

## 'Unprecedented' infection rates crippling female koala fertility

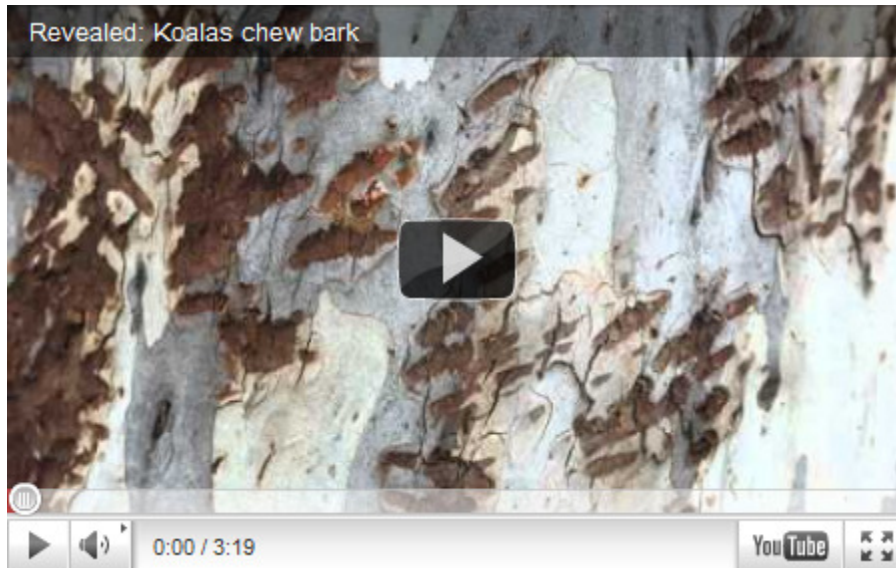
ROSSLYN BEEBY

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Chronic disease among Australia's koalas is occurring on a scale comparable to the facial tumour disease killing Tasmanian devils, a Senate inquiry has been told.

Australian Wildlife Hospital research director John Hangar said research showed more than 60 per cent of female koalas in some areas of south-east Queensland were infertile because of severe reproductive tract infections.

"The level and severity of disease in the koala populations examined in our study is almost unprecedented compared to other species," he said.



Dr Hangar estimates his Queensland wildlife hospital, which is privately funded by the late Steve Irwin's Australian Zoo, treats more than 600 injured and diseased koalas a year.

He said a widespread infectious koala retrovirus, which attacks the animal's immune system, causes leukaemia, blood cell abnormalities, an AIDS-like immune system collapse and pouch deaths of joeys.

Although governments had contributed more than \$22 million to control devil facial tumour disease, their response to koala retrovirus "has been minimal", Dr Hangar told a Senate environment committee inquiry into Australia's koala populations.

Australian Greens leader Bob Brown said Dr Hangar's statistics were "truly shocking".

The results were also indicative of a deeper government policy neglect and "a sub-conscious fear among our politicians that koalas are trouble, and will cost us politically," Senator Brown said.

"It's so easy for governments to park the issue of koala conservation and trivialise these animals as a national adornment a theatrical prop to be trotted out when overseas celebrities visit our zoos."

Last November, Senator Brown won a long-standing battle to secure a six-month Senate inquiry, which begins public hearings next month and has received more than 80 submissions from scientists, local councils, community conservation groups, private citizens, wildlife shelters, developers and the forestry industry.

Only two national conservation groups, Humane Society International and Friends of the Earth, have filed submissions.

Senator Brown said such a high level of public interest and concern for native wildlife should send a "clear warning against koala complacency" to Australia's politicians and environment bureaucrats.



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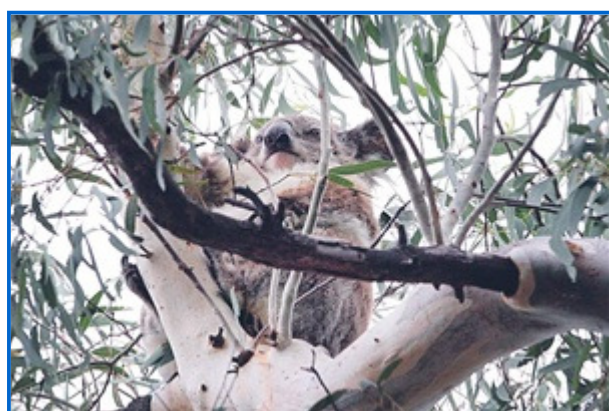


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COMPLACENCY: Greens leader Bob Brown says a level of public interest in native wildlife means governments should not take koala health for granted. Photo: ANDREW SHEARGOLD

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