

Koala virus could result in extinction

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AN AIDS-like virus is killing koalas at such a rate it has the potential to send them into extinction.

Like AIDS in humans, the virus weakens the immune system so koalas are often killed by other diseases such as chlamydia.

Koala researcher Jon Hanger told a Senate inquiry in Brisbane yesterday the decline in koala numbers was far more dramatic than could be explained by habitat loss.

While habitat was critically important, there were pristine bushland blocks that were empty of koalas.

"This retrovirus has the potential to cause extinction," Dr Hanger said.

"... And despite Queensland spending \$43 million on habitat acquisition, they are still going extinct."

Dr Hanger said the virus was probably transmitted through close contact or insects.

It had not been seen before in other species and may have started in Queensland and be moving south across the continent.

It was not known how long it had been in Aus-



RAPID DECLINE: Koala numbers are dwindling.

tralia and substantial research was needed to unravel the disease and save the marsupials.

Once infected with the virus, koalas struggled to recover from diseases such as chlamydia that should have little impact on them.

Scientist Jo Loader said about 50 per cent of female koalas had reproductive tract disease that prevented them from breeding.

Koala Research Network spokesman Clive McAlpine said critical deficiencies in koala management occurred across all levels of government.

Professor McAlpine said

the koala's status was uncertain although many local and regional populations were in decline.

The network, which represents more than 60 scientists, wants national standards developed for assessing and comparing the health and size of koala populations.

It is thought koala numbers range from 45,000 to 100,000, with mulga land colonies having crashed by 95 per cent.

With the Federal Government currently assessing an application to list the koala as vulnerable, Prof McAlpine said there was no adequate national data that would help consider its status.

Australian Koala Foundation executive director Debbie Tabart said environment laws and policies had been proved totally inadequate in protecting koalas.

She said the key issue was habitat protection.

In February, state Environment Minister Kate Jones said that of \$45 million being spent on koala projects, all but \$400,000 was going toward buying or rehabilitating bushland on the advice of a scientific panel.