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Koalas on the Brink: Will Australian Wildfires Drive the Koala to Extinction?

Brushfires in Australia killed thousands of rare koalas

In 2019 and early 2020, wildfires burned more than 46 million in Australia, mostly in the southeast. The fires killed more than 30 people and destroyed almost 3000 homes. The fires were even more devastating for animals than for people, however. Around one billion wild animals are thought to have died. Koalas were among the hardest-hit animals, with 60,000 koalas killed and injured. The koalas that survived the fires were left with little food and water after their natural habitat was destroyed.



A Koala Hospital sprang into action

The Port Macquarie Koala Hospital took in dozens of koalas that were injured in the fires. The hospital rehydrated, then treated and bandages their burns.

The hospital set up GoFundMe account to help them with their rescue efforts. The hospital had originally hoped to collect \$25,000. But an outpouring of compassion from people around the world raised more than a million dollars. Now, the hospital will be able to do much more. The staff at the station plan to set up a breeding program for the surviving koalas.

Koala numbers were declining before the fire

Even before the fires, koala populations had declined. Habitat destruction - the loss of the forest they depend upon - was the major cause. Koala populations - groups of koalas - had become "fragmented." Fragmented means broken up into smaller pieces. Koala populations that are isolated can not interbreed with each other. This reduces what is known as "genetic diversity." Genetic diversity means variation among organisms. This is important, not only to koalas, but to all living things. Genetic diversity helps species to be able to adapt to changes in their habitats.

Some news reports stated that koalas are “functionally extinct.” What does that mean?

A news article that was circulated widely on social media carried a headline declaring that koalas were “functionally extinct” following the fires. What does that mean, and is it really true?

The term functionally extinct is used when some members of a species survive, but they are unlikely to do so for long, or when they no longer have a significant role in their ecosystem. Is this true of koalas? Some populations of koalas now have so little genetic diversity that they may not be able to remain healthy. But there are other populations that are healthy.

There have been tremendous declines in koalas because of the fires. Some populations have lost more than half of their numbers. A 2016 study, however, estimated that there were about 329,000 in Australia. Koalas are listed as “vulnerable” by conservation organizations. This means that they are not yet considered to be an endangered species. In early 2020, some of the koalas burned in the fires were returned to the wild. There is hope for the koala. Their future, however may depend upon the decisions that people make.

What actions should be taken to help koalas recover?

Koalas eat only one type of tree - the Eucalyptus. So they are found only where Eucalyptus trees grow, and only on the continent of Australia. Koalas play an important role in Eucalyptus forests, where their droppings fertilize the trees they need to survive. To save koalas, the Australian government and ordinary Australians will need to set aside forested land where koalas can live. They will also need to decide to establish connections or “corridors” between populations that are now isolated, so that koala populations can maintain genetic diversity.

Climate change is another big problem for koalas. The awful bushfire season of 2019-2020 has been linked to high temperatures and drought - lack of rainfall. Human-caused climate change has been linked to the Australian drought. If droughts, high temperatures, and wildfires continue, koalas will struggle to survive.

Will it matter if koalas go become extinct? Koalas are gentle, peaceful animals. They are what is called a “national icon,” a symbol of Australia. People around the world have responded with sorrow at witnessing the suffering of koalas rescued from the fires. It is natural for us to feel compassion for others, and to want to do the right thing. But it may also be in our interests to protect forests and the creatures that live in them. The Australia Koala Foundation is promoting the “Koala Protection Act.” On their website, they state: “The Koala Protection Act will insist that the Koala should be treated with immense respect, and that every single tree on the Australian landscape needs to be protected; not only for the Koalas, but the millions of other species living there, including humans. Remember: ‘No Tree No Me’.”

What to do: *If you were in Australia, would you want to save the koala from extinction? Pretend that you get into a discussion with a neighbor about whether the koala should be saved. What points would you make to convince your neighbor that koalas should be saved?*

Explore more!

Links:

videos:

Rescued koala returned to the tree where he was rescued: <https://time.com/5773255/australia-bushfire-koala-hospital/>

koala being cared for by veterinarians feeding himself despite burned paws:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=27&v=12NvvvnLjm0&feature=emb_logo

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/weather/topstories/parched-koala-grabs-for-water-bottle-at-northern-new-south-wales-fire-ground/vi-BBX9cp5>

<https://www.savethekoala.com/our-work/koala-protection-act>

<https://www.sciencealert.com/new-ways-to-save-koalas>

<https://www.savethekoala.com/about-koalas/interesting-facts>

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/koalas-may-be-functionally-extinct-but-what-does-that-mean>

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2203655-no-koalas-are-not-functionally-extinct-but-they-are-in-trouble/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/26/koala-rescued-from-nsw-bushfire-dies-due-to-extensive-burns>

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/26/opinions/lewis-the-koala-fire-death-climate-filipovic/index.html>