

# VIEWPOINT

All the signs are pointing to effective extinction of most of our remnant regional koala populations sometime in the near future

Jon Hanger on the plight of Queensland's koalas

## Cuddly, cute and doomed

The demise of koalas is near, writes Jon Hanger

**K**OALA scientists are a conservative bunch generally. We like to think that as long as we do good science, someone else will take that information and make sure it gets used well.

We have observed the koala decline in New South Wales and Queensland over the past few decades, occasionally expressed concerns about "declining population trends", but never seriously countenanced the prospect of extinction of the species. Things have changed.

Now there is scientific consensus that the koala population in southeast Queensland is in decline. The evidence from Queensland's Koala Coast population suggests that the decline could be serious and widespread. As scientists, we don't have as much data as we'd like, but all the signs are pointing to effective extinction of most of our remnant regional koala populations sometime in the near future if we don't take some really serious action to prevent it. We don't think that Queensland's western koalas are faring much better.

The decline of koalas is the tip of the iceberg and an indicator of what's happening to our ecosystems more broadly because we continue to fail to get the balance right.

Balance doesn't mean taking half, then half again, and then another half of what's left, and then another. If you think that there is enough bush left in Queensland to take some more and still have the equation balanced, fly over southern Queensland with Google Earth and see how small and unconnected those fragments of bush really are.

Isolated and tatty fragments of bush are not signs of a valued and protected natural environment and neither are they particularly conducive to the long-term survival of many species. Hence, the State Government, quite appropriately, is taking measures to better protect some of the

remnants of koala habitat in southeast Queensland, with stricter controls on land-clearing and development.

Obviously, the pro-development lobby isn't keen on more land being tied up and higher costs associated with off-setting their environmental damage, but, fair go – what would they have us do?

The trouble with koalas is that even in some of the larger remnants of good habitat they are still not doing very well. In fact, their population numbers seem to be plummeting there, too – not just in the urban areas. We know that bulldozers, cars, trains and dogs kill our urban koalas, but what's killing the ones living in relatively large areas of bushland?

Here's the thing: koalas are a sickly bunch. We've known that for years, but what we didn't know was how sick they really are. Recent research on some of our southeast Queensland koala populations suggests that 40 per cent of koalas are sick enough to need veterinary treatment or euthanasia, 60 per cent or more of female koalas are infertile and, of the healthy koalas, one in four will become sick each year.

If that devastating scenario is being played out in populations around Queensland (and I think it is), you don't need to be a mathematician to figure out why the population is collapsing. The two prime suspects causing these epidemics of disease are the bacterium *Chlamydia* and a leukaemia and immune deficiency-causing virus called KoRV (koala retrovirus). There are no vaccines for them and, frankly, not an awful lot we can do about them currently, other than frantically research ways to make the koalas more resilient.

Now, before the development industry starts crowing that the koala crisis isn't their fault after all, consider this: Had we not killed off a significant proportion of our koala population with bulldozers and subjected the survivors to the risks of urban living, we might be in the luxurious



GRIM FUTURE: Koala populations are being decimated by urban development and epidemics.

position of letting nature sort out the disease issue. We have yet to adopt the simple principles of ecologically sustainable development.

Consequently, we no longer have a robust, large koala population left, which might have been able to sort out its disease problems. Instead, we have a fragmented, rapidly diminishing population that is now exquisitely susceptible to extinction. Throw in infectious disease, the odd bushfire and a carefree attitude to further habitat loss, and the final nail in the coffin will hit home.

I am not anti-development but I think the way that we plan and develop should avoid further damage to our ecosystems,

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the natural environment and the wildlife with which we share this country. It can, and it should, be ecologically sustainable.

We all must accept that, at some point, a line in the sand must be drawn. Whether we draw that line before or after the regional extinction of koalas is an urgent issue the State Government is facing.

I don't think our koalas can withstand more significant loss of habitat, at least until we stabilise their populations. I also think it is immoral to push species to the brink of extinction.

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