentially lose half of them straight away," he says. "But our ability to track them has evolved and the facilities are in place so we can treat those more severe injuries. We've seen the success rate come back up."

This is why Dunlop never goes alone on a release, giving the likes of Quartermain and Donithan, as well as park staff – some who have lost homes – the opportunity to enjoy a hard-earned moment.

Gingerly we climb over a barbed wire fence and head for a towering gum tree, placing the crate at its base. Colette doesn't waste any time, shooting out of the crate and up the trunk. Smiles break out among the group. Looking up at her as she settles in for a feed, Dunlop remarks that she's the healthiest, most robust koala he's seen in a while. It's a rare glimmer of hope.

Our next stop is a little further down. Grumpy, his nose scarred by fire, has spent considerable time recuperating at the wildlife park. Lately he's been showing signs of restlessness. He's attempted at least one escape from his enclosure, and has started taking the occasional swipe at the keepers with his long claws. Dunlop jokingly calls him "angry man". Happily, he's now been given a clean bill of health.

As with Colette, we locate a healthy gum full of food and place the crate at its base. This time I'm given the privilege of opening the crate's door. But when I release the latch, Grumpy is a no-show. We sit and wait. Eventually, he peers out at us, then tentatively takes a few steps. He quietly sits at the base of the tree and stares at us. We stare back. A few minutes pass. Quartermain wonders out loud if this is a bad sign. We wait some more.

Grumpy finally takes one last look at us and begins his slow ascent up the gum tree. He finds a branch to his liking, takes a seat, reaches out for a handful of leaves and slowly begins to munch. He's back home. ■

IN OUR NEXT EDITION, WE VISIT THE PEOPLE OF KANGAROO ISLAND AS THEY REBUILD THEIR COMMUNITY.

photos by **Christina Simons** @christinasimons