

# Wildlife carers, vets call for faster and better prepared wildlife rescue after bushfires

ABC South East NSW

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When Peter Day returned to his remote wildlife sanctuary after a last-minute escape from a megafire, he needed vets to treat surviving kangaroos and wallabies, but he could not get a swift response.



Surrounded by forests, their sanctuary near Cathcart in south-east New South Wales operates as a release site for rehabilitated wildlife.

[Peter Day at his sanctuary with wildlife treated for burn injuries caused by surrounding bushfires, February 2020.](#) (ABC South East NSW: Bill Brown)

Throughout January huge bushfires swept towards them from the north and south, and by 1st February were closing in on the sanctuary. He and his wife Mimi had stayed to defend the well-prepared property, putting out spot fires.

But their plan suddenly changed as three large bushfires, out of sight in the surrounding forests, were about to join up.

"A brave man in a National Parks and Wildlife Service firefighting ute came speeding up the driveway, and he said 'you've got to get out of there now, or you'll die'," Mr Day said.

Captured in dramatic CCTV footage, they bundled up four of the joeys in their care and followed the ranger out.

"My wife turned around and she could see flames higher than the trees," Mr Day said.

The megafire destroyed over 12,000 hectares of forest, but amazingly the sanctuary survived.

But when they returned a few days later they found numerous kangaroos and wallabies with burn injuries.

"There wasn't a bird sound," Mr Day said.

"The place was silent. No insects, nothing."

He was able to get feed from a fellow WIRES carer at Cooma, a one and a half-hour drive away, and treated the injured wildlife for their wounds, putting the call out for veterinary assistance.

"We found that it was really, really hard to find support," he said.

"I was treating them on the ground where I'm sitting."

Help came a week after the fires when a New Zealand-based animal welfare charity, HUHA (Helping you help animals), arrived, led by its CEO, Carolyn Press-McKenzie.

They brought builders to construct a temporary triage clinic at the sanctuary, and brought in a team of volunteer Australian vets and a dart-shooter to sedate injured animals to be rescued from the surrounding firegrounds.

"He had been amazing on his own, but didn't have the resources," Ms Press-McKenzie said.

"The NSW Wildlife Council said to us, 'this man is desperate, and he just needs someone to turn up'."

The team of vets worked at the sanctuary for 10 days before briefly handing over to the Australian organisation, WIRES.

But Peter Day terminated the arrangement, and resigned from WIRES.

He joined another registered wildlife group, LAOKO (Looking After Our Kosczisuko Orphans), based in Cooma, which was also supported by HUHA with vets and the construction of a larger triage clinic and recovery shelter.

Peter Day said the experience provided valuable lessons for the future.

"There needs to be a rapid response headed by National Parks and Wildlife Service because they are the ones ultimately responsible for our native wildlife," he said.

One of the treating vets, Catherine Schuetze, from Vets for Compassion said that rapid wildlife rescue needs to be included in the government's emergency response system.

"We, as Australian vets, were told earlier on that we didn't need to go out there and do that, we had to wait to be called," Dr Scheutze said.

"[We were told] that DPI [the Department of Primary Industries] was handling it, RSPCA was handling it, WIRES was handling it, that the National Parks were handling it.

"And it did take a few weeks to realise that no one was responding."

The vast scale of the bushfires across NSW was such that a WIRES spokesperson said in the three months prior to February they received more than 87,000 calls to its wildlife rescue assistance hotline.

WIRES said they have also provided over \$1 million to its 28 branches across NSW, as well as, 'in lieu of any emergency wildlife rescue funding by the Federal Government or any state government', establishing an emergency relief fund of \$1 million to provide emergency grants to licensed wildlife rescuers and carers across the country who were not affiliated with WIRES.

Dr Schuetze said that trained teams of veterinary disaster management personnel and equipment should be all set up and ready for the next bushfire emergency.

"So that we enter into the situation really early on, along with emergency services, so that it's an integrated rescue effort," she said.