

Koalas only clinging on

Loss of habitat through urban development threatens the future of koalas, and governments don't seem to care, ROSSLYN BEEBY reports

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In the past five years, more than 25,000 koalas have died in Queensland. Break down that figure with a series of divisions, and that's a mortality rate of 5000 a year, just over 400 a month and more than 100 animals a week.

Scientists studying these iconic Australian marsupials despairingly refer to a "koala conservation crisis". Many are critical of the lack of action by state and federal governments to fast-track reforms to protect koala habitat from destruction by urban development - particularly in coastal NSW and Queensland.

Australian Koala Foundation chief executive Deborah Tabart has read veterinary post-mortem reports on 700 recent koala deaths in south-east Queensland.

The picture that emerges is one of "shocking neglect and dangerous complacency about the future survival of such a cultural icon", she says.

"Most of the koalas in those reports starved to death. That was certainly the case in Redland Shire, where they are clearing trees and felling them through cheap housing developments. Out of those 700 deaths, there were only 20 due to injuries from dog attacks. That shows community education is working."

"But state and federal government conservation laws are failing the koala."

Running to only 15 pages (12 pages, if you subtract title and content pages and the final list of acknowledgments), the Federal Government's "National Koala Conservation Strategy" is a surprisingly slim document given the range of threats to the species. This grim litany includes climate change, loss of habitat and food trees, road kill, dog attacks, illegal shooting and a gamut of diseases that cause sterility, cancer, blindness and the collapse of the immune system.

Recent research has shown climate change is altering the chemistry of eucalyptus, stripping the nutrients koalas rely on and increasing the level of toxins.

Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Environmental Management at Central Queensland University, Dr Altmir Melzer, says drought and heat can also take a deadly toll. "Koalas live in a narrow metabolic balance between keeping cool, finding enough water in their diet

discussion by a ministerial council taskforce.

Deborah Tabart has raised the question of whether it's appropriate to have a commercial company - whose website describes them as "a leader in the development and operation of infrastructure" - gathering information to inform a national conservation strategy for an icon species threatened by loss of habitat from urban development.

"I would have thought there is some possibility of conflict of interest. This is a major developer that has been involved in large-scale infrastructure programs across Australia, some of which involved state governments," she says.

A departmental spokeswoman said the company was chosen "because they have the expertise to pull together a vast amount of information in a short time".

Asked why the Federal Government didn't appoint a group of eminent scientists to oversee this stage of the review, the spokeswoman replied, "Such a group would have been welcome to tender for the job but they didn't."

Rolf Schlagloch, a conservation biologist who works as a community liaison officer with the Australian Koala Foundation, has achieved a rare success in protecting koala habitat from development.

A former economist from Germany, he has spent the past six years developing a koala management plan with the city of Ballarat in central Victoria. Ballarat is now the first council in Australia to adopt a koala management plan, mapping and analysing 2500 areas of native vegetation in the region.

"We now know what we have to work with, and what we have to protect. We know where the houses shouldn't go, if we want to keep our koalas," he says.

Local, state and federal governments need to work together to develop tax incentives and laws to ensure koala habitat is protected from urban development. Major forest revegetation campaigns are also needed to restore habitat.

"We are already at a stage where koalas are disappearing and local extinctions are occurring because of continuing loss of habitat. Stress and disease. It's a red alert situation but governments aren't getting the message," he says.



STARVING: Koalas in Queensland are dying at the rate of 100 a week. Many are starving to death.

and suffering from heat exhaustion. They use habitat in a complex way, and they choose particular trees as shade trees, to keep cool. Combine the loss of these shade trees with a decline in the suitability of food trees, and the koala is in real strife. The issue of koala habitat is such a big area of research and we've barely scratched the surface.

Koalas in coastal NSW have been diagnosed with an infectious fungal disease of the nasal cavity, called cryptococcosis. Its causes are not yet known, but could be linked to changes in temperature and

humidity that favour the spread of this fatal infection. Other diseases include chlamydia, a pathogen that causes infertility and blindness in koalas, and an AIDS-like virus which weakens the immune system.

Known as koala retrovirus, it's been linked to 80 per cent of koala deaths in Queensland zoos, causing leukaemia, lymphoma, malignant tumours and immune deficiency disorders.

Australian Wildlife Hospital research director Jon Hanger genetically sequenced the retrovirus in 1999, and has warned it could wipe

out koalas in south-east Queensland within 15 years. "We're seeing a 100 per cent infection rate in the populations we're studying. On those figures, it should be considered a disease epidemic."

But state and federal governments have failed to understand the severity and impact of this fatal virus and are relying on "antiquated legislation" to conserve Australia's koalas, he says.

"The National Koala Conservation Strategy is basically just a list of management objectives. It doesn't address the science of conservation such as genetics or ecology, or the

Picture: AUSTRALIAN KOALA FOUNDATION

welfare issues relating to loss of habitat or rehabilitation of injured animals." So it should be good news that the strategy, which was written in 1998, is currently being reviewed.

The Federal Government has awarded a \$64,000 contract to the Australian office of global development consultants Parsons Brinckerhoff to "undertake an evaluation of the strategy".

According to the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts website, the aim of this "initial evaluation" is not to rewrite the strategy but to "inform" further