Researcher uncovers koalas' creature comforts

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University of Queensland Master of Science student Maren Dammann is aiming to uncover what makes a koala's wish list when it comes to choosing a place to live.

By studying the movement patterns of koalas from Coomera Waters, a new housing estate located 40km south of Brisbane, Australia, Miss Dammann will learn how green developments can be made more appealing to the native marsupial.

“The Coomera Waters development project is a good example of a modern development that aspires to be green and considers environmental issues,” Miss Dammann said.

“The developers did not undertake broad scale clearing of the whole area but rather they retained, rehabilitated and linked several large areas of native vegetation that incorporate koala habitat and now have koalas present in high numbers.

“This study aims to learn about habitat use and get an indication of what a development design should look like in order to sustain koalas over a longer term.

“We want to find out in which patches koalas can be found and what characteristics these patches have. We are also interested in learning about the usage of corridors and street vegetation.”

The project is sponsored by Coomera Waters development company, AustCorp, which plans to incorporate the results into future green constructions.

Miss Dammann has chosen to involve the Coomera Waters community, an approach which will assist the researchers and help the locals learn about koala conservation.

“Residents of Coomera Waters have been invited to participate and report sightings of koalas to us,” she said.

“Every koala has different coloured ear tags which makes them easy to recognise for residents, and us.

“We hope that an active involvement of the residents draws attention to the topic and leads to a positive attitude and appreciation towards the species and the natural environment in general.

“That is very important for koala conservation because residents need to know how their actions can affect koalas, such as restraining their dogs and planting native vegetation.

“People in the estate are very friendly and communicative. For example, when we caught a koala from a backyard, the owners watched our work and wanted to learn about koalas.

“We named the koala Ashlee after their little daughter, and she shared the story with her class mates at show-and-tell the next day.”

Miss Dammann's research forms part of a larger project assessing the effectiveness of green developments in South East Queensland.

“Many developers claim to be ‘green' but we don't really know if their

development designs and approaches are actually good at saving wildlife," she said.

Several researchers from UQ are involved in the broader study, including Dr Sean FitzGibbon and Ben Barth, both from the Integrative Ecology Lab in UQ's School of Biological Sciences.

They are examining approximately 30 new developments that vary from green to non-green, to compare the diversity and abundance of birds, dung beetles and microbats (insect-eating bats).

The Coomera Waters project, which runs until July 2009, forms part of Miss Dammann's Master of Science in Conservation Studies, supervised by Dr Sean FitzGibbon and Dr Robbie Wilson.

Provided by University of Queensland (news : web)

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