

## Koalas face demise

By Alice Roberts and Megan Hendry

**Researchers, conservationists and property owners have met in Rockhampton for a three day workshop to discuss ways to save one of Australia's most iconic marsupials.**

Researchers say climate change, mining activity and human activity have had detrimental impacts on koala habitats.

Koala Research Centre Research Coordinator Dr Alistair Melzer says islands along the Queensland coast with koala populations are critically important to the conservation status of koalas.

"One of those islands represents one of only two natural koala populations occurring on islands, that one is North Stradbroke Island, and all the others represent important refuges for koalas in the face of climate change and also in the face of increasing disturbances on the mainland," he says.

He says koala populations are located on Brampton Island, St Bees Island, Rabbit Island, Newry Island and also Magnetic Island off the coast of Townsville.

He says the islands have been paramount to their research.

"We believe that they'll be important if climate change predictions come through and as increasing drought pressures develop on the mainland and these populations will be able to persist," says Dr Melzer.

"We believe they're important in terms of being able to allow animals to persist on the islands when they're being disturbed by increasing coastal development on the mainland.

"They're also very significant because of their research value because they're natural laboratories for the study of koalas."

So are the populations of koalas on the islands healthier than on the mainland?

"The population of St Bees Island is stable and is apparently quite healthy, the populations on the other islands are poorly known at this stage," he says.

"It may be that the Rabbit Island population as declined, there's some evidence of that but it's still circumstantial and the Brampton Island population is



Koalas (Alice Roberts - ABC Local)

just not known sufficiently."

Recently the Australian Senate held an inquiry and subsequently released a report on koala populations in Australia.

Queensland University Professor Frank Carrick says the report highlights the need for action.

"First and foremost the Federal Minister needs to get on with listing the koala under the so called EPBC Act which is really the only way that the Federal Government can get practically involved in assisting with wildlife conservation and until that happens, the priority is so low that they just don't donate time and resources to it," says Professor Carrick.

"As was pointed out, we really have good information for a small number of populations and that's mostly been driven by the dedication of particular researchers but we need to fill in the dots in between, the spaces where we just don't have any or not very good information about how koalas are doing.

"What's really important is looking at the trends of the populations overall, the absolute numbers are much less meaningful than knowing what's happening."

He says the majority of koala populations, except for a few in south Australia, are in decline.

"I'm not a great fan of endangered species lists because it ends up being a defacto way of managing a species to the very brink of extinction before you do anything," he says.

"We really ought to be addressing issues when there are clear signs of a problem which the information that the Senate has gathered certainly provided.

"We need to do something about it while there's still time to bring things back."

He says he supports the koala being placed on the endangered list because it's the only way to get the Federal Government to intervene.

Ironically he says, the koala is listed under the US Endangered Species Act and has been for over 10 years.

"There are disturbing signs that there have been substantial declines," he says.

The workshop aims to use the practical knowledge of attendees towards developing a more unified approach to koala conservation.