

Cape Otway koalas to be relocated around Lorne in trial

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THE State Government will trial relocating koalas from overpopulated Cape Otway this week to areas around Lorne, while euthanising unhealthy animals.

The animals have reached plague proportions in the national park, stripping bare hectares of manna gum trees killing their habitat and leaving them starving to death.

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning said vets and wildlife officers would relocate 36 koalas to test the suitability of other local habitats, sterilise healthy females and euthanise “unhealthy koalas to prevent suffering”.

Welfare checks will be conducted on 300 to 400 animals over the next fortnight, after revelations in March that 686 koalas were put down during three checks in 2013 and 2014 led the Australian Koala Foundation to argue it was a “secret cull”.

Deakin wildlife and conservation biology lecturer Dr Desley Whisson told the *Geelong Advertiser* the trial relocation would determine if relocation was a possible solution after the planting of 70,000 extra manna gum trees in previous years failed to stop the koalas from going hungry.

She said koala relocations from Kangaroo Island to south eastern South Australia had been successful while a number of previous trials in Victoria hadn't.

“I think (not going too far) will be key, and finding a place without an existing koala population and suitable habitat and no other threatened species and I think the government has put a lot of work into that,” Dr Whisson said.

“My fingers are certainly crossed that they survive and more can follow in their footsteps.”

Environment Minister Lisa Neville said the trial would send the koalas to areas around Lorne to see if they would take to non-manna gum gumtrees.

“We're trying to build to a long-term solution,” she said.

Ms Neville dismissed suggestions of relocating koalas to other states where their numbers are in decline, saying research had shown that it did more harm than good as the animals adapted to local conditions and could not survive outside them.

Ms Neville said she had changed the rules so orphaned healthy joeys could be sent to wildlife parks rather than have to be euthanised alongside their malnourished and sick mothers.

Australian Koala Foundation chief executive Deborah Tabart called for more transparency about the operation.

“Every question I asked (the department) regarding mapping, guidelines, outcomes, research protocols, ethics and habitat management was met with no response,” she said.

“We've offered our advice over the years, unfortunately to no avail. Perhaps this time, with the world watching, next week's actions will be more respectful.