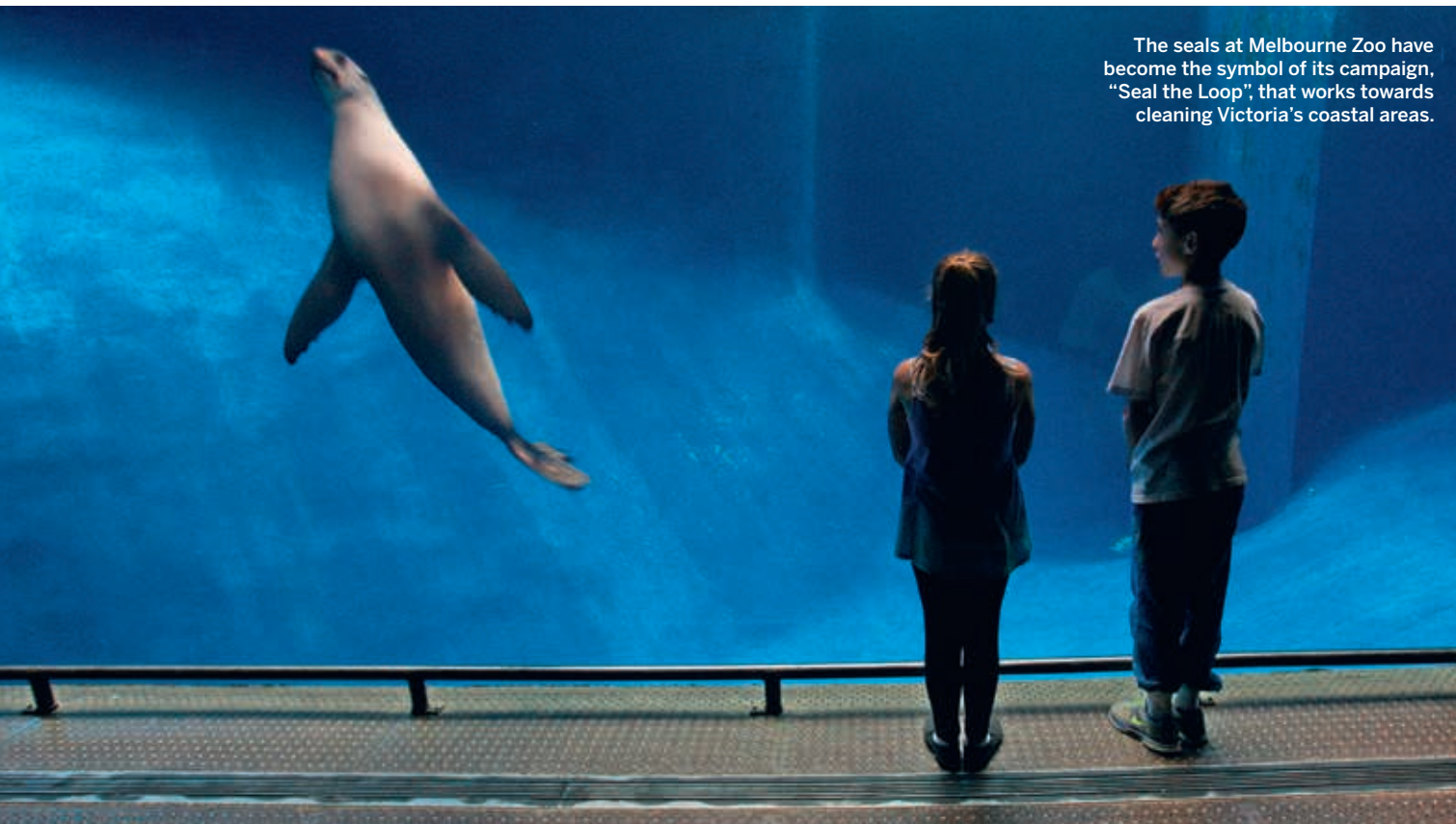


MY FAMILY OF OTHER ANIMALS

From shy bandicoots to adorable koalas, Victoria brims with heartwarming stories of conservation and rehabilitation

BY SONAL SHAH

The "Penguin Parade" at Phillip Island gathers a group of enthusiastic viewers who wait at sunset for a glimpse of little penguins returning to their burrows.



The seals at Melbourne Zoo have become the symbol of its campaign, "Seal the Loop", that works towards cleaning Victoria's coastal areas.

As the plane descended, the moon rose, inching across the sky like the bioluminescent tail of a giant glow-worm.

The land glistened with its light, reflecting off lakes, waterholes, and muddy riverine slivers. The illuminated, striated hillocks below, pocked with bush plants, echoed an observation in the book on my lap—Bruce Chatwin's classic travelogue, *The Songlines*—that Australia's "dotted" landscape inspired the Aboriginal style of painting.

But as we turned towards Melbourne, the moonlight splashed across the ocean, revealing the crenellated coastline of Victoria, and the dots gave way to straight lines and squares. Here, unlike the distant part of the continent Chatwin wrote about, the scrub had been transformed into pasture and farmland by its European settlers over the last 180-odd years.

This transformation appeared, complete, by the light of the next morning, in the staid urban landscape of Melbourne. Except for an abundance of eucalyptus trees, everything looked startlingly familiar to me, like the eastern coast of America transplanted, with elms and oaks, and precise road markers. Of all the supposed strangeness of the land "down under", there was no obvious sign.

Yet Australia is still one of the strangest places on the planet, particularly in terms of the biodiversity of its wildlife. One of a handful of "megadiverse" countries, the continent has a high percentage of endemic species. But it also has one of the world's highest rates of extinction; some scientists estimate a rate of one or two land animals lost per decade. Climate change is a big

factor, but so are invasive species, such as feral cats and foxes, introduced by Europeans.

Now, as the descendants of the settlers who irrevocably altered the landscape work to preserve its particularity, some of their approaches involve bringing in tourists—typically an invasive lot themselves—to help fund conservation efforts and raise awareness. Over the week I spent in and around Melbourne, discovering a range of these approaches and their effects, the weirdness of Oz and its unique animal life slowly sunk in.

The Special Ks

"Wowie Kazowie!" yelled Janine Duffy, swerving and slamming the van to a halt. "That was an eastern blue-tongued lizard!" By the time I was out of the vehicle and peering into the long grass that lined the road leading into You Yangs Regional Park, the skink had slithered away. But Duffy's Level Ten enthusiasm—and the tenet of animal avoidance she had so forcefully just put into practice—turned out to be hallmarks of my group day trip with her company, Echidna Walkabout (www.echidnawalkabout.com.au).

Founded in 1993, Duffy's company was one of the first to offer minimally invasive wildlife experiences in Australia. She and her co-founder also set up a research foundation, specifically to study koalas. Echidna's guides and researchers are intimately familiar with each koala around the granite You Yangs range,

an hour southwest of Melbourne. In 1998, they discovered a new way to tell koalas apart from the underside of their nostrils—a testament to how much time they've spent staring up at them.

Once in the woods, Duffy led us to Winberry, a "dominant" male, who she called the king of the forest. Despite the crunch of our feet on the dry undergrowth, he slept peacefully, his cushion of cartilage keeping him moored to his high perch. Duffy told us that koalas prefer the moisture-rich new leaves from the tops of trees, and that climate change, which causes dryer eucalyptus, has affected their population.

Duffy explained that because Australia's climate is already so extreme, its flora and fauna are "superheroes", uniquely adapted to living on the edge. Kangaroos, for example, can survive 10 years of drought, even reproducing for the first six. But because animals are so precisely calibrated to certain extremes, their populations decline catastrophically when a larger change, such as global warming, is introduced, making Australia a bellwether of climatic disaster.

Duffy's insistence on maintaining a strict distance from Winberry was in stark contrast to the koala conservation centre I visited on Phillip Island, about two hours southeast of Melbourne, where the trees surrounding a boardwalk were festooned with fresh eucalyptus boughs to draw the animals to them. However, Echidna does encourage some hands-on engagement, and Duffy soon had us hard at work, pulling up boneseed, an invasive weed that was planted here about a century ago to pack the soil after a forest fire.

This weeding project began when Echidna's researchers noticed that koalas avoided the trees that were surrounded by boneseed, probably because they like a clear view of predators when ambling from one trunk to another at dawn or dusk. Partly through the weeding efforts of Echidna's tour groups, which resonate with traditional Aboriginal land management practices, the koala population in the park has increased fourfold in two years.

As the afternoon grew hotter, we ventured out of the shade of the You Yangs' eucalyptus groves to a field of dry long grass in the nearby Serendip Sanctuary, which the state purchased from farmers in the 1950s to breed endangered birds. Serendip's grazing ground for mobs of wild eastern grey kangaroos became a stalking ground for us, as Duffy all but belly-crawled between sparse rows of trees, attempting to sneak up on the skittish megapods.

Feeling a little foolish, and very sweaty, I was still thrilled when a kangaroo bounded by, then melted ghost-like into the grass. The experience surpassed the more up-close and personal encounter I had with eastern greys at the Melbourne Zoo, where one can pet the creatures while they feed. But as Duffy said, "some people need zoos to form the connection."

Hit Parade

If Australia's animals are superheroes, nowhere are these champions pressed into greater service than at Australia's oldest zoo. The Melbourne Zoo (www.zoo.org.au/melbourne), though cosy and colonial, has come a long way from its mid-19th-century origins. Besides areas like the kangaroo enclosure, where humans are taught to respect animals within their spaces, the zoo also runs several campaigns to change people's habits. One of these is "Seal the Loop", an initiative to recycle the zoo's plastic into bins for collecting fishing line, which is



Trails sheltered by Great Otway National Park's rainforest canopy (top) are a popular option for hikers; The eastern grey kangaroo (bottom), Australia's poster child for wildlife, reaches a speed of over 56 kmph.



PHOTO COURTESY: PAUL PHILIPSON/VISIT VICTORIA (PEOPLE); PHOTO COURTESY: ECHIDNA WALKABOUT NATURE TOURS/VISIT VICTORIA (KANGAROO)



The elusive platypus can be spotted on a boating trip on Lake Elizabeth (top) in Great Otway National Park; The 74-odd-acres of You Yangs National Park are an ideal habitat for koalas (bottom).



harmful to marine animals. At the fur seal tank, these graceful, intelligent animals, whose ancestors drew the earliest European hunters to Victoria's shores, now perform acrobatics while their keepers talk about Seal the Loop: the grand finale involves a seal dunking items into a bin.

The zoo's star ambassador is a little penguin named Miss Wing, who was abandoned by her parents and adopted by the keepers. During a special backstage interview with the diminutive bird, she allowed me to touch her iridescent teal feathers, gargled out a few notes, pecked at my toes, and then wandered off, wings straining, behind a shimmering dragonfly—her aspirations towards humanity momentarily abandoned for an attempt at flight.

Miss Wing's relatives at the nature reserve on Phillip Island (www.penguins.org.au) were far less tame, though just as sociable amongst themselves. Since the 1920s, the island's Summerland Peninsula has hosted viewings of the "Penguin Parade" at dusk, when little penguins return to their burrows after a day of fishing. What began as a couple of guys with flashlights is now a huge viewing area that can accommodate up to 3,000 people per night.

In a process that involved the state's purchase of a large housing colony, the peninsula became a conservation and tourism destination, and its penguin population has grown steadily, from 6,000 birds in the late 1970s, to 35,000. The viewing areas are designed to get you very close to the penguins without disturbing them, and a great deal of work goes into conditioning human behaviour here—no cameras are allowed, for example. When a new section opened a year ago, only three burrows were shifted, and the penguins, who follow the same path home every night, were carefully taught their new routes.

Though the visitor centre has a regurgitated mass of penguin merchandise in its gift shop, its informative displays show how little penguins' powers extend beyond cuteness. Among their "superhero" skills is the ability to dive into the water up to 1,300 times a day, sometimes to depths of 130 feet.

But as the sun went down, and the foot-high penguins emerged from the ocean, cuteness was most definitely their predominant feature. Appearing in small flocks, the penguins waddled cautiously out of the water, scurried across the exposed stretch of beach, then ambled slowly—stopping often to socialise on the rocky shore—towards their burrows.

Unsexy Beasts

Penguins, koalas, and kangaroos are among Australia's most popular and recognisable animals, but they are not its most threatened. A priority list of about 20 highly endangered species includes such timorous beasts as the southern brown bandicoot and long-nosed potoroo, and marsupial "mice" such as dunnarts and antechinus. The eastern barred bandicoot, already extinct in the wild, is foremost on the list.

This small marsupial is the focus of conservation efforts on **Churchill Island** (www.penguins.org.au/attractions/churchill-island), a smaller island just next to Phillip Island. Churchill has a preserved early settler "heritage" farm, complete with livestock, but conservationists are trying to return the underlying ecosystem of this island to its pre-European state, starting with the eastern barred bandicoot. I visited Churchill during the day—the wrong time to commune with this elusive, speedy, and nocturnal marsupial, but I did meet Donald Sutherland,

PHOTO COURTESY: MARK CHEW/GREAT OTWAY NATIONAL PARK/VISIT VICTORIA (LAKE); PHOTO COURTESY: ECHIDNA WALKABOUT NATURE TOURS (KOALA)



The Open Vehicle Adventure at the Werribee Open Range area in Melbourne Zoo lets visitors witness the wildlife of the African savannah up close.

a researcher involved in its rehabilitation. Sutherland talked about how a small population of bandicoots was introduced to Churchill, which has no foxes or cats. With Churchill's bandicoots now rapidly multiplying, Sutherland hopes the species can one day be delisted as extinct in the wild.

Getting people to care about such reticent and visually understated animals as bandicoots is a challenge, but Sutherland explained that such efforts are key to broader ecosystem restoration. And the myriad people and institutions involved in bandicoot recovery—from citizen scientists, to zoos, to a special fox management team—spells greater collaboration in conservation efforts across the board.

Sutherland spoke of geographically isolated places like Phillip and Churchill Islands as conservation hubs. Thanks to the trapping, baiting, and hunting initiatives of the fox management team, no foxes have been spotted on Phillip Island for almost two years. This is good for the penguins there—a single fox can kill up to 40 birds in a night—but also means that bandicoots could be reintroduced on a larger scale. "People could go to Philip Island to see what life could have been like," Sutherland said.

Hide-and-Seek

In the **Great Otway National Park**, along a southern tip of Victoria's coast, the landscape looked not only pre-European, but primeval. A rainforest of tall tree ferns and hang-ing mosses loomed over an enchanting trail at dusk. I followed guide Bruce Jackson (www.platypustours.net.au), a man as quiet as the animal he was taking a small group of us to see, down to Lake Elizabeth for the subtlest wildlife experience of my trip.

It was here that I saw—or did I?—the platypus.

Though the hidden lake looks ancient, it is actually only about 50 years old. The trunks of dead trees stuck up from its muddy green surface, casualties of its formation when the valley flooded. As we paddled across the water in rowboats, the lake seemed so devoid of life that we might as well have been searching for the Loch Ness monster. Indeed, the platypus, a mammal with a bizarre duck bill and habit of laying eggs, was originally considered to be a hoax in Europe.

Each time Jackson murmured, "12 o'clock, 3 o'clock, to our left," we whipped our heads around, looking for the fascinating creature, which not only uses electrolocation to hunt, but also produces venom from an ankle spur. Was that the glimmer of a fur-slicked back, or a wet log? The ripple of a swimming fish, or a diving platypus? After several such ambiguous sightings, Jackson, presumably deeming the outing a success, brought out biscuits and a flask of coffee.

I sipped the warm drink, bemused at the capriciousness of this sort of wildlife "encounter". But even if the platypuses were not forthcoming, it was enough to know that they were there, and to drift a while longer, listening to the rustling trees, the occasional splash of an oar, and the unfamiliar evening birdcalls. As we rowed towards the shore, the soft, basso grunting of a koala calling for its mate floated across the water. Its rumbling gently receded behind me as I walked back through the dark forest, along a path glittering with glow-worms. Everything was strange and wonderful. ●

SONAL SHAH is a freelance editor and writer. She formerly edited *Time Out Delhi*, and was an associate editor at *The Caravan*.

PHOTO COURTESY: ZOO'S VICTORIA/VISIT VICTORIA