Release and Capture ‘How the Release of Endangered Birds has Captured Our Youth’

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Abstract
In 2013 and 2015 Taronga Youth at the Zoo (YATZ) volunteers attended ‘Camps of a Lifetime!’ and assisted Taronga Zoo Bird Keepers in the release of two separate groups of captive bred birds into Mount Pilot National Park with the regent honeyeater (Anthochaera phrygia). Once endemic to the east coast of Australia, the bird’s decline has been dramatic in the last 40 years, and is now critically endangered on the IUCN Red List. While on the camps, the YATZ also visited a local school near the release site and educated students about their new birds. The camps have proven to be vital in the attraction and retention of YATZ volunteers over the last few years and have dramatically increased participants’ understanding and commitment to conservation. Many have become leaders in the program and have made active efforts to participate in and educate others about conservation programs and initiatives.

Background
The Taronga Zoo Youth at the Zoo (YATZ) program began in 2001 with 20 teenagers with the primary focus of vocational training and experience in zoo keeping. Since then the program has grown and currently has 347 active members with conservation education being the core focus with the purpose of ‘helping others take positive actions for the conservation of wildlife and their environments’. YATZ take part in many activities in and out of zoo grounds and time with zoo keepers is only one of over ten activities; others include supporting the Zoo’s Conservation Campaigns, assisting with ‘Zoo Adventures (a vacation care program for 5-10 year olds) and devising and delivering YATZeD (informal education lesson devised and run by YATZ Leaders for other YATZ).

The endangered regent honeyeater (Anthochaera phrygia) has been held at Taronga Zoo since the mid-1990s and has been bred for release since 2000. Bird keepers in the Australian Fauna Division manage...
and maintain these birds with advice from vets and curators, and the releases occurs in Mount Pilot National Park in Chiltern, Victoria in conjunction with BirdLife Australia and the Victorian Government.

Chiltern is a small rural town with a population of less than 1100; it has two local primary schools (with student numbers 100-115), and no high school.

**Regent Honeyeater Releases**

Previous regent honeyeater releases in Chiltern were conducted in 2008 and 2010. In 2010, Taronga Zoo Educator, Rod Cheal, accompanied the keepers and taught the local students at two primary schools about the endangered bird, its release, as well as conservation actions the students and the community could take to ensure their success of the species. Actions included responsible rubbish collection and keeping pet cats indoors. While this was considered successful and created new relationships with the two local schools, it was not followed up in any particular way.

2013 was the first release of these birds in which YATZ were involved. YATZ Educators approached Taronga Zoo Bird Supervisor, Michael Shiels, to seek permission for YATZ to support the release, as previous release debriefs had detailed the lengthy set up process of release tents and browse collection.

YATZ were invited to submit an ‘Expression of Interest’ to attend the 5 night camp, with over 25 applications received, of which 15 teenagers were chosen.

**YATZ Camps- 2013 and 2015**

In April 2013, 15 YATZ and two staff travelled 600kms by mini bus from Sydney to Chiltern.

On Day 1 the YATZ assisted 2 bird keepers to erect and furnish four release tents, with branches, browse, water and food containers. The keepers provided supervision and training for eager teenagers who loved the idea of being in the bush preparing a site to release endangered birds into the wild. The YATZ assisted keepers to collect the birds from the airport, process the birds; which involved health checks and applying trackers; and settle them into their temporary accommodation tents, erected with the keepers in the days preceding, saving money and time. Importantly, two days were spent at the local primary schools educating the local students about their ‘new’ birds and the importance of looking after their habitat. This was considered highly valuable by the teachers in those schools (Dinsdale Classroom Teacher, St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, 2013, pers. comm., 15 April).

When release day came, all YATZ attended, with locals and agencies such as BirdLife Australia, Monash University and La Trobe University and the Victorian Department of Water, Land and Environment. Two YATZ were invited to assist the keepers and some other key stakeholders to open the tents to allow the birds to make their way into their new home in the Mount Pilot National Park.

Those who attended the release emotionally connected with the animals, with one Taronga Zoo staff commenting, “Many zoo keepers with years of experience could only dream about releasing their animals into the wild!” (Brown, Supervisor of Backyard to Bush, Taronga Zoo 2013, pers. comm., 16 May).

By 2015 the regent honeyeater release program had grown in reputation among YATZ, with applications growing to 45, with again only 15 being chosen. The value of this selection process has been commented on by parents of YATZ who hope their children will learn important vocational and life skills from applying for the program (Adamson J, YATZ Parent, Taronga Zoo 2013, pers. comm., 19 June).
The camp in 2013 was so successful that the formula was repeated in 2015, with some changes made to activities to enhance previous learning delivered two years prior.

**Reflections**

The keepers enjoyed both the practical help and the company of teenagers with similar mindsets to their own and were impressed by the maturity of these young people. “Thanks guys for all your help. Your enthusiasm was addictive and your determination and helpfulness was admirable!” (Michael Shiels, Supervisor of Birds, Taronga Zoo – comment on Facebook, April 17, 2013).

Many of the YATZ expressed that they had now found a group that understood their concerns for the environment and didn't think they were ‘weird’ for wanting to pick up rubbish or spend hours sitting in the Australian bush spotting birds and other animals. 13 out of 14 YATZ also stated they learnt all that they know about the endangered bird from the camp they attended. “... I want to thank you all so much for being a part of this week and especially to Rod and Kerry for giving me the opportunity to spend a week with people who do pretty much exactly what I want to do when I grow up. It was such an invigorating and inspiring experience and all of you made it that much more worthwhile. I can’t think of a better group of people to have done this with, and I feel honoured and privileged to call myself a RHE YATZ” (Elizabeth Morrison, YATZ member – comment on Facebook, April 18, 2013).

100% of camp attendees stated they made friendships they still consider valuable. Anecdotally, their passion for wildlife conservation was ignited or enhanced and their confidence to speak up for their cause also increased. They continue to be passionate and active in their communities and schools; many have created ‘green groups’; started fundraising campaigns and have spoken to their whole schools at assemblies about their concerns.

**Conclusion**

The 2013 and 2015 regent honeyeater releases involved Youth at the Zoo volunteers in a fashion previously not practised. The overall positive result is encouraging and many YATZ believe these experiences are among the best things they have ever done, creating young people who are well on their way to becoming global citizens.

Providing teenagers with the opportunity to participate in these programs and giving them direct and meaningful access to the field, sparks a passion for conservation and creates positive memories. The YATZ may have attended a ‘release’ but in the mind of this author – I feel they were ‘captured’ by the activities – the birds – the keepers – and the important conservation work zoos engage in.

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**References**


