

How much can the koala bear?

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imagine the australian bush without koalas. with development, disease and political inaction ravaging their numbers, it's a real possibility. by nikki barrowclough.

Here is a terrible truth. koalas are vanishing from Australia. There are probably fewer than 100,000 left on the continent. Once, there were millions. Their deaths, from a number of causes, range from poignant to pointless to grotesquely violent. Even so, when I started this story I still had a quintessential image in my mind of a koala asleep in the fork of a gumtree. That has been replaced by another more graphic and indelible image: a badly burnt koala clinging to a blackened eucalypt in south-east Queensland.

Rian is the koala's name. She was trapped by a controlled fuel-reduction "bushfire" that ripped through her habitat last September, after the area had supposedly been cleared of wildlife. When she was found in that tree, 2 1/2 weeks after the fire, every one of her footpads had been roasted. She'd also lost her eyelids, as well as the tips of her ears.

Her temporary home is the Australia Zoo Wildlife Hospital in Beerwah, just north of the Glass House Mountains, where she's still recovering from her injuries. Adding to the sadness I feel after stepping into her enclosure is the fact that Rian is the first koala I've ever encountered. And there's an injury I missed. Her nose is burnt pink. It should be black. She doesn't shy away from her visitor, gazing steadily at me with that seemingly dispassionate expression typical of her species. And at least she's now well enough to be out of the intensive-care ward, where the sight of forlorn little koalas on drips or huddled in blankets is utterly depressing.

Rian has paid a high price for her survival. But thousands of other koalas, not as "fortunate" as Rian, have perished, as the killing of an iconic species continues unabated.

"the koala has many powerful enemies," says Deborah Tabart when we first speak on the phone. She's waiting at Brisbane Airport when I arrive - striking woman with short black hair, bright-red lipstick and, as I know already, plenty of attitude.

Tabart is head of the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF), which sounds benign enough. But she's well known as an outspoken, indefatigable campaigner who doesn't so much "campaign" as go into combat for the animals whose plight has consumed her for more than 20 years. Her war is with anyone who fails to protect koalas. Developers, as well as politicians, are permanently in her sights.

In the car, she vents as she drives. "Who are the custodians of these animals?" she demands. "I go into meetings with politicians and warn them that if they're going to shaft the koalas, I'll make it public. I'm so sick of seeing burnt-out people who have fought so hard, who have given up believing that anything will change."

The hypocrisy of politicians who piously continue to call koalas national symbols while turning a blind eye to threats to their long-term survival infuriates her. And she's not impressed by the Bligh government's \$43-million Koala Habitat Strategy put in place to establish koala natural refuges. "That money is lip service," she says. "There are no real, strategic thought processes. Putting controls in place to restrain developers doesn't cost anything."

As we head into heavy traffic, I think of the bucolic Australia inhabited by Bunyip Bluegum in Norman Lindsay's 1918 classic, *The Magi Pudding*, and by Blinky Bill in Dorothy Wall's 1933 children's tale. But even then, grim reality intruded in the latter when a hunter killed Blinky's dad, and indeed koalas were hunted almost to extinction in the early 1900s for their fur. No one talks about the dark side of koalas' lives these days when they're earning their keep as funny-faced little ambassadors in photos with world leaders or Oprah Winfrey.

During the two-day road trip through south-east Queensland with the AKF boss, I'll be meeting Dr Jon Hanger, the wildlife veterinarian who isolated and genetically sequenced the appalling koala retrovirus, which inserts itself into the animals' DNA and can be passed on genetically through infection, attacking the immune system.

The retrovirus is a major killer of koalas. But disease is just one of many threats faced by the famous marsupials. The list is endless: mining, logging, coal-seam-gas exploration and, most of all, broad-scale land clearance. No one knows how many koalas come down with the trees falling straight into the path of bulldozers. With urbanisation comes dog attacks and an increasing number of road accidents.

Then there's the wild card in the crisis - climate change. The nutrients koalas need, found in the leaves of eucalyptus trees, are being destroyed by

rising carbon dioxide levels. Droughts can also wreak havoc on koala habitats, while heatwaves can cause chronic heat stress in the animal resulting in metabolic breakdown.

For Tabart, though, it's all about rapacious development. "I know this is going to sound far-fetched," she says. "But the fact is, after September 11, when John Howard was so busy focusing on terrorism, three Labor states - Queensland, NSW and Victoria - were able to work in tandem to build infrastructure and real estate developments. The koala has paid a huge price through that process, because they said, 'Okay, we want to build here, build there.' Developers have run the east coast of Australia for the past 10 years, and thousands of koalas have died."

As it turns out, Tabart was married long ago to a developer, although she says this had nothing to do with her decision to take a job with the AKF in 1988, as a fundraiser. She isn't sure what triggered her passion to save koalas, although while she was still fundraising there she met a Brisbane couple who had raised an orphaned koala called Epi - a remarkable little creature who regularly banged on the door in the evening and popped in for a bottle of milk. This relationship between koala and humans left a deep impression on Tabart. "It made me realise how vulnerable koalas are," she says.

Then, in the early 1990s, she became involved in the battle to save Wild Cattle Creek State Forest - a pristine old-growth forest and prime koala habitat in north-east NSW - from logging operations. (About 80 per cent of the forest was eventually logged.)

"The phone had been ringing," she says. "'You are the Australian Koala Foundation. You have to help us.'"

So she went there and spent time with both the foresters and the "ferals" fighting them - and ended up respecting the wild-looking young environmental activists.

Tabart was also in the thick of protests when thousands of Queenslanders demonstrated against the Wayne Goss government in 1995, an election year. The government wanted to build a new highway between Brisbane and the Gold Coast, cutting through prime koala territory. Goss lost a number of key seats as a result and the "koala highway" is widely believed to have cost him the election.

Tabart believes she made enemies in political circles as a result - and she may well have done. All the same, she was awarded an Order of Australia medal in 2008 for her work with the Australian Koala Foundation.

From the airport, we go directly to see Luke and Jean Daghish, a couple in their 70s who live in Cornubia, a bush suburb of Logan City, on the "Koala Coast" - a region

20 kilometres south-east of Brisbane.

It sounds as if this area should be crawling with koalas, but Tabart says there are only about 2000 koalas left. She also maintains that 25,000 koalas have died in south-east Queensland in the past 10 years, mainly because of property development. According to AKF's figures, there are between 90 and 170 koalas living in Cornubia.

The Daghishes are two of the badly disillusioned people about whom Tabart spoke earlier. For years, she explains while en route to their place, the pair have fought, along with other locals, to stop a Melbourne-based company from expanding its existing quarry operations in the area. The company wants to build a new mega-quarry in beautiful koala habitat at nearby Mount Cotton.

We take the Cornubia turn-off, eventually pulling up in front of a rambling house in a seemingly idyllic bushland setting. Wallabies occasionally wander through the trees. Inside the house is a veritable research centre; there are even freedom-of-information documents stacked in the laundry

"The last time we heard a koala, moving past our bedroom window one night, was two years ago," says Luke. "But when we first moved to Cornubia over 30 years ago, we thought the loud grunting we heard coming from all directions at night was wild pigs."

Luke and Jean, both British migrants, were delighted when they discovered their land was in prime koala habitat - and that the koalas were protected. They thought they'd found paradise. But everything changed in 2003, say the couple, when the Queensland government ordered the local council to rezone the land targeted for the proposed new quarry.

"The heartbreak," says Jean suddenly. "I mean, you can write to various ministers - all you get back is a blanket letter saying they've referred it to someone else, which gives them another couple of months. You get stalled and lied to. We've sat in meetings knowing we have [information that proves] this quarry should never, ever be looked at. But we cannot get it out there." At this point she breaks down and starts weeping.

Tabart's mood, after we leave, is grim. "I sit in houses year in, year out, listening to people like Luke and Jean, who are just being worn down," she says.

Within the hour we're sitting in another house, in another bush suburb, in south-west Brisbane this time, listening to another couple expressing the same despair. The pair, who asked not to be named, spent about \$16,000 over two years appealing against a decision by Brisbane City Council to approve a development sub-division in their street, because it was a koala habitat.

The twists and turns in the legal arguments during the court battle first bewildered, then angered them. They describe how they turned themselves into amateur lawyers, spending their evenings poring over paperwork. They argued in court that suburban areas aren't assessed or mapped for koala habitat and therefore the koalas in their neighbourhood didn't appear on state government maps. They paid for expert witnesses. They drove

themselves to the point of exhaustion to win the appeal. They lost.

"I'd never given koalas much thought before we moved here," the husband says at one point. "And I assumed there would be some legal mechanism to protect them. The whole process has made me understand why people chain themselves to trees. It's easier!"

The pair put a lot of what they'd told me in a submission to last year's extraordinary eight-month Senate inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population. The inquiry only took place at all because of the perseverance of the Greens leader, Senator Bob Brown. Like many people, he's hoping that the remarkable amount of information aired will finally prompt federal Environment Minister Tony Burke into listing the koala as a nationally threatened species under the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC). There have been three unsuccessful attempts in the past 15 years to get koalas this protection.

If Burke obliges, it will become an offence to injure koalas - which means that any development that's likely to have an impact on the animals will need federal approval. It also means that billions of dollars in development plans in Queensland could be halted.

The minister was due to give his decision last October but said he needed more time to consider the new information from the inquiry. As well, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC) had advised him in 2010 not to list the koala - mysteriously, in the view of many - because of insufficient demographic data.

During the inquiry, Professor Frank Carrick, the founder of the University of Queensland's koala study program, was asked why he thought the TSSC would say that koalas weren't threatened. "The Commonwealth authorities have persistently refused applications to provide funding for koala surveys and establishment of long-term monitoring sites," replied Carrick bluntly. "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 on. 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 goes on. Move over, Joseph Heller. This is the ultimate catch-22."

Carrick added that, in his view, the EPBC Act was specifically written to minimise the Commonwealth's need to intervene in threatened species issues. "If we look at the coastal Queensland population and the coastal NSW population, they are being hammered," he continued. "They are also the stronghold of koalas in those two states. So if the bulk of the koalas in those two states are under severe threat and those two states have more of the koalas in Australia, how this is not of national significance, to me, defies the commonsense test."

Minister Burke's decision is pending.

He won't do it," predicts Tabart of the threat-ened species listing. We're in Noosa by now, yet another region where koalas are disappearing. A dawn we'd walked in pouring rain through the national park, craning our necks beneath sodden gumtrees trying to spot one of the 11 koalas reportedly still around. Tabart, who has been coming to the park for 30 years, looked in vain for one koala that was always in a particular tree. "Where did he go? I want him back. That's part of the sorrow."

Later, as we eat breakfast in damp clothes, she says there should be a royal commission into the resistance to listing koalas as an endangered species. The conversation swings back to developers. "I'm not against development," she emphasises, pointing out that she collaborated with the late, colourful Queensland businessman Brian Ray when he built Koala Beach, a koala-friendly residential community at Pottsville, on the NSW Tweed Coast.

"But I can't bear the levels of corruption that go with developers getting everything they want. They [the politicians] go to enormous lengths - 'We love koalas and we're writing these documents and policies to protect them' - and all the lovely koala people believe them. People often think I'm the enemy because I say, 'Don't believe them. They'll produce a document that's completely toothless.' As I said in my submission to the Senate inquiry, if all those documents and policies are so effective, how come we've got tens of thousands of dead koalas?"

It's a good point, and Tabart isn't alone in making it. There is indeed a bewildering number of planning and conservation policies put in place in Queensland to protect koalas. The Senate inquiry committee also noted the concerns raised in a number of submissions about "the ability" of state koala planning regulations to be overridden by other planning decisions. But if Tabart is right, and koalas are put on hold again, then even the fact that they're reportedly worth billions of dollars to the tourism industry will mean little.

The "sorrow" she mentioned stays in my mind, because I've heard it from others, too. People like Mark Powell, a veterinarian who ran a clinic in Noosa from 1983 until 2008, says he and his peers feel utterly powerless to protect koalas. "It seems there's no political will to lock up [koala] habitats to make populations viable," he adds. "I can see why this has happened, because the land has been fragmented into small pockets of private holdings. It's going to come as a huge shock when people wake up to what's happening. It makes me so sad. My children will see extinctions of koala populations in their lifetime and my grandchildren will probably never see koalas at all."

Equally despairing is Lorraine Vass, president of Friends of the Koala, based in Lismore, NSW. She remembers the sadness of one local woman in her 70s, recalling the days of her youth when the trees were full of koalas and that they often wandered in and out of people's houses.

Cheyne Flanagan, the supervisor of the Koala Hospital at Port Macquarie in NSW, suggests that koalas have become the sentinel species in Australia. "The bottom line is that we're the problem in this story," says Flanagan. "We've got one of the highest rates of extinction in the world. If the koala goes down the tubes, people should remember that every animal living in the same ecosystem, like sugar gliders, goes down the tube as well."

It was the prominent landscape ecologist Clive McAlpine, from the University of Queensland, who said there were probably 100,000 koalas left on the continent (excluding introduced koala populations on islands off the Victorian and South Australian coasts). McAlpine was appearing at the Senate inquiry, representing the Koala Research Network (KRN), an independent network of more than 60 researchers from universities, government departments and private groups around Australia.

He cautioned that the KRN couldn't "confidently" give an exact number. But crucially he added, "One of the issues before the Threatened Species Scientific Committee [when the committee advised Tony Burke not to list the koala as endangered] was an over-emphasis on numbers. I think the emphasis should be on the trends in those numbers, not on trying to say whether there are 50,000 or 100,000 koalas in Australia. We know that the populations are in decline."

Deborah Tabart doesn't believe there are even 100,000 koalas left. She told the Senate inquiry the AKF believes there may be no more than 85,000 koalas in the wild - and maybe only 45,000. The fact that there is no official national estimate of koala numbers has been one of the hurdles - or excuses - to getting koalas listed as a threatened species. And a disparity in koala populations complicates the picture. Koalas in the Mulga Lands in western Queensland have declined from an estimated 65,000 in 1996 to about 10,000 to 15,000 today because of land clearing, drought and heatwaves. But Gunnedah, in NSW, has one of the few increasing koala populations, thanks to a massive tree-planting project in the area in the 1990s.

When I ring McAlpine and ask whether he thinks the koala should be listed as a threatened species, he doesn't hesitate. "I do," he replies. "The evidence is there." But he emphasises that the koala crisis is a complex one.

Dan Lunney, senior principal research scientist with the NSW Department of Environment and Heritage, echoes this. It's not an "even" problem, says Lunney, not least because of the disparity in koala populations and habitats. He was involved in a recent project tracking Gunnedah's koalas to see which trees they use. The good news is that the koalas, with GPS devices attached, have been using the new trees planted in the 1990s.

In Victoria, koalas are considered overabundant. But they're also vulnerable to catastrophic bushfires, such as the Black Saturday fires in 2009 which killed 173 people. During that terrible time, a badly burnt female koala named Sam became internationally famous after footage of her drinking water from a firefighter's water bottle was screened around the world. Only months later, though, Sam had to be euthanised when she was diagnosed with cysts linked to the stress-related bacterial infection chlamydia.

The prevalence of significant illnesses in koalas is almost unique compared with other wildlife populations, and chlamydia, which can cause blindness and infertility in female koalas, is rampant. But it's the koala retrovirus, whose origins remain a mystery, that could wipe out Australia's koalas and is already decimating the Queensland population.

Jon Hanger delivered this grim news to the Senate inquiry, and suggests to me that if the government is hesitating about listing all koalas as threatened, why not just the northern population? At the Australia Zoo Wildlife Hospital, accompanied by one of the vets, Amber Gillet, he takes me to see Rian - and on the way mentions that koala populations are declining even in secure bushland untouched by development.

"That means we should be even more worried," says Hanger, echoing something else he said at the inquiry, that a hypothesis popular with conservationists - that koala diseases have been induced by nutritional stress caused by habitat loss - doesn't stack up. But he's as appalled by the destruction of koala habitat as everyone else.

"Queensland's Sustainable Planning Act (2009) was supposedly underpinned by the intent to make development ecologically sustainable, but you don't see it happening," he says.

We discuss the awful scenario of koalas coming down with the trees and falling into bulldozer blades and other machinery. Hanger doesn't pull his punches. "Their limbs get ripped off. They suffer horrendous crushing injuries."

Developers have to employ koala "spotters", but he says there are no minimum standards required for the work. "You'd think the least that [Queensland] government could do is bring in a better set of regulations. But they won't even do that."

Amber Gillet is incensed that it's the people who rescue koalas, including vets, who face prosecution if they don't return the injured animals to their original habitat (if they're well enough, and if that habitat still exists). "You can only patch up a koala so many times," she says, as we pause in front of another koala patient, Blair, who's in hospital for the fourth time. He suffered a fractured clavicle and ribs in a dog attack, was then hit by a car and, after spending 2 1/2 months recovering from those injuries, was hit by a car again.

"This time he's in with chlamydiosis," says Gillet, sadly.

Koalas cry out when they're frightened or in pain. It's one of the most poignant sounds Stephanie Ridley, a volunteer driver for a wildlife ambulance on the Koala Coast, has ever heard. One koala she rescued, which had been hit by a car, "cried and cried" all the way to the vet.

Blair must have cried. Rian, too. And what of all those koalas vanishing as vast tracts of land are cleared? Cries unheard, in an ancient landscape where they've belonged for aeons.
