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Close to 700 koalas killed by authorities in Australia because of overpopulation

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The euthanasia operations were conducted between September 2013 and March 2014 in a colony of koalas in gum woodlands at Cape Otway, about 140 miles south-west of Melbourne.

The koalas were taken from trees, sedated and assessed by veterinarians before being killed by lethal injection.

Despite concerns about the marsupial's declining population nationally, the state government in Victoria killed about 686 koalas but the operation was kept secret to prevent a public backlash.

Scientists defended the cull, saying the koalas were starving and that the 8,000-strong colony was too large for the woodland area. According to The Australian newspaper, the koala densities were up to 11 per hectare in the area, compared with sustainable rates of fewer than one koala per hectare across the state of Victoria.

Desley Whisson, a koala expert at Deakin University, said the animals were in poor health and euthanasia was the only option.

"It got to the point where there were no leaves left on the trees and the koalas were literally falling out of trees," she told Radio 3AW.

"They were dying of starvation. It's actually not a very nice thing to move a koala; a lot of them will actually die [from stress] during that process."

The state government said no more secret culls would be allowed but biodiversity experts would be consulted about preventing further suffering.

Frank Fotinas, who runs a holiday caravan park at Cape Otway, supported the cull, saying the area "smelt of dead koalas".

"A lot more were dying naturally than were euthanased," he told ABC Radio.

"It smelt like death. You should come and look at the trees. There are hundreds of acres of dead trees."

Australia's total koala population has decreased from "millions" early last century to about 50,000 to 100,000, according to conservation groups.

The decline was blamed on widespread hunting for the marsupial's pelt, as well as introduction of diseases and the impact of development on natural habitats.

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