

A photograph of a koala climbing a tree trunk. The koala is brown and fluffy, with its claws gripping the light-colored bark. The background shows more tree branches and a bright sky.

Barking up

“Our goal is to once again have a healthy, thriving and connected population of koalas in the Southern Highlands.”

the right tree with koala research

While Wingecarribee residents are becoming more aware of how lucky we are in terms of flora and fauna in the region, information continues to come to light that emphasises just how special the Highlands really is.

For example, the first European sighting of a koala was near Colo Vale - 'colo' or 'cola' is the Aboriginal name for koala and around the 1900s the area was popular for koala hunting, attracting the likes of Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand to hunt in Moss Vale.

However, it was only three months ago that the first koala had a GPS collar fitted to enable researchers to find out more about the local population. Now that number is working its way up to twenty thanks to contributions from local donors.

Wingecarribee Shire Council's Joe Stammers said that interest in the shire's koalas snowballed after sightings increased after the 2013 fires.

"There have been no studies on koalas in this area so there is so much we don't know. We think they have been pushed out of the Sydney catchment area, so maybe koalas here are adapting to the types of trees in the Highlands - species that grow in the more fertile basalt, clay and shale soils and so provide different nutrients to the trees that grow out of Sydney sandstone.

"However this project is not just about koalas. It will also educate the community about the environment, and assist in land planning," he said.

The collars not only help researchers

track where a koala is, but as they emit a signal every 12 hours, it is possible to track their travels and work out which kind of trees they are spending time in, as often tree species are specific to certain locations.

Kylie Madden from the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) said the project was the "most exciting and positive experience of my career because of the way that people have come together and achieved so much in such a short time.

"The species has moved from being an oversight in this area, to the subject of one of the most high-tech projects in NSW," she said, adding that the Highlands was where the first European sighting of a koala occurred in 1798.

Indeed there is a plaque at Lake Alexandra commemorating explorer Francis Barrallier who had a major role in the discovery of the koala by Europeans. While the first sighting was in January 1798 by John Price, his diary wasn't published until a century later. In the meantime in 1802 Barrallier was given body parts of a koala (or 'cola' as the Aborigines referred to it) to eat in the same area.

However less than one hundred years later the decline of the population had started, and by the 1930s they were almost extinct due to hunting for fur, as well as drought, fire and habitat loss.

Now it seems the tide is turning.

"Our goal is to once again have a healthy, thriving and connected population of koalas in the Southern Highlands," Kylie said.

In addition to the Office of Environment and Heritage's input, the project also has support in-kind from Sydney University which has three vets on call to check the health status and

collaring potential of any koalas that are spotted. The Southern Highlands Koala Conservation project will help provide details about:

- › how many koalas there are and where they live;
- › how they move about and the routes they take;
- › the main risks to these koalas, such as being hit by cars or disease;
- › what gum trees they like to eat, so these can be used for replanting projects in the area.

An important aspect of the project will be to make sure everyone in the Southern Highlands knows about their koala colonies and what they can do to help their long term survival. Joe said that the ongoing assistance of the community was vital to the success of the project.

"54 per cent of land in the shire is privately held, so we really need the support of residents to ensure we are able to create corridors and maintain habitat for the koalas," he said.

Koalas are classed as vulnerable in both the Highlands and the state. It is one of the 974 species currently listed as threatened in NSW. Mr Stammers said that only



four significant populations in NSW in addition to the Highlands: Campbelltown, Port Stephens, Gunnedah, and Port Macquarie.

“Unfortunately though about 70 per cent of the Highland koala population have chlamydia, with 21 per cent showing symptoms, which can be fatal, and another 51 per cent carrying it but not showing symptoms,” Joe said.


While this is a standard rate compared to the state average, chlamydia is absent from the Campbelltown koala population.

“It is inevitable that one day a Highlands koala will get up into that population though,” he said, as young koalas can move up to 50km away after being kicked out of their mother’s territory when they are about two-to-three months old.

By the end of August 10 koalas had been collared and in late September funding was announced to enable the collaring of another ten koalas in coming months.

“There is still so much more to find out,” Joe said. “And this project is not just about koalas. It will also educate the community about the environment, and assist in land planning by giving us an insight into different types of vegetation.”

More than 100 sightings had been reported to the Koala Hotline in the past year, and evidence suggests that populations in Canyonleigh and the Yerrinbool area are growing.

If you spot a koala ring the Koala Hotline immediately so the appropriate people can come out to look at the koala and assess its suitability for tracking. The number is 4868 0888 or call Joe Stammers on 0427 422 702. 



For more information go to www.wsc.nsw.gov.au/koalas or follow the Southern Highlands Koala Conservation Project on Facebook: [SouthernHighlandsKoalas](#)

Clusters offer a tasting plate of the Highlands

A new way to promote Highland produce to both visitors and locals was launched last month.

Southern Highland Food & Wine Clusters will group local producers into bite-size segments to enable people to easily see a varied cross-section of what is available in the region. More than 100 artisan producers will band together under the cluster banner.

The idea is that visitors can work through a geographic cluster each time they come to the Highlands, encouraging repeat visitation. It will also provide residents with an insight into the variety of our produce.

The clusters were the idea of Brigid Kennedy from The Loch in Berrima and has been supported by the Moss Vale and Rural Chamber of Commerce and pioneer of food trails in the Highlands, Jill Dyson.

"I am a Chair of the Chamber of Commerce for Walsh Bay, and before we created the Walsh Bay Arts Alliance the area was attracting 300 visitors a day and the major arts companies never worked together. Now we have around 2500. This has shown that when you create a hub, people will come - it doesn't happen when people work in isolation," Brigid said.

"There is some amazing stuff coming out of the Highlands that even locals aren't aware of and we have incredibly unique offerings such

as Hairy Herefords and A Taste of Alpaca, a food normally eaten in Peru. The hub will be all encompassing, so that smaller producers will be as visible as the larger ones," she said.

"It will also provide a vehicle for producers to be open one day a week or two days a fortnight when part of this cluster, opening the door for more artisan producers. You will have the opportunity to shop direct, so you meet the growers themselves who are only too happy to share their passion for fresh food."

Ms Kennedy said that the clusters will work to showcase the variety of the region.

"Each cluster is so different from each other - we have such an diverse variety of produce. The region has the potential to become the food bowl for Sydney; being in the

water catchment area we have the ability to be the least contaminated," she said.

Ms Kennedy has worked with Ms Dyson to provide a business model for each individual cluster, starting with Joadja as the pilot.

"What has historically been a problem is that these people were working in isolation. Often visitors would go to maybe a garden and a vineyard and think they've 'done' the Highlands. The clusters will give them a reason

"Each cluster is so different from each other - we have such an diverse variety of produce."





to keep coming come back, given there are nine clusters. Each cluster has around 10 - 12 places to visit, so more than enough for a weekend," Jill said.

"This is such an interesting area, but people don't tend to know where the producers are based. We'll be working with the farmer, supporting both growers and tourism. It's a win-win," she said. "There is a growing interest in eating local fresh food and this is a great way for visitors to the Southern Highlands to discover what we have to offer in each area - and we love it because it supports our local producers too."

The Highlands will be split into nine clusters, with the Joadja cluster already in action.

"This cluster features farmgates where you can meet growers, multi-award winning cellar doors, chefs specialising in the best regional produce and stays that offer an authentic taste of Highlands country living," Brigid said.

The producers within that cluster are the new Howards Lane cellar door, Artemis Wines, Cuttaway Creek Raspberry Farm, Bendooley Estate, The Loch, Tertini Wines, A Taste of Alpaca, Feast@McVitty, Your Farmer, Joadja Wines and Joadja Historic Town.

The other clusters to follow are Mittagong and northern villages, Bowral, Robertson, Fitzroy Falls, Moss Vale, Sutton Forest, Canyonleigh and Berrima. ■



The Joadja cluster map can be found at www.southernhighlandsfood&wineclusters.com.au

Creating a masterpiece

In 2006 the Southern Highlands Textile and Fibre Network held an open studio weekend to showcase a range of local artists and gain increased recognition for their work. They had seven venues and 20 artists.

Nine years on, the idea has morphed into the Southern Highlands Arts Studio Trail, with 31 studios and more than 50 artists, attracting thousands with the opportunity to peek inside what is normally a private and creative space.

Wingecarribee Shire Council's Cultural Development Officer, Jenny Kena, said council took over running the event in 2008.

"Originally we held it as part of the Wine Arts and Roses Festival but now the arts festival is a stand-alone event every November," she said.

Each year expressions of interest are called for participation and Jenny visits each studio to ensure it is suitable.

"It has to be a nice experience for the visitor. It is not about judging the quality of the art as that is too personal, but the studio has to be a real expression of that person's creativity. It must look like there is a real artist working there," she said.

This commitment to quality has paid off.

"There are more artists at the higher end who are now more comfortable being part of the trail," Jenny said. "However in general artists love to share their stories and many artists go on the trail themselves to



Loopline Pottery – Steve Harrison and Janine King – at Balmoral have participated in the Art Trail five times.

discuss techniques with their peers. It also provides an incentive to produce a body of work and test it on the market."

Studios are encouraged to invite other artists to exhibit and be present in their studios so that a variety of experiences and work is available at each studio. Artists are also encouraged to offer demonstrations, have their working studio tools on show and to have a range of work on sale.

The trail also benefits the wider Highlands population by bringing in visitors from out of the region; approximately one-third of studio visitors are from out of town.

"One of our main challenges is our limited marketing budget, but we very much want to target the Canberra market and encourage overnight stays," Jenny said.

The trail also presents a unique opportunity to buy art direct from its maker.

"A purchase has much more significance when you have seen where the piece was made. And how much nicer it is to give a piece of art or jewellery for a Christmas present," Jenny said. The trail includes such diverse arts

as bookbinding, sculpture, textiles and bespoke lamp making, as well as painting.

The Art Trail is part of the broader Southern Highlands Arts Festival held throughout November. Events include concerts by the Southern Highlands Symphony Orchestra, the Nature and Art Festival at the Fitzroy Falls Visitor Centre, and a chamber music concert by Selby & Friends. The National Gallery of Australia is also holding information sessions about their Tom Roberts Exhibition.

Another highlight of this year's festival will be the unveiling of the ANZAC Centenary public art work by local sculptor Thomas Bucich at the Moss Vale War Memorial Aquatic Centre on 11 November.

The Art Trail will be held on 7-8 and 14-15 November, and studios will be open between 10am and 5pm. The Arts Festival is on during all of November. ■



For the full program visit
www.shaf.com.au