

## The tragedy of Noosa's lost koalas

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NOOSA'S koala population will be extinct by 2010.

That is the dire prediction from some of the state's leading koala experts who say there are fewer than 15 koalas left in Noosa Heads, and no more than 50 in the rest of the former shire.

Gail Gipp, Australian Wildlife Hospital manager, estimated the last 15 koalas in Noosa Heads will disappear by the 2010 and gave the wider population just one more year before the entire region becomes extinct of the native species.

Deborah Tabart, chief executive officer of the Australian Koala Foundation, agreed.

Having watched 25,000 koalas die across south-east Queensland in the past 10 years, Deborah says Noosa's koalas have suffered from the same habitat loss and human impact as the rest of the south-east Queensland population.

Noosa vet and founder of the Noosa Koala Squad, Mark Powell, has been keeping records of the local koala population for the past 25 years. He told The Noosa Journal that our national park koalas were "doomed".

The population had declined, he said, to between "25 and 30 per cent" of its natural level and said the damage was irreversible.

Dr Powell said that while he used to treat 50 koalas a year, he has only seen nine in the past 12 months.

"The year of the Peregrian Springs development was probably the year we saw most koalas," he said.

He said other developments had also caused severe damage as they replaced prime koala habitat.

"Nowadays, the Noosa Koala Squad really just provides an ambulance service," Dr Powell said. "We are left as monitors of a declining population.

"I can't see a solution in terms of the remaining koalas. Unless you took all the people out of Noosa."

Dr Powell said there were possibly "no fertile females" left in Noosa.

"In the past 10 years, I can count on one hand the number of young I've seen. It's very sad. We get very excited when we see one."

He also revealed that the remaining population were "all diseased", either with Chlamydia or koala retrovirus, an AIDS-like virus specific to koalas that can cause leukaemia, lymphoma and other bone-marrow disease. This was largely due to the stress humans have placed them under.

"There's more disease among them because these koalas are stressed. The population is fragmented and the threats from cars and dogs are great," Dr Powell said.

“I don't think there's anything that we can do to add to the population. If you brought healthy koalas in you'd be consigning them to catching the diseases the koalas have and, to my mind, it's not a viable habitat for koalas. They need more area and they need better habitat.”

Wildlife expert and the Australian Wildlife Hospital's head veterinarian, Jon Hanger, who has been studying the koala retrovirus for the past 15 years, argued it won't be good enough to blame disease for their demise.

“In terms of a species, they are quite a robust animal. They can survive hideous injuries and quite bad infections, but koala retrovirus is a massive threat to koalas that is compounding a massive threat caused by habitat loss and fragmentation,” Dr Hanger said.

“We can't do an awful lot about the fact that they're all infected with this virus but we can bloody well take seriously the fact that we're pushing them to extinction.

“And it won't be good enough just to blame extinction on a virus, because we've pushed them to a point where the population can't even deal with that virus.

“We're putting such pressure on the population in terms of habitat and population and edge effects that they will have absolutely no chance of recovering from a virus that's in its active phase, or in its recent infection phase, in the species.”

Australian Koala Foundation Deborah Tabart called on the community to take action.

“It can be rebuilt if developers, politicians, truck drivers, businesspeople, mums and dads, the whole community, get behind it,” Ms Tabart said.

She said Sunshine Coast mayor Bob Abbot needed to introduce a koala management plan for Little Cove and one for the wider Noosa area. She encouraged the community to report sightings, establish each koala as an individual, and keep track of their progress.

“Noosa needs a recovery plan. Its first step will be to stop the deaths, then stabilise it, then rebuild.”

She said Myall Lakes, in New South Wales, is proof it can happen but said it takes “a concerted effort” from all members of the public and business community.

Dr Hanger and his team, who work from what is now the world's largest wildlife hospital at Beerwah, have established an ecological services unit to work with developers and government bodies to minimise development's impact on wildlife.

“In the first instance, that means being present when the bulldozers go in and the land clearing's occurring. Really trying to take the so-called wildlife spotter-catching game (which rescues wildlife that lives in land about to be bulldozed), to a much higher standard,” Dr Hanger said.

“The level at which this is working at the moment is very, very tokenistic. The spotter will go in, might catch a koala and a couple of possums but 99 per cent of the fauna will still be killed.

“We're trying to apply a lot more effort to it, with a lot more pre-clearing trapping, and getting more than 10 times the animals out of it.”

Dr Hanger highlighted a recent project that, in the first stage, saw 870 animals rescued from clearing.

“Just as importantly, the service is trying to establish dialogue and consultation with developers early in the piece, even as early as the design phase, and looking at the block of land and discussing the number of dwellings suitable if they want to retain some of the ecological value of the land and achieve a higher price for fewer houses,” Dr Hanger said.

“At the moment, what is so upsetting is developers want to get as many houses as possible on a block of land and the way of doing things nowadays is to clearfell everything, build the houses, then plant the trees, so it's effectively moonscaping, then we build.

“The government's got to put some pressure on developers and say ‘you can't do that anymore’. You can't completely destroy every ecological value of that site and we've got to design our developments to be a lot more eco-friendly. People have been talking about this for years.”