

# Mac Koala: Isolation ends in cruel irony

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IN NOVEMBER, 2009, I was invited by Ray Andrews to inspect his property at Canyonleigh where a healthy colony of koalas had developed in roughly the same time-frame as Campbelltown's population.

Canyonleigh is in the Southern Highlands about 15 kilometres west of Moss Vale and Ray showed me two koalas during a quick drive around his property. However, he usually sees more than that on the same day and often they are mothers and cubs.

In March this year, a sick koala was brought in from Canyonleigh to the Wildlife Health and Conservation Centre at Cobbitty suffering from chlamydiosis, a dreadful disease that afflicts koalas across the country.

Then Ray Williams contacted us to report that many of the koalas on his property had "wet bottoms" and he hadn't seen a cub for several months. The wet bottom is caused by incontinence, a continual leakage of urine from the bladder which is infected by the chlamydial bacteria which also infects the reproductive organs causing infertility.

So it appears koalas have a significant problem in the Southern Highlands. The rapid rate at which the koalas on Ray's property appear to have been affected may mean the Canyonleigh animals are particularly susceptible.

Studies of other koala populations show the proportion of affected animals varies significantly. This suggests the less affected populations have developed a degree of resistance. However, we have never seen koalas in Campbelltown with the clinical signs of chlamydiosis so it's unlikely they will have any degree of resistance. Tristan Lee's DNA studies have shown that Campbelltown's koalas have been isolated in the past from the Southern Highlands animals but there is now a point of contact around the Appin-Bulli Road. So contact of the Campbelltown animals with chlamydia is inevitable but may take some time because the first koalas to storm the barricades will be young males. Unless they have acquired the bacterium from their mothers they are unlikely to carry it because they would not yet have mated with females, the usual mode of transmission.

On the other hand, Campbelltown's koalas need contact with other populations to restore the genetic variation that they have lost during their period of isolation. It is a cruel paradox that the genetic cure brings with it disease and suffering.

Report koala sightings on the UWS pager, 9962 9996.

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