Good afternoon.

Thanks for inviting us to this lovely lunch to speak about the work of women involved in the Myall Koala and Environment Group, also known by the initials MKEG.

First, I would like to acknowledge that this lunch is held on the traditional lands of the Worimi people and we pay our respect to elder’s past, present and future.

I think such an acknowledgment is especially important given that we’ll be talking about protecting the environment, something traditional owners have been doing for many thousands of years.

Nature is at the heart of everything – the air we breathe, the water we drink, the places and wildlife we love.

But the Government’s State of the Environment 2021 report holds a dire reminder that **nature is in trouble**.

The report paints a devastating picture.

The health of our environment is worsening. Australia has lost more mammal species than any other continent and invasive plant species now outnumber native ones.

The major threats to fauna here in Hawks Nest and Tea Gardens are habitat destruction, fences across animal paths, noxious weeds, dog and cat attacks, vehicle strikes and disease.

But by far the biggest cause of decline has been the loss of habitat.

In the past 15 years, Tea Gardens has seen many developments in Myall Quays, the Grange, Palm Lake Resort, Shearwater and soon Parry’s Cove.

In 2016, the Rural Fire Service introduced the 10/50 Code which allowed property owners to remove any tree within 10 metres of any building in a “bush fire zone”

Those are the threats, so now we’ll tell you something about MKEG.

The Group was formed in 1989 as a result of concerned local residents hearing about how koalas would be extinct in the near future.

More than half the foundation members were women. Together, they began monitoring the koala population and investigated other environmental issues that affect the Myall Coast region.

One of the first members was a Woman Warrior - Mrs Jean Shaw, the “Koala Lady”, who was supported by another Eco-Warrior and nature artist, Pat Pritchard.

Their group rescued sick and injured koalas and kept a written record of koala sightings in Hawks Nest and Tea Gardens.  Over ten years the records showed a significant drop in the koala population, resulting in classifying the Hawks Nest & Tea Gardens koala population ENDANGERED by 1999, when the population was estimated at only 20 animals.

The Koala Nature Reserve in Hawks Nest is named after Jean Shaw.

MKEG has more than 150 members and is involved in many activities to protect our endangered koalas, fauna and flora and the local environment in general.

Some of these are:

Participating in the Koala Recovery Plan managed by MidCoast Council and National Parks by planting trees and creating the John Davis Memorial Walk in Hawks Nest.

Also participating in and providing financial assistance for koala habitat surveys.

We provide funding assistance to MidCoast Council for koala signage in Hawks Nest and Tea Gardens. We instigated and financially supported the “Slow Down” flashing sign on the Singing Bridge and the painted “Slow Down” Koala images on the road.

Also, the planting of thousands of koala food trees in public reserves.

Over the years the council has supplied tube stock native plants and koala food trees for our members to plant out.

We also encourage residents to plant koala food trees on their own properties by our annual tree giveaway program at the Myall River Festival and at other times.

Then there is the removing of invasive weeds by our keen volunteers in the Bitou Busters group. We meet monthly on a Saturday morning between March and October and tackle Bitou Bush and other weeds along the dunes and in reserves and on public land.

We rescue sick and injured wildlife, particularly koalas and deliver them to wildlife carers. Some of our members are trained to handle koalas.

Then there’s the maintaining of a database of koala sightings from reports on the telephone hotline, website and Facebook page. This database is solely to keep track of the koala population. It is not so we can tell tourists where to go to see a koala as some residents seem to think!

We educate the wider community on the importance of preserving healthy ecosystems for our local flora and fauna, including koalas, by regular articles in the local paper, social media platforms and entries on our website.

We also give presentations about the local koala population to schools and other community groups.

We work with MidCoast Council and State government through the Saving our Species program to monitor and record data on shorebird and seabird species such as the annual little terns project on the Winda Woppa sand piles and Corrie Island.

Also, we actively lobby Council and the state government over inappropriate developments such as those involving excessive bulk and scale, excessive tree removal, destruction of core koala habitat, severing wildlife movement corridors or other environmentally damaging proposals.

We also Support environmentally sensitive development proposals in the region. We are not totally opposed to development, but we work to be a voice against inappropriate development.

And finally but not least we give finance support to the Port Stephens Koala Hospital at Anna Bay with annual donations. Our oldest local koala, Princess, who is at least 14 years old, is now living her best life as a senior resident there. Princess was rescued back in March and found to be nearly blind, falling out of trees and far too arthritic to climb very high in search of food so she was deemed too frail to be released back to her home range.

So that’s what we do at MKEG and we couldn’t do it without our environmentally aware women founders and our tireless women members who take on much of the heavy lifting!