

INTRODUCTION

As an American living in Germany, some may question my authority to write a book about the importance of preserving Australian wildlife. However, as a lifelong animal lover, political activist, and author deeply passionate about protecting the Earth and its most vulnerable inhabitants, I feel compelled to address this issue. The devastating fires of 2019, which claimed the lives of an estimated 3 billion creatures in Australia, deeply affected me. This, coupled with my recent fulfillment of a lifelong dream to visit Australia, has solidified my determination to contribute to the protection of these unique critters.

While I would prefer to hop on a plane and relocate to Australia to work as a wild animal caregiver, for many reasons, it is impractical. Therefore, after weeks of soul-searching and shelving a book, I had been researching, I decided to write a book about the importance of educating the public about the need to prioritize securing a safe home for Australia's native and vulnerable resources before it is too late.

Both my grandfather and my mother instilled in me the importance of being kind and showing respect for **“all God's creatures.”** I don't have many memories of my grandfather, but the fondest ones I do have involve animals in some way. Most of my recollections of visiting him at his cottage on a small lake in western Michigan involved pets—whether I helped him build a birdhouse or sat out on watch with binoculars to see if the squirrels and chipmunks had eaten the food he had left for them. To people, my grandfather could be impatient and even angry, but he had a soft spot in his heart for all wildlife—even those considered “pests” by most humans. In his mind, the only “pests” were the humans who interfered with the lives of these critters.

My mother also shared my grandfather's love for furry creatures. Whether it was due to her own passion for animals or her belief that children should be surrounded by pets, I always had my share growing up, including hamsters, guinea pigs, dogs, and cats. I even had a goldfish, but after I pet it and it died, my mom prohibited me from having another fish. In any event, there was never a shortage of domestic creatures in my household.

I don't remember exactly how old I was the first time I saw a photo of a koala—no more than eight—and I instantly fell in love with the cuddly creature. As I became aware of other animals, particularly kangaroos and wallabies, I became almost as fascinated with them as I was with koalas. By the time I was twelve, I had a stuffed animal collection, of which over 100 comprised of koalas and kangaroos.

Given my love for animals, I always assumed I would have a career where I would work with them in some capacity, probably as a veterinarian. Unfortunately, I learned at an early age that I am a social scientist, and my biology and natural science classes in school bored me to tears. I assumed that without a scientific background, my career paths working with animals would be nonexistent, so I turned to other interests. Nevertheless, the passion for these furry creatures continued.

I discovered my talent for writing creatively when I was ten years old. My teachers informed my mother, who believed me to be a gifted writer and encouraged me to write more often. I began to explore those options and spent the majority of my free time writing short stories. When I was in sixth grade, my middle school had a writing competition, and the winning author would have an opportunity to present their story at a young writer's conference at the local university (Michigan State University), where they would meet other local young

writers as well as established authors. Combining my talent for writing with my love of koalas, I wrote a story about a mamma **koala, Kristi, and her joey, Kandi**. The whole experience provided an amazing learning opportunity because it was the first time I wrote a story that would be read by someone other than my mother or my teacher. More importantly, in order for the book to be realistic and believable, I had to research koalas. Prior to writing the story, I mistakenly thought they were bears, and I knew they were cute, lived in Australia, and ate eucalyptus leaves, but that was about all.

My mother took me to the library, and she checked my facts and my spelling, but I had to do the work myself. I knew koalas ate a special kind of leaf, and I was quite sure I knew the name, but long before the days of spell check, I had absolutely no idea how to spell it. I knew better than to ask my mom for help, because she would have told me to sound it out. Only after spending an hour with a dictionary trying to spell eucalyptus—first with a “u” then with a “y”—did my mother finally assist me. One can only imagine my surprise when I learned I should have been looking in the “e” section of the dictionary.

My life would have been much easier if I had known then that gum leaves and eucalyptus are used synonymously. The most important fact I learned while writing my story was that koalas are marsupials, meaning they carry their young in a pouch, and they are not bears—despite the worldwide misconception. In any event, my teachers and principal selected my story to represent the school at the young writer’s workshop in 1985. It was quite an honor, but I am embarrassed to admit that other than the names of my characters, I recall nothing about the story, and sadly it was lost in one of the many moves we had since I had written it.

By the time I entered high school and college, analytical and nonfiction writing took priority, leaving me with little time for creative writing. My passion for writing took a backseat as I became more involved in political activism, fighting primarily for women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and labor rights. I fought for the underrepresented against the establishment, much like my desire to work on behalf of animals. In both situations, I exerted energy to give a voice to those without one. I hold several degrees in history, public policy, labor relations, and social work from Michigan State University, University of Illinois, San Jose State University, and the University of Michigan. Over the years, I have worked on social justice in various capacities, including political campaigns and as a case manager at a homeless shelter.

Most recently, I authored the book **"Dear Barack: The Extraordinary Partnership of Barack Obama and Angela Merkel,"** published in 2021. My husband Brian and I called the San Francisco Bay area home from 1999 until we relocated to Germany in 2017.

My love for pets remained consistent throughout my life, regardless of my age, location, or occupation. I remained obsessed with koalas and kangaroos, yet I had not made the trip to Australia to see them in their native habitat or to actually hold or touch one. The long and expensive flight from California or Europe, coupled with my chronic migraines aggravated by flying, outweighed my desire to go. Nevertheless, I vowed that one day I would make it, and I would see my beloved koalas and kangaroos in their natural habitat, and I would hold and pet one. In the fall of 2019, Brian and I decided to go to Australia in the summer of 2020 to finally fulfill my lifelong dream and the number one item on my bucket list. Besides 2020 being Brian and my twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, this was after I put a deposit on a

three-week trip to Australia and New Zealand in celebration of our wedding anniversary thus was before the dreaded bushfire known as “**Black Summer**” that destroyed 3 billion of Australia’s native animals began, and before the first case of Covid had been diagnosed, I feared this might affect the look of things and my dearest creatures such as the koalas- might go extinct.

In the summer of 2019, often referred to as “Black Summer,” more than 15,000 fires ravaged Australia, impacting an area of up to 19 million hectares and killing three billion animals, including over 50,000 koalas and 5 million kangaroos and wallabies. As a passionate animal advocate, I closely followed the devastating impact of the fires through wildlife sanctuaries, hospitals, zoos, and rescues on social media. Witnessing the destruction, I even reached out to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, urging her to send German firefighters to aid the overworked Australian, Canadian, and American firefighters. Despite my efforts, I never received a response. Finally, after months of devastation, Australia received much-needed rain, and the fires were largely contained. This reinforced my determination to make our upcoming trip to Australia and New Zealand, as I feared that waiting another year might be too late due to the ongoing threat of wildfires. Then Covid happened...

In early 2020, the global spread of Covid-19 led to widespread border closures, including in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. These countries implemented some of the strictest policies and were among the last to reopen their borders to foreigners. A month before our planned trip, our tour company canceled it. I felt relieved in many ways, as I considered this trip a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and the conflicting policies on what would be open and

when made me hesitant to proceed. I didn't want to make the trip if I couldn't visit the koala hospital in Port Macquire or the animal sanctuaries and zoos. Even as Australia and New Zealand slowly returned to normal following the pandemic in 2022, Brian and I decided to wait one more year to go just to ensure we would be able to see everything and go everywhere I wanted. Intellectually, I knew we made the right decision, but emotionally I worried endlessly that the fires of 2020 would return, and the country would lose more wildlife at the hands of a changing ecological system. I feared once again I would miss my opportunity to see the habitat I cherished so much because I had waited too long.

In September 2022, Brian and I put a deposit on our trip to Australia and New Zealand, originally scheduled for September 2020. However, shortly after making that deposit, my life was turned upside down when doctors diagnosed me with breast cancer in October 2022. Given the history of the disease in my family, I was terrified and reluctant to undergo treatment. The upcoming trip to Australia in September 2023 helped motivate me through the difficult weeks before, during, and immediately after my treatment. I knew that I could not leave this planet without doing the number one thing on my bucket list—to go to Australia and see Australian wildlife up close.

On September 6, 2023, Brian and I boarded a plane for the eighteen-hour flight to Sydney via a short layover in Doha. Our tour group of 30 (including the tour director) was set to begin with a group meeting at our hotel in Sydney at 4:30 on September 8th. However, Brian and I arranged to arrive in the evening on the 7th, despite our flight being two hours delayed, so that I could spend a day at the koala hospital in Port Macquire. I had heard a lot about the

hospital and had adopted many koalas over the years, so I wanted to visit it firsthand. The hospital, established in 1973, is a licensed wildlife rehabilitation facility open to the public. Visitors can see the exhibition enclosures where koalas they treated can no longer return to the wild, a treatment clinic, and rehabilitation yards, many of which have trees for koalas to learn to climb as part of their rehabilitation process. Fortunately, a friend of a German acquaintance I met online in one of the koala groups had volunteered at the hospital and put me in touch with Mick. Mick, a long-time volunteer at the hospital, gave Brian and me our own personal tour of the hospital and grounds. He introduced us to the koalas (from afar), showed us the exam room, the ambulance, and the exhibits, then gave us a tour of the museum. We also had a conversation at the facilities' café.

After visiting the museum, Mick took us to a local shopping center to see the Lewis sculpture (more information about its significance will be discussed in a specific chapter on the 2019 fires). I took a few photos and we had lunch. The little we did see of Port Macquarie in between the hospital, shopping center, and the airport was beautiful. I wish I had more time to spend there, but my primary purpose had been to visit the koala hospital and see the Lewis sculpture, which I happily accomplished.

The next day, our tour group received a tour of Sydney. One of the highlights of my trip was when we visited the famous Harbor Bridge and Opera House. We even stopped at an opal outlet store where we received a brief presentation on opal mining and could purchase items at a discounted price. We returned to our hotel late afternoon and had the rest of the afternoon free. I found that Wildlife Sydney Zoo was a fifteen-minute walk from our hotel, so Brian and I immediately headed over there. By this point, it was 3:30, and the last admittance was

at 4:00, so we ran quickly to ensure we arrived in time. Upon arrival, our first stop was the kangaroo walkout area where six female kangaroos could hop around freely, and the public could pet and interact with them—under the watchful eye of the zookeeper. Here, I excitedly got my first opportunity to pet a kangaroo when one hopped over to where we were standing. I was amazed at how soft her fur was and how sweet she was. We stayed until she lost interest and hopped back to the cool dirt she had been laying on, so Brian and I took that as our cue to go see the koalas.

Since koalas sleep approximately 18 hours a day, I was especially excited to see a mother koala and her joey quite active while we were there. They climbed down one tree and wandered over to the glass where we stood, staring at us for a couple of minutes before the baby hopped on her mama's back and they climbed another tree to continue eating the leaves the zookeepers left for them. I took videos and as many pictures as I could, finding myself teary-eyed at witnessing this firsthand.

After a while, I could tell Brian was bored (although he never said a word), so we went back to see the kangaroos before we left. Since it was late in the day, we were the only ones in the enclosure. I told the caretaker that my sole purpose of coming to Australia was to see the wildlife, and I had waited 45 years for this trip. She smiled broadly and said, "I absolutely love it when people tell me this," and she walked over to the center area where they kept the food and water for the kangaroos. She grabbed some carrots and sweet potatoes and said, "I am not supposed to do this, but since nobody else is here," she lured the kangaroos over to where we were and introduced us to each of them, telling us an interesting fact about all of them.

I was so overcome with emotion that I don't remember too much, but I do recall the zookeeper showing me one kangaroo, Julie, who she said had a wasp fly up her nose earlier in the day. I asked her if Julie had been stung, and the zookeeper said, "I don't think so, but she is feeling quite sorry for herself." For the next ten minutes, I had the attention of all six kangaroos at the zoo, and I was able to pet and talk to them while Brian took photos and videos. It was without a doubt one of the most memorable experiences of my life. We finally left when the zoo closed, and they pretty much had to throw us out.

The following day, we had free time, so I had booked an "encounter" with a penguin caregiver and a koala caregiver at Featherdale Wildlife Park, a park about 45 minutes outside of Sydney. Here, I paid to get up close with the 16 penguins at the zoo, meet with the caretaker, and help her feed them. Despite being a bit uncomfortable, it was amusing to see these adorable animals up close and watch them waddle as they tried to get around. After my penguin encounter, I had my koala encounter. I spent 20 minutes up close with a koala and her joey. Because the laws in Sydney strictly prohibit it, I could not hold her, but the caretaker allowed me to pet her (not the baby) and take as many pictures and videos as I wanted. I managed to take some amazing photos—one of which is on the cover of this book. When I saw the photos I took, I realized those were my photos—not ones I had seen on social media or in a book, but photos I had taken with my own camera.

A couple of days later, our tour group traveled from Sydney to Cairns. While most people were excited about diving or snorkeling in the Great Barrier Reef, I was ecstatic because Cairns is one of the few places in Australia where it is legal to hold a koala. Even though it is

permitted, it is heavily regulated, and the koalas are limited to thirty minutes per day of human contact. Knowing this, I scheduled my appointment several weeks earlier.

Our tour group arrived in Cairns an hour late, and I feared Brian and I were going to miss our appointments. Luckily, we all managed to get our luggage and get to our hotel in record time. Fortunately, our hotel was only a fifteen-minute walk from Cairns Zoom and Wildlife Dome where we had our scheduled appointment, and we ended up early. Since we had some time to waste before our appointment time, Brian and I walked around the Zoo/Aquarium. They had a lot of lizards and reptiles which for me, I fear and loathe in contrast to the way I loved the koalas and the kangaroos, so I looked quickly at them and off to find the koalas so I could spend more quality time with them before that defining moment where I could actually hold one.

Finally, the time arrived, we went downstairs, all of us that had the 3.30 time slot (probably a dozen of us) we got a brief introduction on the proper way to hold a koala, and shortly thereafter the caretaker arrived with the koala. Brian likes animals, and he has always been more than patient with my obsession with furry critters, but he does not have the passion for them that I do, (few people do) and even he muttered, “awe” at first glance at our koala, Pavlova. I admit that as much as I had waited for this moment my entire life, the event itself was anti-climactic. They had about twelve of us all lined up to have our pictures taken with her. They had us hold our arms down in koala position, hands looped together down by our stomach, so they felt like a safe and secure tree. We could not even pet her, and they put the Pavlova in our arms, snapped a photo, picked her up and in the next person’s arms it went. It felt like an assembly line for the poor girl, and I really felt bad for her, but I kept reassuring

myself that they regulated this for a reason, and if the caretaker or anyone thought that was too much for the koala, they put the koalas' safety first, so I was not doing anything wrong.

In a split second, a lifetime of waiting was over when I finally got my photo taken holding a koala. Right after me, Brian had his picture taken, and judging by the expression on the koala's face, it seemed like she really liked Brian. The caretakers even commented on how much she appeared to like him. Needless to say, I was more than a little jealous because his picture turned out so much better than mine. My last koala encounter occurred in our third city, Alice Springs, in the middle of the Australian Outback. Our group had a planned visit to Hartley's Crocodile Adventure.

At the zoo in Australia, there was a walkout area where the public could feed and interact with the kangaroos. I lost track of how many kangaroos they had, but I was really focused on one—a mama with a joey in her pouch. I was determined to get a couple of really good photos of the mama and joey, but after a long time and several tries, I had to settle for many okay photos of the mama and joey. In the meantime, I was able to feed and pet the other kangaroos that hopped around the encounter. I couldn't believe how much fun they were. The highlight of the trip was when Brian sat down to take a selfie with a kangaroo in the background, and the next thing he knew, a kangaroo reached over and put its paw on his shoulder—an ultimate photobomb by a kangaroo.

I had always maintained that I thought koalas were cuter than kangaroos (marginally), but truthfully, it was the kangaroos I fell in love with while I was in Australia. They were so

much fun and so entertaining. I could have watched them for months. I tried to get a good video of them hopping a decent distance, but they are so quick and unpredictable, so it was not an easy task. I took several videos of them hopping short distances, but nothing like across a field as I had hoped for. While we were there, I also got a photo taken patting a koala, and our tour group had a special presentation with a koala and her caretaker, so I got to pat her as well. By the end of our trip to Australia, I managed to hold one koala, pet three, and have my picture taken with four. I am uncertain of the number of kangaroos or wallabies I petted or played with, maybe a dozen. At the end of the trip, I totaled the number of photos I took of koalas during the trip, beginning with the koala hospital in Port Macquarie and ending in the Crocodile Adventures in Alice Springs. I had 112 photos of koalas, 12 videos, and 95 photos of kangaroos, and 22 videos, and approximately two dozen photos of the little penguins. At our tour group's farewell dinner, more than one of my group members stopped me and told me they would never see a koala again without thinking about me.

While in Alice Springs, we had our first camel ride, a sunrise trip to see Ayers Rock via camel, a once-in-a-lifetime event that I adored, but it still did not compare to my experiences with the koalas or the kangaroos. Unfortunately, I had also hoped to see dingoes, platypuses, and Quokkas, other animals unique to Australia, but they were always hiding or the zoo did not have them, so I was unable to see them.

I knew my trip to Australia would do one of two things—it would either satisfy my obsession for Australian wildlife, and I could say I had a dream of going and seeing and touching it, and after having done that, I could move on to something else, or it would do the exact opposite—it would make me even more fascinated with these amazing creatures. The fact that I am

writing this book speaks to the latter occurring. Since I have returned from Australia, I look at the pages of my friends who rescue animals or run sanctuaries or work in zoos, and I become nostalgic and want more than anything to be back in Australia helping them, being on the front line caring for the animals.

For a variety of reasons, that is not practical for me, so I have to find an alternative solution, and this book is it. I have lived in San Francisco and now live in Europe; I have seen some of the most beautiful opera houses and theaters in the world. I have visited some of the most famous museums and cathedrals in the world. Every country in the world has these things—what is unique to Australia is their wildlife. They are fortunate enough to have some of the most beautiful and precious animals that are found nowhere else in the world, and people travel all over the world to see them. Yet, some Australians take it for granted, and many of these creatures are on the brink of extinction due to climate change, feral infestation, and land clearing, bush fires, and human indifference. As a result of these factors, experts estimate that koalas, could become extinct by 2050 if people do not act now!

Moreover, even for the wildlife that are not endangered, such as the kangaroo, they face ongoing obstacles from people, including fence injuries and cars. As a result, these animals still need care, and rescues are at their limits on how they can help. Australia would not be Australia without any of these animals. I am writing this to show the challenges these animals and the people who care for them face, and to urge people to take an active interest and act to save and appreciate these unique animals before it is too late. This planet belongs to all of us, and since they cannot speak for themselves, they rely on humans to do it. Not only can

humans do it, but they have an obligation to do so. After all, we all live on this planet together, and there is no reason why we cannot continue to coexist.