

TARONGA AEC ANNUAL REPORT 2025

Submitted by Dr Justine O'Brien, Taronga Conservation Society Australia

1. Introduction

The Taronga Animal Ethics Committee (AEC) is a Statutory Committee through which all projects involving use of animals in research and formal education must be approved.

2. AEC membership

The Taronga AEC is constituted in accordance with the *Animal Research Act 1985* and consists of the following representatives:

Name	Category
Dr. Frances Hulst	Category A – Veterinarian
Dr. Peter Johnson	Category A – Veterinarian
Dr. Alisa Wallace	Category A – Veterinarian
Dr. Joanna Day	Category B – Researcher
Dr. Justine O'Brien, Chairperson	Category B – Researcher
Dr. Monique Van Sluys	Category B – Researcher
Dr. Catherine Brett	Category C – Animal Welfare
Mr. Aaron Purcell	Category C – Animal Welfare
Mr. Shane Daw	Category D – Independent
Mr. David Roden	Category D – Independent

3. AEC meetings and inspections

Six meetings were held in 2025, all of which were held on Cammeraigal Country at the Taronga Institute of Science and Learning, Taronga Zoo. For those unable to attend in person, an option was provided to join online.

Date	Location
12 th February 2025	Taronga Zoo
9 th April 2025	Taronga Zoo
11 th June 2025	Taronga Zoo
13 th August 2025	Taronga Zoo
8 th October 2025	Taronga Zoo
10 th December 2025	Taronga Zoo

Quorum was maintained for all meetings held throughout the year. Member attendance at meetings is shown below, denoted with 'X':

Member	Feb 2025	Apr 2025	Jun 2025	Aug 2025	Oct 2025	Dec 2025
Dr. Frances Hulst		X	X		X	X
Dr. Peter Johnson	X	X	X	X	X	X
Dr. Alisa Wallace			X		X	
Dr. Joanna Day	X	X	X	X	X	X
Dr. Justine O'Brien	X	X	X	X	X	X
Dr. Monique Van Sluys	X	X	X	X	X	X
Dr. Catherine Brett	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mr. Aaron Purcell	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mr. Shane Daw			X		X (partial)	
Mr. David Roden	X	X	X	X	X	X

Site inspections

In 2025, the AEC inspected the following facilities and records:

- **Regent Honeyeater back-of-house aviaries, Taronga Zoo**

Taronga's Behavioural Biologist Dr Joy Tripovich and Senior Keeper Ms Emily Schmelitschek led the Committee on a tour of Taronga Zoo's bird banding facilities and the back-of-house Regent Honeyeater aviaries to discuss the work undertaken through AEC protocol **3c/02/25** – *The importance of song in the critically endangered Regent Honeyeater*.

- **Great Southern Oceans seal & sea lion back-of-house holding, Taronga Zoo**

The Committee was shown the back-of-house holding area behind Taronga Zoo's Seal Bay by Taronga's Behavioural Biologist Dr Ben Pitcher and Marine Mammals Unit Supervisor Mr Brad Mackenzie. Dr Pitcher and Mr Mackenzie discussed how the area would be set up and operated to facilitate seal and sea lion hearing trials undertaken through AEC protocol **4a/08/25** – *Pinniped hearing and risks from offshore windfarms*.

- **Bellinger River Snapping Turtle conservation breeding facility, Taronga Zoo**

An inspection of Taronga Zoo's newly finished Bellinger River Snapping Turtle breeding facilities with Senior Herpetofauna Keeper Mr Adam Skidmore was held to discuss the work undertaken through AEC protocol **3d/12/23** – *Husbandry of the Bellinger River Turtle*. The advancements in enclosure design, filtration systems and husbandry processes that have come with the new facility were highlighted in this inspection.

- **NSW marine turtle fieldwork, virtual inspection**

Taronga's Conservation Biologist Dr Jo Day and Wildlife Conservation Officer Dr Phoebe Meagher led the Committee on a virtual site inspection of marine turtle tagging fieldwork undertaken through AEC project **4b/12/24** – *Movement and habitat use of marine turtles in NSW*. Pre-recorded footage of Drs Day and Meagher capturing turtles while SCUBA diving and images of sample collection and tagging provided the Committee with a unique opportunity to observe the project's protocols themselves.

marine turtle tagging fieldwork undertaken through AEC project 4b/12/24 – *Movement and habitat use of marine turtles in NSW*. Pre-recorded footage of PIs Day and Meagher capturing turtles on SCUBA (and images of sample collection etc etc) were shown to the Committee.



Images: (Left) Dr Tripovich showing a data server with Regent Honeyeater recordings (held in the bird banding room) to the Committee. (Right) Ms Schmelitschek showing the Committee the outdoor Regent Honeyeater aviaries, where recorded vocalisations were being played over speakers to the birds housed within.



Image: Dr Pitcher and Mr McKenzie showing the Committee the back-of-house area at Seal Bay, where hearing trials will commence later this year.



Images: Mr Skidmore leading the Committee on an inspection of the TZ Bellinger River Snapping Turtle breeding facility.

4. Projects assessed and approved/rejected

Eleven new projects were reviewed and approved. These were:

Name & institution	Project title	Approval granted
Prof Merran Govendir University of Sydney	Investigation into the pharmacokinetic profile of a single subcutaneous injection of robenacoxib at a dose of 2 mg/kg as an analgesic for koalas	Approved with no conditions
Claire Nelson & Natalie Scobie Taronga Conservation Society Australia	Practical workshop for the Taronga Veterinary Professional Training in Wildlife Treatment and Care	Approved with no conditions
Dr Joy Tripovich & Dr Ben Pitcher Taronga Conservation Society Australia, University of New South Wales, Macquarie University	The importance of song in the critically endangered Regent Honeyeater	Approved with no conditions
Dr Anthony Waddle & Michael McFadden Macquarie University, Taronga Conservation Society Australia	Conserving declining frogs with new technologies	Approved with no conditions
Robert Kyte & Dean Portelli BirdLife Australia, Dean Portelli Ecological Consulting	Trialling modified harness design for attaching radio transmitters to Regent Honeyeaters as part of the Release of Captive-bred Regent Honeyeaters into NSW	Approved with no conditions
Jane Hall Taronga Conservation Society Australia	<i>Salmonella enterica</i> var Weltevreden in reptiles on Christmas and Cocos Islands	Approved with no conditions
Alexia Jankowski & Dr Karrie Rose Parks Australia, Taronga	Translocation of the Christmas Island Lister's gecko (<i>Lepidodactylus listeri</i>) to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands	Approved with no conditions

Conservation Society Australia		
Dr Jo Day Taronga Conservation Society Australia	Age determination in monotremes using an epigenetic clock	Approved with no conditions
Dr Ben Pitcher & Dr Dave Slip Taronga Conservation Society Australia, Macquarie University	Pinniped hearing and risks from offshore windfarms	Approved with no conditions
Dr Aimee Silla & Michael McFadden University of Wollongong, Taronga Conservation Society Australia	Securing the genetic diversity of threatened frog populations through strategic biobanking and assisted reproduction	Approved with no conditions
Dr Gabrielle Tobias & Dr Michelle Cowan Taronga Conservation Society Australia, Small Animal Specialist Hospital	Effects of Premedication on Anaesthetic Induction and Recovery in Little Penguins (<i>Eudyptula minor</i>)	Approved with two conditions

In 2025, the Committee also reviewed and approved 31 ongoing projects and 17 amendment applications. The Committee noted 12 final reports, reviewed 10 Unexpected Adverse Events and ratified two AEC protocols approved by external AECs which included Taronga staff as project participants.

The Committee undertook their annual review of Taronga’s Emergency Response Plan, as per requirements placed by the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (NSW DPIRD) to uphold Taronga’s licence and accreditation under the *Animal Research Act 1985*. In the June 2025 meeting, the Committee discussed and approved Taronga Zoo and Taronga Western Plains Zoo’s primate escape and recapture plans.

The Taronga AEC did not receive or approve any project applications that have a high adverse impact on the welfare of the animals (i.e. Category 7: Major Physiological Challenge and Category 8: Death as an endpoint).

5. Animal care and use facilities and field sites

Taronga facilities

All facilities at Taronga are licensed and approved by NSW DPIRD under the *Exhibited Animals Protection Act 1986*. This legislation requires that Taronga comply with their high standards of animal care and exhibit design at all times (Authority Number 48705). Both Taronga Zoo and Taronga Western Plains Zoo are also accredited through the Zoo and Aquarium Association of Australasia.

Field sites for new projects approved in 2025

- Various field sites across NSW (AEC protocol **3c/02/25** – *The importance of song in the critically endangered Regent Honeyeater*). This project is being undertaken in collaboration with Australian National University, BirdLife Australia and the University of New South Wales.
- Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands (AEC protocols **3b/06/25** – *Salmonella enterica var Weltevreden in reptiles on Christmas and Cocos Islands* and **3c/06/25** – *Translocation of the Christmas Island Lister’s gecko (Lepidodactylus listeri) to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands*). Protocol **3b/06/25** is being

undertaken in collaboration with Parks Australia and NSW DPIRD, and protocol **3c/06/25** with the Director of National Parks.

6. Activities supporting educational needs of AEC members and personnel involved in the care and use of animals

AEC members

- The link to the ANZCCART ComPass online training course for the use of animals in research and training has been provided to Committee members and researchers for completion if they have not undertaken other AEC training.
- Committee members were provided with online access to a series of educational webinars from the NSW DPIRD Animal Research Review Panel, which focused on animal research topics including euthanasia methods and managing adverse events.
- Site visits (in person and online) included information sessions with keepers and area supervisors to provide information on animal care and facility suitability. During these inspections, the Committee was also provided valuable information from researchers about project objectives, methodology and conservation outcomes.

Animal carers & teaching staff

The Taronga Training Institute (TTI) offers two certificate courses in the animal care industry. These courses are run across both Sydney and Dubbo sites, as well as in conjunction with Zoos Victoria, Perth Zoo, and Zoos South Australia for interstate students. The Certificate II course is now offered in an online format for students based in New South Wales or Queensland, which includes practical days at Taronga Zoo, Taronga Western Plains Zoo or Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary. The course is also available as a VET and HSC program for high school students based in Sydney or Queensland.

- **ACM20121** – Certificate II in Animal Care: an introductory course for those interested in the animal care industry and/or pursuing a career as a keeper in the animal care industry.
- **ACM30321** – Certificate III in Wildlife and Exhibited Animal Care: a pathway to zoo keeping where students will further develop their knowledge in animal husbandry, with graduates seeking employment as a zookeeper, or animal keeper in aquariums and wildlife parks.

Researchers

- Researchers can access the ANZCCART online training course for the use of animals in research and training. Taronga researchers with co-joint or adjunct positions can also undertake these courses through universities.
- Staff at the Taronga Wildlife Hospitals and at the Taronga Institute of Science and Learning provide training to students enrolled in graduate and post-graduate programs and professional training for scientists on specialised techniques and wildlife species for approved projects as required, to ensure all procedures are carried out with a high degree of aptitude and care.
- As part of a joint education alliance, Taronga and the University of Sydney offer and co-deliver a three-year conservation degree, the *Bachelor of Wildlife Conservation (Taronga)*, with an optional one-year *Bachelor of Wildlife Conservation (Taronga) (Honours)*. The bachelor's degree provides students with unparalleled opportunities to develop skills and expertise in achieving conservation outcomes. Students are taught by dedicated researchers and practitioners from Taronga and by leading academics from the University's Faculty of Science and School of Life and Environmental Sciences.

7. Administrative or other difficulties being experienced

While the AEC meetings in 2025 were held in person at Taronga Zoo, Committee members were able to attend the meetings via videoconferencing if required (e.g., due to illness or work commitments). For remote locations, site inspections of field sites were conducted virtually by Taronga staff sharing videos and photos of field sites and research activities.

Taronga continues to explore options to move the current AEC system to an online alternative. This is required to streamline the application and approval process, which will significantly reduce the amount of time spent administrating the AEC and facilitate annual reporting requirements. Our barriers to implementing an online system include the costs involved in purchasing and maintaining the system, and limitations around the capacity of Taronga's IT team to facilitate the rollout of new systems. The option of moving to an online system will be further explored in 2026-2027 with the assistance of Taronga's Information Management team.

8. Any matters that may affect the establishment's ability to maintain compliance with the Code and is necessary, provision of suitable recommendations

There were no issues to report. Ms Kelly Debono was contracted by Taronga Conservation Society Australia to undertake an independent external review of its AEC, as required under Section 6 of the Code. Ms Debono's investigations included a review of AEC documentation, observation of an AEC meeting, inspections of animal facilities and discussions with key stakeholders. The review was completed in February 2025 and found no areas of non-compliance. Fifteen areas of continual improvement were identified during the review, as were eight areas that support compliance and are worthy of commendation. The report's recommendations have been noted by the AEC Chair, discussed with members of the Taronga Executive and Management team, and are being considered for implementation.

9. Implementation of the three Rs: replacement, reduction, refinement

Research of zoo-based populations is often focussed on animals that are held in small numbers and consequently it may not be possible to reduce sample size. Opportunities to 'replace, reduce or refine' are discussed by the Committee for each new application received. Primary investigators are required to justify the number of animals requested and to describe approaches taken to minimise the use of animals without compromising the ability to address the proposal objectives. Further, zoo studies in the main do not involve significant stress or morbidity and mortality outcomes. We also make available samples that are collected opportunistically from zoo-based and recovery program animals, and from rescued wildlife under our care or that have died. These samples are collected under NSW DPIRD Scientific Licence SL100104 and Taronga AEC protocols **4a/02/23** (Taronga Zoo) and **4c/04/24** (Taronga Western Plains Zoo). Access to this important material reduces the need for additional interference with animals and has benefited many collaborative researchers through the years.