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Koalas clinging on
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OUR FADING EMBLEM
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By: Matthew Fynes-Clinton
KOALA populations in Australia have crashed and many experts believe they will all but vanish within 50 years.

“There'll be small remnants hanging on,” says Clive McAlpine, University of Queensland ecologist and spokesman for the Koala Research Network. “But I think they'll be sort of functionally extinct.”

Hugh Possingham, director of the university's spatial ecology lab, compares the koala with the panda. “There'll be 1800 of them scattered around,” he said. “We'll have captive breeding programs, they'll be in zoos, and it will cost $100 million a year to keep them chugging along.”

Urbanisation, the loss of habitat and disease are considered the most significant threats.
OUR FADING EMBLEM

By Matthew Fynes-Clinton
The relentless march of industry and infrastructure, coupled with debilitating disease, could see Queensland’s koalas die out. 

Story Matthew Fynes-Clinton
Photography David Kelly

Advancing settlement inevitably disturbs the balance of nature to the imminent danger of the less adaptable creatures, and sufficient has been seen of the effect of settlement upon the notoriously unadaptable koala to make wise men pause and think seriously of what is to come in the next decade … – Wildlife magazine, Melbourne, May 1941

It is more than 70 years since those words were penned … and how staggeringly well they were ignored. I am standing on a tiny, treed reserve in Strathpine, part of the former Pine Rivers shire 25km north of Brisbane. The fringing Samsonvale Road, 6km long and traffic-laden, is a major conduit between Gympie Road to the east and the suburbs of Warner and Joyner in the west.

Next to me, intrepid wildlife veterinarian Jon Hanger holds a barred antenna overhead and, with his other hand, twitches the knobs on the radio-wave receiver dangling by his waist. A set of pulsing beeps grows louder as he steps towards a towering ironbark … then suddenly, he and his research assistant Jo Loader lean in and help direct my eye to a spot 18-20 metres above the ground. Finally, I zero in on the pale grey, furry lump wedged in a vertical fork. The koala is a three-and-a-half-year-old female called Blaze. Her back is turned to us, and I contemplate her field of view. The ironbark is against a tall timber fence, behind which lie rows of middle-class homes. Tiled roofs and swimming pools and concrete driveways and fluttering smalls on rotary hoists, for as far as Blaze can see.

Hanger explains she is one of dozens of koalas he and Loader have captured, health-checked, fitted with an electronic tracking collar and placed back where they were found a Brendak eucalypt forest, 2.5km away over the past four years. The landowner hired the pair during the planning stages of a massive residential-light industrial development to assess, monitor and advise on reducing the impacts to the local koala population.

Today, that 120ha site is a brown desert of cleared earth and piled logs. Despite a segment
of habitat being retained, Hanger hasn’t seen Blaze back there since the excavators moved in. Her miniature woodland in the midst of Samsonvale Rd suburbia has become one of the last ribbons of her 2-3km home range.

Cars and trucks are zooming by. “So how did she get here?” I ask Hanger. “Just wandering,” he replies, “on a hope and a prayer.” He says Blaze would have crossed Samsonvale Rd countless times. “The fact that she’s still alive suggests to me that she probably does it in the wee hours of the morning. There’s no doubt she crosses many roads, has gone over fences and through back yards with dogs in them ...”

“A perilous journey,” I mutter absently.

Loader offers a courteous smile: “Yes. It is.”

KOALA POPULATIONS HAVE CRASHED TO THE extent that many experts believe the iconic creatures will have all but vanished within 50 years. “There’ll be small remnants hanging on,” says Clive McAlpine, a leading landscape ecologist from the University of Queensland and spokesman for the pre-eminent Koala Research Network. “But I think they’ll be sort of functionally extinct.”

If possible, an even bleaker picture is painted by his colleague Hugh Possingham a decorated mathematician-biologist and director of the university’s Spatial Ecology Lab. “It will end up,” he forecasts, “with the koala being like the panda. There’ll be 1800 of them scattered around, we’ll have captive breeding programs, they’ll be in zoos, and it will cost us $100 million a year to keep them chugging along.”

How could this have happened? And moreover, does the approaching catastrophe stand any hope of salvation? Not in the Pine Rivers district, fears Wanda Grabowski, who says the confirmed green light for a long-mooted railway spur connecting Petrie in the north and Kippa-Ring on the Redcliffe Peninsula could finish off one of the two key koala populations left in south-east Queensland. “The end,” she says, when asked what the $1.15 billion Moreton Bay Rail Link might mean for the delicately poised colony. “There are already koala extinctions occurring in [parts of] Pine Rivers. There are very few bits of habitat left.”

Grabowski is secretary of Koala Action Pine Rivers, a 70-strong volunteer army that rescues and cares for hurt and diseased koalas, lobbies government to stop the demolition of native bushland, and takes koala education campaigns to schools, community groups and business houses. The 61-year-old livewire is also an environmental scientist, throwing intellectual weight behind her emotive 20-year fight against public officials, private entrepreneurs and the apathetic masses, each group she accuses of hastening the demise of what is, after all, Queensland’s faunal emblem.

Pine Rivers (which in 2008 amalgamated with the Shire of Caboolture and City of Redcliffe to form the Moreton Bay Region) exemplifies the nationwide, multi-pronged crisis besetting koalas. The area, harbouring 16 varieties of eucalypt trees including blue gum, tallowwood, ironbark, mahogany, brush box and blackbutt, once teemed with tens of thousands of the animals but best estimates now place the population at about 2000. Latest council surveys record a “substantial decrease in koala densities” across the fast-urbanising region from 2001 to 2008, where the average decline in koalas per hectare was 45 per cent in residential-retail nodes and 15 per cent in enduring bushland.

The state government’s more intensive mapping of south-east Queensland’s other core vestige of koala habitat, the “Koala Coast” – at the southern gateway to Moreton Bay in Redland City – shows the marsupial’s numbers dropping...
from 6200 in 1996 to 4600 in 2006, then plummeting to 2250 in 2008 – a 64 per cent collapse in little more than a decade.

The starting point of this exponential diminution has been the pressure to clear land to meet Australia’s chronic housing shortage. Koalas suffer crushing deaths when their trees are felled and bundled by heavy machinery. “It’s heartbreaking,” says Hanger, 43, a top koala field investigator, former director of the Australia Zoo Wildlife Hospital and who in 1999 isolated and genetically sequenced the debilitating koala retrovirus. “They don’t all get killed instantly. They get their limbs ripped off, they get eviscerated, they get their eyes popped out and their heads smashed. I know it’s hard to imagine that someone can push a tree over and not notice a koala, but it’s very easy to do.”

Yet by no means do the majority suffer death at the first cut; the consequences of urbanisation are far more insidious. As their natural habitat breaks up, displaced koalas venture from one fragment to the next without cover and under perpetual threat. From January 1997 to May 2011, a combined 4714 koalas struck by motor vehicles were delivered to south-east Queensland’s three koala infirmaries – the state-run Moggill Koala Hospital, Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary and Australia Zoo. Almost 3000 were pronounced dead on arrival. Another 849 were immediately euthanased.

The total number is almost as high as the 4839 koalas brought to the hospitals (dead, dying or admitted for treatment) due to disease. Dog attacks are the third most common cause of koala harm, with 1419 presentations across the 14 years. More than 1000 of these animals arrived dead, or were so badly mauled they had to be put down.

**WHEN IT COMES TO KOALAS, WANDA GRABOWSKI**

knows no boundaries. In 1995, she lent her support to the uprising against a proposed motorway into southern bayside koala territory that ultimately contributed to electoral defeat for Wayne Goss’s state Labor government.

A former Strathpine resident, Grabowski’s new battle against the rail link will be pitched from her recently acquired home in the Sunshine Coast hinterland’s Glass House Mountains. The house is arrayed with framed photographs of koalas that have passed through her care. But even if the sick or injured are nursed back to health and returned to the wild, only one in three will survive long-term.

A wall in the hallway is especially poignant: six furry faces peering out, eyes glistening like copper coins bearing witness to almost every detriment known to koalas. “Bart,” Grabowski says, pointing to the first picture, “was not out of care six weeks when he was attacked and killed by dogs.” She moves along the gallery. “Meredith died of retrovirus. Parker and Oscar had pneumonia. Samira had stomach cancer, as a consequence of retrovirus. Burman was found dead three weeks after being released, starved to death.”

Grabowski tells how along Gympie Rd, near Pine Rivers State High School, she once saw a four-wheel-drive deliberately weave across three lanes of traffic to hit a koala with a joey on her back. Both were killed. In Whiteside, to the north-west, a semi-rural householder stood by as her two German shepherds killed seven koalas over four years. “I can remember koala number six,” Grabowski says. “We got a call from a neighbour at 2am and went out to this property with beautiful koala food trees in the back yard. The injured koala was lying on the ground, crying, and I said, ‘Could you please let us on the property?’ but the woman owner wouldn’t. It took the police about an hour-and-a-half to come. By that time, the koala had died.”

Hanger would never underplay the tentacular reach of land clearing. He gets particularly exercised over the credentials of koala spotters, supposed experts contracted by developers or their environmental consultants to locate koalas in trees before they come down. “The guys who drive the [clearing] machines come back and tell us stories about spotters just sitting in the car, reading,” he says.

But koala disease appears to be rattling him even more. “In good areas of koala habitat under no alienation pressure from land clearing or development,” Hanger says, “populations are declining. They’re just as sick as other areas.”

Hanger is alluding to chlamydia, which may...
They don’t all die instantly. They get their limbs ripped off, their eyes popped out and heads smashed.

Tracking in the field ... Vet Jon Hanger keeps tabs on Blaze in Brisbane’s north; (below) activist Wanda Grabowski.
be cured via antibiotics in koala hospital patients, but in the wild progresses to blindness, infection of male and female reproductive tracts -- rendering the females sterile -- and a slow, excruciating death. The disease is commonly sexually transmitted and evidently rampant. Hanger’s clinical sampling informs his conclusion that half the female koalas clinging on in south-east Queensland are infertile. In some areas, Brendale for example, he says the proportion is 60 per cent. At these rates, populations are struggling to replace themselves.

Meantime, koala retrovirus (KoRV) ticks like a time bomb. Hanger believes the inherited parent-to-offspring virus, linked to leukaemia, other cancers and an immunodeficiency syndrome known as “koala AIDS”, may prove as malevolent as the facial tumour disease in Tasmanian devils. He suspects KoRV also advances the effects of chlamydia in koalas with both illnesses. “And based on thousands of samples, 100 per cent of koalas in Queensland and NSW have KoRV,” he says, adding “It’s not just lying dormant, but circulating in their blood. They’re producing virus. They’re all viraemic, which is just unheard of, ridiculous, unprecedented, there’s just no other species…”

**FEDERAL ENVIRONMENT MINISTER TONY BURKE**

is expected by the end of this month to pronounce his verdict on whether the koala will be listed a threatened species under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC). If the koala is assessed at a minimum as “vulnerable” – the classification below “endangered” – protective mechanisms will swing into play. In Queensland, the one that has business sweating compels development proposals likely to have a “significant impact” on koalas and their habitat to be approved by Burke.

And yet the current appraisal, which began in 2010, follows reviews that rejected the koala’s listing in 1996 and 2006. This time, the government’s advisory body, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee, has already recommended “no” again, notifying Burke that, despite a marked decline over three koala generations, the “body of data on koala populations is patchy, often sparse and not nationally comprehensive or coordinated”.

At last year’s landmark Senate inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of koalas, another University of Queensland scientist, Frank Carrick, shot back: “The commonwealth authorities have persistently refused applications to provide funding for koala surveys and establishment of long-term monitoring sites. They then use the absence of detailed quantitative data as a reason to refuse to recognise the clear evidence of the decline in those populations we do have hard data for. Then they use that to justify failing to list the koala under the EPBC Act, so this restricts access to survey and monitoring funds and so it ever goes on. Move over, Joseph Heller! This is the ultimate Catch-22.”

Ironically, the koala has been listed under Queensland law as vulnerable in the south-east bioregion since 2003. But Carrick’s colleague Possingham tells *Qweekend* that the legislation involved, the Nature Conservation Act – just like a handful of other state statutes, plans and regulatory provisions later introduced to purportedly safeguard koalas – has amounted to little. “The state threatened species legislation for koalas is meaningless,” he says. “It doesn’t stop you doing anything other than shooting them.”

Prominent residential industry lobbyists, the Property Council of Australia and the Urban Development Institute of Australia (UDIA), argue national listing will encourage a flood of objections to developments, potentially paralysing projects during the process of commonwealth environmental scrutiny. Thousands of dollars will add up in delays, holding fees, consultancy charges, and business uncertainty. They say these overheads will be passed on to consumers, reducing housing affordability.

“And all of that may not equal a better life for a single koala,” says Caryn Kakas, executive director of the PCA’s residential development council. “[That’s because] there hasn’t been one serious national scientific study, with a standardised methodology, to understand exactly where koala populations are, and what needs to be protected. All we have is anecdotal evidence.

“It’s a massive risk if you’re looking at south-east Queensland as one of the largest and fastest-growing areas of Australia, and you’re talking about basically closing it for business.”

In a written submission to the Senate inquiry, UDIA Queensland chief executive Brian Stewart spelled out the imperative of a triple bottom-line approach. “Without the combination and consideration of the three elements of social, economic and environmental sustainability,” he said, “each element is not fully achievable.”

But Possingham reckons koalas have the money-spinning ground covered. As far back as 15 years ago, an analysis by respected economist Clive Hamilton estimated koalas generated $1.1 billion in annual tourism revenue. More than 300 of the 419 foreign tourists he surveyed nominated the creature as the animal they most wanted to see during their stay in Australia.

Possingham says the degree of underspending on such a plank of tourism infrastructure is “insane”: “If you’re running a factory, you should put ten
per cent of your profit back into the infrastructure.
In Queensland, we don’t even put $100 million into all of conservation, let alone koalas. Instead, they’re facing death by a thousand cuts.”

ON A VISIT TO THE AUSTRALIA ZOO WILDLIFE hospital intensive care unit, at Beerwah, just north of the Glass House Mountains, I get to see – close up – what Possingham means. The first patient introduced by senior veterinarian Amber Gillett is a six-year-old female koala called Camilla, who has awoken a long way from home.

Airlifted from near Mackay, North Queensland, after straying into the path of a car, she is recovering from brain swelling, a damaged eye and bleeding in her chest. As well, Gillett was forced to amputate one of her digits. “She’s hanging in there at the moment,” the vet says. “Our thoughts are to get these animals back in the wild. But some injuries mean that euthanasia is really the only option, and the kindest option.”

The next cubicle houses another road victim, Stuart, suffering an appalling neck trauma inflicted by a car. On Toowoomba, on the lip of the Great Dividing Range. Koalas are increasingly imperilled west of the range, too, from drought and climate change, and in central Queensland from expansive mining operations.

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“In the Mulga Lands [the sandy plains area of south-west Queensland],” UQ professor Clive McAlpine had earlier explained, “we did a survey in 2009, compared to 1996, and the koala population had decreased by 80 per cent. It collapsed during the drought, and also due to land clearing. So we’re talking 60,000 koalas down to 12,000 in this area alone.”

Gillett crouches next to Stuart (koalas are named by their initial human contacts, often rescuers or researchers). His neck has been broken in two places. He is sprawled on his tummy with the foam-filled ends of a collared splint poking out from beneath head-to-shoulder bandages. His immobilised state means he must be hand-fed leaves every two hours.

A veterinary spinal specialist was enlisted to help Gillett and her team put Stuart back together. Two vertebrae were fused, and the joint capsules supporting them had screws inserted. Again, Gillett is hopeful about his prospects. “But he’s very intensive,” she says. “A lot of work has gone into him.”

She says the hospital has treated more than 3500 sick and hurt koalas over the past five years. The facility’s $1.5 million-plus operating budget, however, is footed principally by the zoo, assisted by private donors and a $50,000 Sunshine Coast Regional Council annual endowment. The state and federal governments, while effectively sanctioning the built-environment hazards to koalas and other wildlife, do not provide a cent.

“We have koalas that come in once, twice, three, four times over a period of years,” Gillett, 30, says. “They might have been attacked by a dog, then they’ve come back to the hospital after being hit by a car. Then they come in again with disease. Unless disease and the impacts of urbanisation are controlled, there are only so many times you can patch up an animal.”

Yet even the boffins seem to be in a pickle over numbers. The Australian Koala Foundation claims the koala population prior to European settlement was up to 10 million. McAlpine, responding to a question from Australian Greens leader Bob Brown at the Senate inquiry, said: “There are probably no more than between 50,000 and 100,000 [left]. But we can not confidently say what those figures are.”

McAlpine conveys to Qweekend that after attending a high-level koala conservation workshop this year, he now believes the total is “probably several hundred thousand”. Just as the property industry claims, multiple counting systems have been employed by various bodies, with certain regions mapped, others passed over, and accuracy always in question.

Some methods work off native vegetation maps to match potential koala abundance. Other estimates are construed on the ground in “straight line transects”, where strips of primary koala habitat are searched, koalas counted and an extrapolation made for the entire site. Koalas are notoriously hard to spot high in trees and absolute counts are impossible, except within the smallest localities. Their entire geographic range covers more than one million square kilometres, and the equation is further complicated by Victoria and South Australia both reporting problems of koala overabundance.

But Possingham says the focus on net sums is a red herring. Across Queensland and NSW, where the best surveying has been executed, evidence suggests the koala population has fallen by 33 per cent since 1990. “That’s one or two per cent a year,” he says. “So whether you start at a million or 100,000 or 10,000, you can’t keep going down at one or two per cent a year forever. The trend is the critical issue.”
This hospital has treated more than 3500 koalas in the past five years.

Wanda Gradowski is hovering over her coffee table, right arm tucked inside a blue sling and left hand smoothing a large photographic map of the proposed Moreton Bay rail route.

A few weeks ago, she became a casualty of her vocation. Koala rescuers and capturers utilise tall metal poles crowned by flags or cloth, which are hoisted above the animals to encourage their scuttling down tree trunks to the ground. The procedure can be protracted and require a deal of manoeuvring. “Wear and tear,” she remarks, of her shoulder. “I’ve torn the rotator cuff.”

Moreton Bay Rail Link will encompass 12.6km of dual track and six new train stations: Kallangur, Murrumba Downs, Mango Hill, Kinsellas Road, Rothwell and Kippa-Ring. The corridor was progressively purchased by the state through to 1979 but was the subject of perennial dithering until Prime Minister Julia Gillard made it a 2010 election campaign sweetener, pledging $742 million to build the rail line backed by then-premier Anna Bligh who promised $300 million in state funds with Moreton Bay Regional Council tipping in $105 million. Campbell Newman’s newly elected LNP Government gave a pre-poll commitment to deliver the project on time, in 2016.

Gradowski says the alignment will spear into dense gum forest surrounding Petrie’s Amcor Paper Mill, taking out trees and cleaving the habitat in two. “There’s more than 30 koalas in there,” she says. “That area’s become a sink for them and it will be totally chopped up.

“Here,” she says, indicating another section of the map. “Once that bit of bushland goes – it’s scheduled to be a parking lot for Kallangur station – where are the koalas going to go? They can’t go south, east or west because there’s more railway corridor or the Bruce Highway. They’re going to go north, straight through suburbia. There won’t be a survivor out of that.”

In 2006, the state government installed an offsets policy for the benefit of south-east Queensland koalas. Community infrastructure activities and private developers eradicating habitat must replant for a substantial net gain: five new koala habitat trees are to be grown at a nearby site for every non-juvenile tree removed.

But the big snag with the scheme is lag time. The trees take at least ten years to mature, an interminable wait in the 12-15 year lifespan of a displaced healthy koala, and a sick joke when the majority of species is already under grave pressure.

In Queensland, translocation, or relocating koalas into available habitat outside their range, is only allowed in exceptional circumstances or for approved scientific research. Fears are held equally over the adaptability of koalas to unfamiliar areas and the possible impacts of a new population on those naturally resident. Gradowski and Hanger, though, are adamant translocation is effective and must be broadly accepted if koalas are to salvage a future.

On the Gold Coast, the roaring construction of Coomera town centre and associated urbanisation in the pristine eucalypt habitat of more than 500 koalas has so far led to the trapping, radio-collaring and transfer of 82 of...
the colony to a council-owned conservation reserve at Lower Beechmont, 30km away.

The scale of the East Coomera development approvals, long pre-dating the state’s koala planning instruments, left the Gold Coast City Council with little alternative but to apply for a translocation permit – which was granted.

Ecologist John Callaghan, who is in charge of the relocation project, admits to setbacks. Some of the introduced koalas have been taken by wild dogs in their new surrounds. “But we have females that have gone in and survived and bred,” he says. “At this point, what I can say with reasonable confidence is that if you move an animal in good health, and which is not particularly old, translocation does work. It can be done.”

Malcolm Paterson, the state’s Moreton Bay Rail Link spokesman, says translocation has been ruled out as an option for the carriageway. He says 30ha of koala habitat will be cleared, affecting at least 60 koalas, and 120-140ha of land – within a 10km radius – has been identified as “potentially suitable” to meet offset requirements. The corridor itself will be fenced to stop wildlife stumbling onto the track, and underpasses and other fauna crossing points will be incorporated.

Grabowski is not comforted, claiming hundreds of koalas are in the firing line. She says one council-owned 3ha plot at Mango Hill (near North Lakes) designated for offset planting is on arterial Anzac Avenue, a known koala killer. “It’s ridiculous,” she exclaims. She says she’s had a “gutful” over the years of inaction, broken promises and “bloody bits of paper that do nothing” masquerading as koala-protective policy. “Queensland’s faunal emblem is becoming extinct as we speak,” she says. “And that’s just devastating.”

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