

INTRODUCTION

I am an American who lives in Germany, which may lead one to ask why or under what authority I have to write a book about the importance of saving Australian wildlife. I am a lifelong animal lover, political activist, and author passionate about protecting the earth and its most vulnerable resources-- its animals. I have contemplated this book since the devastating fires of 2019, which destroyed 3 billion animals in Australia. After my lifelong dream of visiting Australia became a reality earlier this year, I decided now more than ever I needed to do my part to help protect these remarkable animals. Although hopping on a plane and relocating to Australia to work as a wild animal caregiver is my preferred way to help protect these animals, for many reasons, it is impractical. Therefore, after weeks of soul searching—including shelving a book I had been researching, I decided to write a book about the importance of educating the public about the need to secure a safe home for Australia’s native and vulnerable resources that needed to be prioritized before it was too late.

My grandfather and mother instilled in me the importance of being kind and respecting “all God’s creatures.” I do not have a lot of memories of my grandfather, but the fondest ones I do have involve animals. Most of my recollections of visiting him at his cottage on a small lake in western Michigan involved animals. Whether I helped him to 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 animals—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 too shared my grandfather's love for furry creatures. Whether it were because of her passion for animals, or her belief that animals should surround children, I always had my share growing up including hamsters, guinea pigs, dogs, and cats. I even had a goldfish, but after I petted it and it died, my mom prohibited me from having another fish. In any event, there was never a shortage of animals in my household.

I do not remember exactly how old I was the first time I saw a photo of a koala—no more than eight—but I instantly fell in love with the cuddly creature. As I became aware of other animals, in particular 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 were 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. Without a scientific background, I assumed my career path working with animals would be nonexistent, so I turned to other interests. Nevertheless, the passion for animals continued.

I discovered that I had a talent for writing creatively when I was ten years old. When my teachers informed my mother, she believed me to be a gifted writer and told her to encourage me to write more often. I began to explore those options and spent most 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 a fantastic 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, I had to research koalas for the book to be realistic and believable. Before writing the story, I mistakenly thought they were bears, and I knew they were cute; they 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 knew the name, but long before the days of spell check, I had 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” and 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 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 are not bears—despite the worldwide misconception. 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.

Unfortunately, when I entered high school and college, analytical and nonfiction writing took priority, and I had little time to write creatively. Becoming a political activist replaced my desire to be a writer. As an activist, I fought for the underdog, primarily for women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, and labor rights. I fought for the underrepresented against the establishment,

so not too different from my desire to work on behalf of animals. In both situations, I exerted energy to give a voice to those without one. I have several degrees in history, public policy, labor relations, and social work from Michigan State University, the 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 am the author of the 2021 published book *Dear Barack: The Extraordinary Partnership of Barack Obama and Angela Merkel*. My husband Brian and I eventually made the San Francisco Bay area home in 1999 and moved to Germany in 2017.

My love for animals remained consistent throughout my life regardless of my age, where I lived, or where I worked. I stayed obsessed with koalas and kangaroos but had yet to visit Australia to see them in their native habitat and hold or touch one. The flight, either from California or Europe, is long and expensive, and I suffer from chronic migraines, which are aggravated by flying, so my fear of the trip outweighed my desire to go. Nevertheless, I vowed one day to make it, see my beloved koalas and kangaroos in their natural habitat, and hold and pet one. In the fall of 2019, Brian and I decided to go to Australia in the summer of 2020 to celebrate our twenty-fifth anniversary. 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-19 had been diagnosed, Brian and I put a deposit on a three-week trip to Australia and New Zealand. After waiting forty years, I would finally fulfill my lifelong dream and the number one item on my bucket list. Besides 2020 being Brian and my twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, I had been reading reports of the declining koala population for

years, and I realized that I should make that trip sooner than later; if I waited too much longer, it might be too late—the koalas might be extinct.

Then the summer of 2019 came, often referred to as “Black Summer,” when more than 15,000 fires occurred throughout the country, which impacted an area of up to 19 million hectares and killed three billion animals, including more than 50,000 koalas, 5 million kangaroos and wallabies (cite). Because of my passion for animals, I follow many wildlife sanctuaries, hospitals, zoos, and rescues on my social media pages. For almost five months, when the destructive fires persisted, I cried when I logged in and saw photos and read the stories of the animals killed and the landscape destroyed by the fires. Being the political activist I am, I went as far as to send the German Chancellor at the time, Angela Merkel, an email pleading with her to send German firefighters to Australia to help the overworked and exhausted Australian, Canadian, and American firefighters fighting tirelessly to no avail to put out the fires. I even launched an online Facebook campaign asking my German friends to contact her office and plead the case to send help. I have never heard anything from Merkel’s office about my campaign, so I do not know if it will have any impact. I just remember finally turning on my computer one day, months after heartbreaking news, to see that Australia finally received the much-needed rain, and it looked like the first responders had a majority of the fires contained. Now more than ever, I was looking forward to our upcoming trip in six months, and more than ever, I was convinced we had to make the trip—we could not afford to wait because if we waited even another year, 2020 had the fires that 2019 had, it would be too late. Then Covid happened...

In the early months of 2020, COVID took the world by storm, and every country began to shut its borders to travelers—Europe, Australia, and New Zealand were no exception.

Australia and New Zealand had the strictest policies and were among the last countries to open their borders to foreigners. A month before our trip, our tour company canceled the trip. In many ways, I was relieved because I assumed this trip would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Many places I wanted to visit had contradictory policies on what would be open and when. I did not want to go if I could not see the koala hospital in Port Macquarie or visit the animal sanctuaries and zoos. So, even after Australia and New Zealand slowly began to return to normal following the pandemic in 2022, Brian and I decided to wait one more year to ensure we could see everything and go everywhere I wanted. Intellectually, I knew we made the right decision. Still, emotionally, I endlessly worried that the fires of 2020 would return. The country would lose more wildlife due to a changing ecological system, and I feared once again I would miss my opportunity to see the wildlife I cherished so much because I waited too long.

In the meantime, in September 2022, Brian and I deposited a deposit on our trip to Australia and New Zealand in 2020 for September 2023. However, shortly after we made that deposit, my life was turned upside down when the doctors diagnosed me with breast cancer in October 2022. Since both my great-grandmother and my mother had died from the disease, I was terrified and even 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 I could not leave this planet without doing the number one thing on my bucket list—going to Australia and seeing 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 (although our flight was two hours delayed) on the 7th so that I could spend a day at the Koala Hospital in Port Macquarie. I had heard much about the hospital and adopted many koalas over the years, so I wanted to visit it firsthand. The hospital was established in 1973 and is a licensed wildlife rehabilitation facility. It is open to the public where people can see the exhibition enclosures (where koalas they treated can no longer return to the wild) live, a treatment clinic, intensive care units (which are not open to the public) and rehabilitation yards, many of which have trees for koalas to learn to climb as part of their rehabilitation process. Luckily, because a German friend of mine who I “met” online in one of the koala groups had volunteered at the hospital, she put me in touch with Mick. Mick was a long-time volunteer at the hospital, and he gave Brian and me our tour of the hospital and grounds. He introduced us to the koalas (from afar) and showed us the exam room, the ambulance, and the exhibits. He gave us a museum tour, and we talked briefly at the facilities’ café.

After we visited the museum, Mick took us to a local shopping center to see the Lewis sculpture (more information about this significance will be discussed in the chapter specifically on the 2019 fires), where I took a few photos, and we had lunch. Admittedly, the little we did see off Port Macquarie between the hospital, shopping center, and the airport was beautiful, and I wish I had had more time to spend there. Still, my primary purpose had been to visit the koala hospital and see the Lewis sculpture, which I can happily report I accomplished.

The next day, our tour group received a tour of Sydney—including the highlights of my trip when we were in Sydney, and our tour group had 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 discounted prices. We returned to our hotel late afternoon and were free for the rest of the afternoon. Wildlife Sydney Zoo was a fifteen-minute walk from our hotel, so Brian and I immediately headed there. By this point, it was 3.30, and the last admittance was 4.00, so we ran as quickly as possible to ensure we arrived on 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. 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 lying on, so Brian and I took that as our cue to see the koalas.

Since koalas sleep approximately 18 hours a day, I was incredibly excited to see that a mamma koola and her joey were active while we were there. They climbed down one tree, wandered over to the glass where we stood, and stared at us for a couple of minutes before the baby hopped on her mama's back and up; they climbed another tree where they continued to eat the leaf the zookeepers left for them. I took videos and as many pictures as possible, and I found myself teary-eyed at finally 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 so 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 love it when

people me this.” 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 she introduced us to each of them and told us an interesting fact about all of them. Truthfully, I was so overcome with emotion I don’t remember too much, but I remember her showing me one kangaroo, Julie, who said she had had a wasp fly up her nose earlier in the day. I asked her if Julie had been stung. The zookeeper said, “I don’t think so, but she is feeling quite sorry for herself.” Anyway, for the next ten minutes or so, I had the attention of all six of the kangaroos the zoo had, 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. When the zoo closed, we finally left, and they had to throw us out.

The following day, we had free, so I booked an “encounter” with a penguin caregiver and a koala caregiver at Featherdale Wildlife Park, a park about 45 minutes outside of Sydney. I paid money to get up close with the 16 zoo penguins, meet with the caretaker, and help her feed them. Luckily, the zoo provides gloves because, truthfully, as cute as the little penguins were, the fish they eat is pretty disgusting. It was common for one penguin to eat the head of the fish and leave the rest of it, and another penguin would come and nibble a couple of bits, and after the fish was $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way eaten, the caregiver said, “they’re done with that fish,” and she would throw the remains in the trash. Despite being disgusting, the penguins bit as they grabbed their food, so the experience was also a bit uncomfortable. However, seeing these adorable animals up close was so amusing to watch them waddle as they tried to get around. It was a memorable experience—despite the awkwardness.

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 of the most outstanding photos—one of which is on the cover of this book. As I left the caregiver after my twenty minutes was up, I thanked her and told her she helped me complete item number one on my bucket list. The most surreal thing about the whole experience was when I saw the photos I had taken and realized those were my photos—not ones I had seen on social media or in a book, but photos I had taken with my camera.

Our tour group traveled from Sydney to Cairns a couple of days later. Most people were excited about diving or snorkeling in the Great Barrier Reef—not me. I was ecstatic because Cairns is one of the few places in Australia where it is legal actually 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, so the time slots fill quickly; knowing this, I scheduled my appointment several weeks earlier.

Our tour group arrived in Cairns—an hour late, and I feared Brian and I would miss our appointments, but 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 ended up early. Since we had time to waste before our appointment, Brian and I walked around the Zoo/Aquarium. They had a lot of lizards and reptiles, which I fear and loathe as much as I love the koalas and the kangaroos, so I glanced at them and off to find the koalas so I could spend more quality time with them before that defining moment where I could hold one. Finally, the time arrived, and

we went downstairs; all of us that had the 3.30 time slot (probably a dozen of us) got a brief introduction on the proper way to hold a koala, and shortly after that, 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. About twelve of us lined up to have our pictures taken with her. They had us hold our arms down in koala position, hands looped together by our stomachs, 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 went in the next person’s arms. It felt like an assembly line for the poor girl, and I felt terrible for her. Still, 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 koala’s safety first, so I was not doing anything wrong. In any event, a lifetime of waiting was over in a split second, but I did get my photo taken holding a koala. Brian had his picture taken right after mine, and based on the expression on the koala's face, it looked as if she liked Brian. The caretakers commented about how much she appeared to like him. I was slightly jealous because his picture was much better than mine.

My last koala encounter came in our third city—Alice Springs, in the middle of the Australian Outback. Our group had a planned visit to Hartley’s Crocodile Adventure. Like many zoos in Australia, they had 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 focused on one—a mama with a joey in her pouch. I was determined to get some perfect photos of Mama and Joey, but after a long time and several tries, I had to settle with many ok photos of Mamma

and Joey. In the meantime, I could feed and pet the other kangaroos that hopped around the encounter. I could not believe how much fun they were. The highlight I think of the trip was when Brian sat down to take a selfie with a kangaroo in the background, and the next thing he knew, he had a kangaroo reaching over and putting its paw on his shoulder-an ultimate photo bomb by a kangaroo.

I had always thought koalas were cuter than kangaroos (marginally), but truthfully, it was the kangaroos I fell in love with while 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 quick and unpredictable, so it's not easy. I took several videos of them hopping short distances, but nothing like across a field like 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 3, and have my picture taken with four. I am uncertain of the number of kangaroos or wallabies I petted/played with, maybe a dozen. At the end of the trip, I totaled the number of photos I took of koalas during the journey, beginning with the koala hospital in Port Macquarie and ending with the Crocodile Adventures in Alice Springs. I had 112 photos of koalas, 12 videos, 95 images of kangaroos, 22 videos, and approximately two dozen pictures 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. It was 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,

platypus, and Quokkas, other animals unique to Australia. Still, 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 with Australian wildlife, and I could say I had a dream of going and seeing and touching, and after having done that, I can move on to something else, or it would do the exact opposite—it would make me even more fascinated with these amazing creatures. I think the fact that I am writing this book speaks that the latter occurred. Since I have returned from Australia, I look at the pages of my friends who rescue animals, run sanctuaries, or work in zoos. I become nostalgic and want to be back in Australia helping them, being on the front line caring for the animals.

That is not practical for me for various reasons, so I have to find an alternative solution, and this book is it. I lived in San Francisco. I live in Europe; I have seen some of the world's most beautiful opera houses and theaters. I have visited some of the world's most famous museums and cathedrals. Every country in the world has these things—their wildlife is unique to Australia. They are fortunate to have some of the most beautiful and precious animals found nowhere else, and people travel worldwide to see them. Yet, some Australians take it for granted, and many of these animals are on the brink of extinction due to climate change, feral infestation, land clearing, bushfires, 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 the animals that are not endangered, such as the kangaroo, face continuous obstacles from people, including fence injuries and cars. As a result, these animals still need care, and rescues are at their limits regarding how they can help. Australia would not be

Australia without any of these animals, and I am writing this to show the challenges these animals and the people who care for them face and 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; since they cannot speak for themselves, they rely on humans. Not only can humans do it, but they must do so. After all, we all live on this planet together, and there is no reason why we cannot continue to coexist.