

Koalas could be extinct in south-east Queensland in 'not-too-distant future', RSPCA says



The race to build homes is putting Queensland's vulnerable koalas at risk.

South-east Queensland has fewer than 16,000 koalas left in the wild, and of those experts say 10 per cent will end up in veterinary hospitals each year. Only half who receive hospital care will survive.

Australia's iconic marsupial is up against a chlamydia epidemic, vehicle strikes and dog and feral animal attacks.

It's also under threat from the creep of urban development into its habitat.



There's a shortage of a medication vets use to treat koalas. (ABC News: Michael Lloyd)

RSPCA Queensland wildlife veterinary director Dr Tim Portas said koala numbers continue to decline.

"Unless something significant changes and we look at protecting koala habitat and disease control programs for chlamydia, there's a real risk we won't have koalas in south-east Queensland in the not-too-distant future," he said.

Maximus and William

Koalas Maximus and William faced an uncertain fate when they came to a wildlife hospital, west of Brisbane, at the end of last year.

Both were infected with chlamydia, could barely see, and were malnourished and dehydrated.

Maximus needed treatment for six months before he could be released back into the Woogaroo Forest, west of Brisbane, while William returned home to

the same area after nearly two months in care.



RSPCA Queensland says koalas living around Ipswich face a range of threats and stressors. (ABC News: Michael Lloyd)

Their release is bittersweet for wildlife rescuers who fear it's only a matter of time before they see them again.

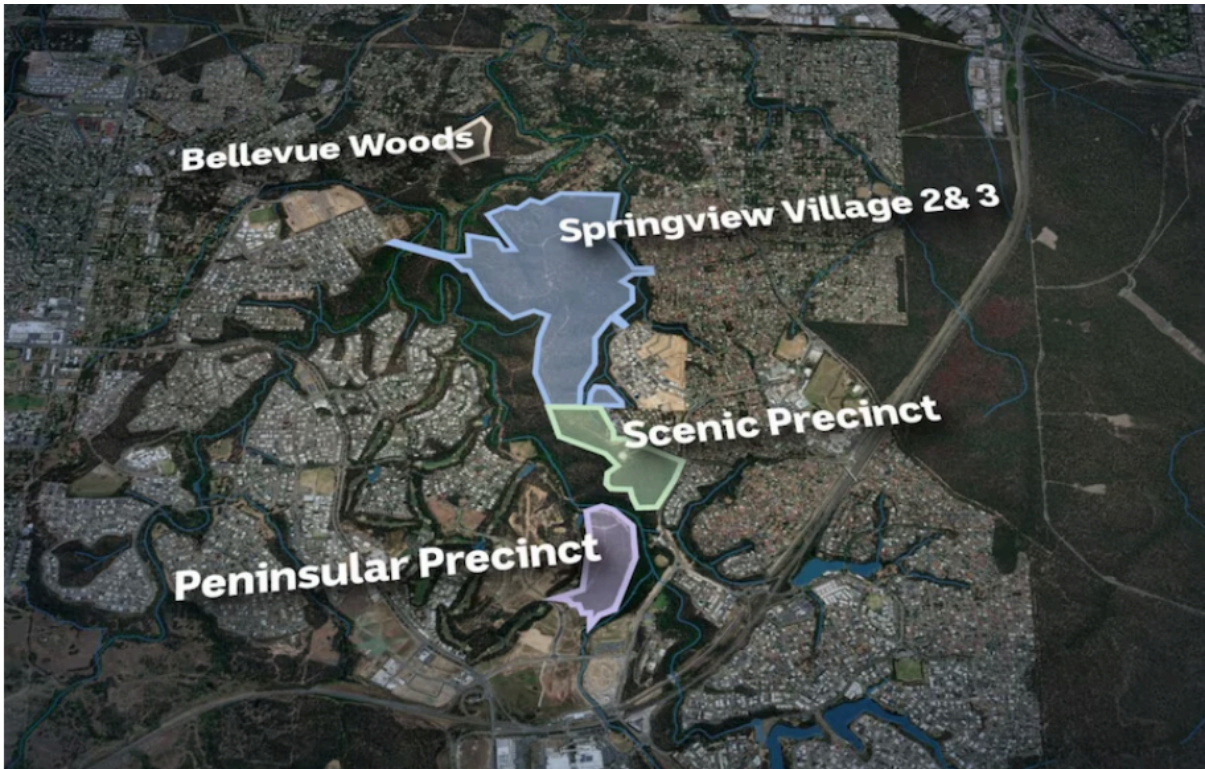
"We would like to think you treat these koalas and they don't come back but the unfortunate reality is that even with the chlamydia vaccine they can be reinfected ... so it's a bit of an uphill battle," Dr Portas said.

"There are a couple of vaccines available, but they are not readily available at the moment, so ideally we would vaccinate every koala that goes out, but we are not in a position to do that."

'Death by a thousand cuts'

Woogaroo Forest, near Ipswich, spans more than 450 hectares, with the majority listed as prime koala habitat by the Queensland Government.

It's also home to sugar gliders, platypus, kangaroos, wallabies, and echidnas.



Four proposed developments in the Woogaroo Forest are undergoing environmental assessment. (ABC News: Peter Mullins)

But a third of that native bushland has been marked for urban development, including almost two thousand homes, a commercial centre, childcare centre, and sports park.



Rebecca Larkin has noticed a sharp decline in the Collingwood Park local koala population. (ABC News: Dean Caton)

There are fears this could corner koalas in islands of bushland surrounded by development, increase the risk of run-ins with cars and dogs and expose them to added stress and disease.

"Once something is listed as endangered, you know that every single one of those animals needs to be protected."

"But at the other end of the system you've got big developers making hundreds of millions of dollars and building houses that are spread out, that aren't communities," Rebecca Larkin, from the Ipswich Koala Protection Society, said.



A koala and its joey killed by a car near Woogaroo Forest in October.

While these sites may not pose a major threat on their own, if all are approved, experts say it will dramatically reduce available habitat.

"It's death by a thousand cuts ... if you look at the broader picture then how can you not determine that these developments in combination will have a significant impact," University of Queensland researcher Dr Sean FitzGibbon said.

"But that doesn't seem to be how they are assessed, it's one at a time."



University of Queensland wildlife researcher Dr Sean FitzGibbon. (ABC News: Will Murray)

In a statement, Ipswich Mayor Teresa Harding said the land was privately owned and "unfortunately" not preserved forest.

The site was earmarked for housing development nearly 30 years ago by the state government, she said.

It's under the Springfield Structure Plan, which Ms Harding said, "was put in place by the Queensland Government in the 1990s to support significant residential development".



Ipswich Mayor Teresa Harding said land marked for development was not part of a preserved forest. (ABC News: Victoria Pengilley)

Ipswich City Council has already approved the developments but it's the federal government that will do the environmental assessment and ultimately decide whether they go ahead.

A spokesperson for the federal Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water said each of the four proposals will need to be fully assessed under national environmental law.

"The department is yet to receive preliminary documentation responses for any of the referrals which sufficiently address the department's information requirements," they said.

Dr Portas said koala habitat like the Woogaroo Forest needs to be "quarantined" from development.

"Obviously we have a growing population and there's a need for more houses, but we probably need to look at more comprehensive strategies that don't target prime habitat," he said.

Populations brought back from brink

Using a handheld receiver with a directional antenna, researchers can track and monitor collared koalas in bushland in Brisbane's south-west.

Among them is Matilda — a young, displaced koala who's been used to successfully re-establish a locally extinct population in the Pooh Corner Bushland Reserve at Wacol.



A koala in the Koala Research Program at Pooh Corner Bushland Reserve. (ABC News: Will Murray)

The program is being rolled out across the city.

"We've been able to re-populate this area with rescued koalas, young animals that needed a new home," Dr FitzGibbon said.

"We've placed more than a dozen animals here now and we've already had the first generation and now the second generation coming through, so it's not all bad news."



The Koala Research Program aims to re-establish a healthy population of koalas at Pooh Corner Bushland Reserve. (ABC News: Will Murray)

The Koala Research Program, a collaboration between Brisbane City Council and research institutes, carefully selects koalas they believe will have the best chance of adapting to a new habitat and starting up a new population.

"The thing that strikes me is that koalas are actually very adaptable and quite a tough animal," Dr FitzGibbon said.

"They need the right food trees and connectivity, that's crucial."



About half of the koalas brought into RSPCA Queensland for treatment die from injuries.
(ABC News: Michael Lloyd)

With the 2032 Olympic Games just seven years away, experts say the need to strike the right balance between development and the environment has never been more important.

"I don't want to be somebody who stands there with Olympic visitors and says 'Look I could have shown you koalas in the wild, but I'm sorry I can't because they are now extinct'," Ms Larkin said.

"People need the forest as much as the animals."