

Koalas calling

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With the help of mobile phone technology, UQ researchers are set to decipher the distinctive grunting noises made by male koalas during the spring mating season.

Dr Bill Ellis, from UQ's School of Integrative Biology, and Dr Sean Fitzgibbon, from the Centre for Mined Land Rehabilitation, along with Professor Paul Roe and Mr Richard Mason from QUT's IT department, will combine their skills in order to eavesdrop on the koalas from St Bees Island, located off the coast of Mackay.

“We are studying whether males are talking to other males, or to females, and how vocalisations might stimulate breeding behaviour in female koalas,” Dr Ellis said.

“This collaboration has opened this area of research up for us and we are extremely excited about the data we have been collecting.”

Dr Ellis and Dr Fitzgibbon have tagged koalas on St Bees with GPS (Global Positioning System) collars that record their location every two hours, and solar powered remote sound sensors have been placed around the island.

Koala bellows are transmitted using Telstra's Next G network to the QUT site, where the research team monitors the duration and frequency of koala calls.

“For the first time, we are able to monitor the spatial response of all

females (and other males) to the vocalizations generated by koalas at our site,” Dr Ellis said.

“Remote sensors and GPS loggers mean we don't disturb the koalas while collecting high quality data, and the real-time nature of the data makes it all the more exciting.”

Funded through the centre for Conservation and Research for Endangered Species at San Diego Zoo, Microsoft, Telstra and UQ, this research has the potential to uncover a great deal about the breeding habits of koalas.

“Our preliminary data from GPS collars indicate that at the time approximately corresponding to when we think a female conceives, she shows exaggerated movement,” Dr Ellis said.

“This might indicate females go looking for males.

“Since the young females stay closer to their mum's home range, this makes sense – The females go to find an unrelated male.

“The question is, what has bellowing got to do with this, which is where the new monitoring technology should be able to help.”

Provided by UQ

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