

Environment

Climate threatens the koala

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KOALAS, already listed as vulnerable, are likely to die in greater numbers as they adapt to climate change, which will bring more intense bushfires, rising temperatures, increased drought and a drop in the nutrition levels of their food, a senior NSW Government scientist warns.

Dan Lunney told a conference of the NSW Nature Conservation Council that rising greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere would push up toxins and lower nutrients in eucalyptus leaves.

As leaf quality dropped and bush fires intensified, koalas would be forced to roam further afield as they foraged for food in shrinking bushland surrounded by farms, housing developments and logging operations.

"The further they have to travel, the more frequently they are on the ground, the more likely they are to be attacked by dogs. And if there is a road in between the patches of trees, they'll die on the roads," said Dr Lunney, a leading koala expert with the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change.

"We'd all burst into tears if they disappeared from the scene," Dr Lunney told the *Herald*. But he and his colleagues have begun a research project that may help the vulnerable animals adapt to climate change.

Twelve koalas, four males and eight females from a population in Gunnedah, have been fitted with collars containing radiotransmitters linked to a GPS tracking unit.

For the first time, NSW researchers are able to track the animals' food foraging and roaming habits by downloading data on their movements at night when they go on the prowl.

The scientists chose Gunnedah's koala population because it is the only one that showed an increase in a statewide survey two years ago.

The scientists believe the flourishing group is likely to be the result of an innovative plan started in the 1990s to get farmers and residents to plant eucalyptus trees along the creek lines of properties to fight salinity.

Climate Threatens the Koala – Sydney Morning Herald

Enlisting more farmers to help with the conservation of koalas is expected to form part of the department's state koala recovery plan, which will be unveiled soon by the Environment Minister, Carmel Tebbutt.

The plan, along with a revised national strategy on koalas, will take into account new thinking on how governments can manage vulnerable species under serious threat from climate change.

The CSIRO and NSW scientists stressed that outdated ideas of protecting native animals in national parks and reserves will not be enough to prevent extinctions. Identifying wildlife refuges and creating wide corridors or escape routes for animals and birds so they can move between reserves and parks will be crucial.

Professor Ian Hume of Sydney University began "waving a yellow flag" earlier this year over research warning of the effects of rising carbon dioxide levels on eucalyptus leaves and the likely effect on koalas.

"It's not going to immediately wipe out koalas or poison them. But it's going to make areas of forest that are now capable of carrying koalas into areas that are not capable," Professor Hume said.

"We won't see dead koalas everywhere but over a period of time we'll see fewer and fewer koalas."

For Dr Lunney, who has devoted his career to studying the threats to the state's koalas, the research is highly disturbing.

But he also told the conference more than a quarter of the state's birds, animals, frogs and snakes would be highly vulnerable to climate change and he warned it would exacerbate "the adverse impact of woodchipping" on some native animals.

He called for programs protecting native fauna to be speeded up.

"We've got to adapt to a situation where everything we thought was crook is going to get worse," he said.