

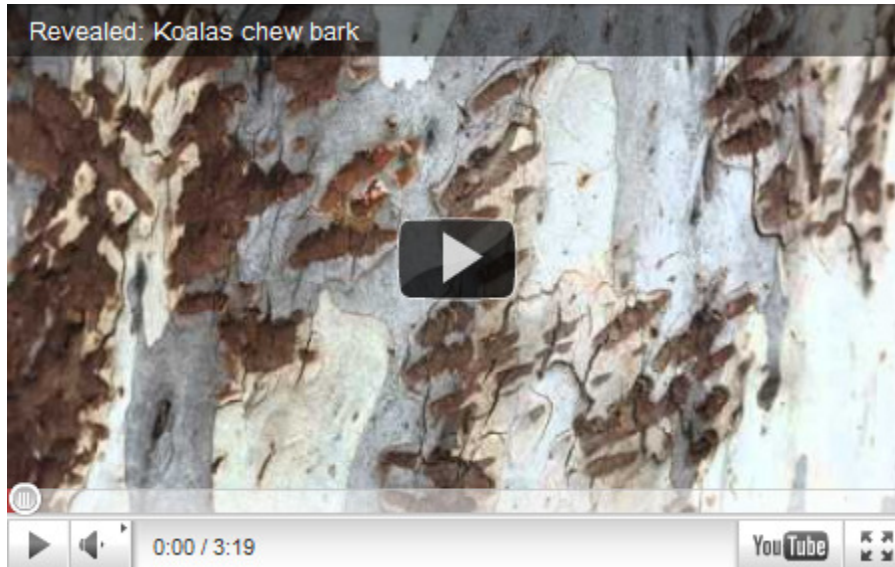
The koala coup that changes the menu

ROSSLYN BEEBY

02 Apr, 2011 01:00 AM

It's a scientific discovery that rewrites the textbooks on koala ecology, shattering the myth they only eat gum leaves.

Across 30,000ha of dry eucalypt forest south-west of Bredbo in southern NSW, evidence has emerged of healthy koalas gnawing bark from brittle gum trees. Some of these "koala chew trees", as scientists are now calling them, have deeply gouged teeth marks running from the base of the tree, up into the crown.



"We don't know why they do it, but it shows koala foraging is far more complex than we thought," NSW National Parks and Wildlife ecologist Chris Allen said.

"They could be after salt, minerals or even sap.

"We don't know if bark is a food source or supplement, or if this chewing is linked to weaning behaviour in young animals."

More than 200 years after Australia's early colonial naturalists were so baffled by the koala they couldn't decide if it was a sloth or a monkey, koalas are showing they can still baffle the experts. Although scientists have claimed for more than a century that wild koalas feed exclusively on eucalypt leaves, local historical records refer to Aboriginal tribes on the Monaro describing koalas as bark chewing animals.

"So this is not new behaviour, or a dietary aberration it's a deliberate foraging strategy. Some trees are extensively chewed, others have a few marks at the base, as if the koalas are testing if a tree is suitable," Mr Allen said.

It was an artist's eye for detail that sparked a 17-year investigation to determine what was gouging bark from trees on privately owned bushland near Bredbo.

Retired fine arts lecturer Garth Dixon noticed the unusual markings while taking photographs on Black Ridge, a 2000ha conservation property he jointly owns with a group of Canberra naturalists. Now in frail health, the 87-year-old artist recalls the amount of koala droppings at the base of the trees suggested koalas, not cockatoos, were eating the bark. But his theory was "dismissed by scientists who patiently explained why it was impossible".

Dixon and one of the property's co-owners, Dierk von Behrens, eventually contacted Mr Allen after hearing of his koala survey work in NSW South Coast forests.

"We had a hard time, because without visual evidence, people were sceptical. It was frustrating," Mr von Behrens said.

Andrew Claridge, a NSW parks ecologist who has pioneered the use of infrared cameras to replace invasive trapping in Australian wildlife surveys, helped Mr Allen set up cameras at six "chew trees".

"We got the proof we were after, but it's just the start of a bigger ecological puzzle" Mr Allen said.

"And most importantly, it shows the extraordinary contribution local people can make to improving our knowledge of wildlife. This discovery occurred because a group of people wanted to learn more about an environment they loved."

The next step is working with Australian National University nutritional ecologist Professor William Foley to analyse bark samples. "Bark is pretty ghastly stuff in terms of nutritional content so one possibility is the bark chewing is a form of self-medicating. It could be a source of sodium," Professor Foley said.

Central Queensland University koala biologist Alistair Melzer said bark-chewing behaviour had not been scientifically observed among wild koalas and the Monaro discovery could point to genetic differences between regional populations.

"When you have an animal with such a large range, there's a strong argument for genetic differences. We may find it's not a regional phenomenon, but just something that hasn't been observed before because so much of the koala's world only happens at night."



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"And most importantly, it shows the extraordinary contribution local people can make to improving our knowledge of wildlife. This discovery occurred because a group of people wanted to learn more about an environment they loved."

Goodness me, what a surprise! If governments and their scientists-for-hire stopped 'managing' and 'controlling' our precious natural world and instead listened to and worked with the visionary people who love, respect, care for and live in harmony with it, our future would be much less uncertain.

Posted by **Bunda**, 2/04/2011 3:28:13 PM, on The Canberra Times

More likely one of the cuddly, furry little creatures was bored or in a rage and decided to chew up the trunk of the tree that feeds it...Kangaroos don't eat trees but regularly chew the tops out of any trees I plant or rip them to shreds when mock fighting with them.

Posted by **dusty**, 2/04/2011 7:09:27 PM, on The Canberra Times

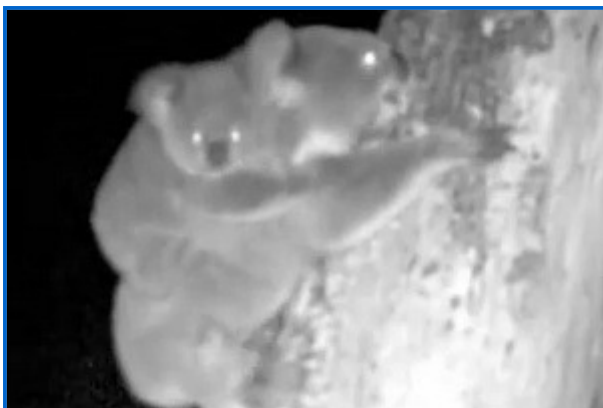
Some areas in the region have very low rainfall, are in rainshadows, and have lost various species of vegetation over 150 years even though koalas (which should be gnomed, split from the larger Victorian koalas, and smaller QLD koalas and classified as endangered), wombats and rosenbergs goanna survive. Other parts of Australia have up to 18 species the koalas utilise.

Posted by **supert**, 3/04/2011 7:57:34 PM, on The Canberra Times

Hmmm.... maybe they aren't Koala's after all, but rather are drop bears?

Posted by **FD**, 3/04/2011 10:14:00 PM, on The Canberra Times

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NSW National Parks and Wildlife Services senior threatened species officer Chris Allen with a tree showing old and new koala markings. Photo: ANDREW SHEARGOLD

An advertisement for T-BOX Home Bundle. It features a yellow and orange nesting doll on the left. The text reads: "HOME BUNDLE WITH T-BOX", "\$109 / MONTH FOR 24 MONTHS (PLUS \$35 UP FRONT)", "MIN COST \$2,651 (PLUS \$9.95 DELIVERY FEE & USAGE)", and "FIND OUT MORE". At the bottom, it says "IT'S HOW WE CONNECT" and has the T logo.

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