

### **The Race to Rescue Koalas**

It's two in the morning and a koala is caught in a fence. Megan Aitken, who runs a volunteer organization that rescues wild koalas, looks at the frightened animal and pulls on heavy leather gloves. Despite their cute, stuffed-animal appearance, koalas can be ferocious when caught. Aitken places a wire cage on the ground and opens up a thick blanket. Then she and two other rescuers quickly get to work. One volunteer throws the blanket over the animal, both to calm it and to protect the rescuers from its teeth and claws. The other opens the lid of the cage. Aitken then firmly grasps the koala through the blanket, frees it from the fence, and puts it in the cage.

The koala, symbol of Australia and one of the most beloved animals on the planet, is in crisis. Before Europeans settled Australia more than two centuries ago, about 10 million koalas lived in the east coast eucalyptus forests. Hunted for their fur, koalas nearly became extinct in the southern half of their territory. In the northern half, a million were killed in 1919 alone. By 1927, only tens of thousands remained.

"Koalas are getting caught in fences and dying, struck by vehicles, even dying simply because a homeowner cut down several eucalyptus trees in his backyard," says Deidre de Villiers, one of the chief koala researchers at the Queensland Department of Environment and Resource Management. For 15 years, de Villiers has been monitoring koala populations, creating guidelines to make development more koala-friendly.

De Villiers insists that koalas and humans can coexist in urban environments "if developers get on board with koala-sensitive designs" such as lower speed limits for streets, green corridors for koala movement, and, most especially, preserving every precious eucalyptus tree.

Unfortunately, koalas have another problem that threatens their survival. "Disease is the other huge issue," says veterinarian Jon Hanger. Hanger has discovered that as much as half of Queensland's koala population may be affected by a single disease. Afflicted koalas may go blind and females may become infertile. The federal government needs to get involved and do it properly, listing the koala as vulnerable to extinction." He argues that this might save the last remnants of critical koala habitat.

A recent report presented to the Australian government has made several recommendations to save the koalas, including listing the animals as threatened and vulnerable, funding a program to monitor koala populations, mapping their habitat, and managing lands to protect the koalas. Until these things happen, the efforts of people like Aitken and de Villiers will be crucial in helping to regenerate the ailing koala population.