

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/25/world/australia/koala-fires-functionally-extinct.html?smid=tw-nyclimate&smtyp=cur>

## ‘Functionally Extinct’: Do Dire Claims About Koalas Help or Hurt Them?

*The fires tearing across eastern Australia have hurt koalas, and their population is shrinking. But scientists disagree about which terms are harmful for conservation efforts and which ones help.*

By [Jacey Fortin](#)

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A koala was given water on Thursday after being rescued from a fire in Jacky Bulbin Flat in New South Wales, Australia. Credit...Paul Sudmala, via Reuters

There is no doubt that the fires tearing across eastern Australia have been hurting koalas.

With large areas of their crucial habitat ravaged, it is unclear what the future holds for a species that was already under threat before [this round of bush fires](#). Some koalas have been [rescued](#) — singed and dehydrated — from the wild. And with blazes still burning, it is hard to know how many have been killed.

But in describing the plight of these animals, is it possible to go too far?

The phrase “functionally extinct” made the rounds in [news articles](#) and on [social media](#) over the weekend. The term refers to a species that no longer plays a role in an ecosystem or that is on its way to extinction, possibly irremovably.

That provoked a visceral reaction from readers who wondered if the fuzzy marsupials, [a national symbol of Australia](#), will be gone forever.

In fact, koalas are not extinct. And some scientists warned that exaggeration can hurt, rather than help, conservation efforts.

“What is particularly frustrating about the term ‘functional extinction’ is it indicates a population that is basically past the point of no return, so it means that nothing really can be done,” said Jacquelyn Gill, an associate professor at the University of Maine’s Climate Change Institute and School of Biology and Ecology.

“That might seem like scientists quibbling over terms or trying to argue for nerdy levels of precision, but a strong statement like that should mean something,” she said.

## Are koalas going extinct soon?

Koalas could go extinct. The International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red List, the authority on the conservation status of the world’s species, [says the koala population is declining and vulnerable](#) — but not endangered.

There [could be hundreds of thousands of koalas](#), but nailing down a number has proved impossible. Estimates range wildly, and every region is different. In some places, scientists say, koalas’ numbers have [declined by up to 80 percent](#).

Noah Greenwald, the endangered species director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said there might have been around 300,000 koalas in Australia in 2016. But things may have changed since then — especially given the recent fires.

"They're in a lot of trouble, and they need our care and our help if they're going to survive," he said.

A dehydrated and injured koala received treatment at the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital this month after it was rescued from a bush fire on Australia's east coast. Credit...Saeed Khan/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Koalas evolved to exist alongside wildfires, but the animals are facing new threats from human development, which has dislocated local populations and impaired their ability to survive fires, [as well as climate change](#).

## Where did that phrase come from?

On social media, [many people](#) who [shared](#) an article that used the term "functionally extinct" to describe koalas pointed to [an article that appeared in Forbes](#) on Saturday. That article, written by a senior contributor to the publication, was about the effects of the recent fires, but it appeared to cite a statement that was issued in May.

The first person cited in the article was Deborah Tabart, the head of the Australian Koala Foundation.

The foundation, a nonprofit conservation organization based in Brisbane, said in [a statement on May 10](#) that it believed koalas "may be functionally extinct in the entire landscape of Australia." The statement also said that the organization believed there were no more than 80,000 koalas left in the country.

The organization doubled down on its use of the phrase in a different [statement last month](#). But while the bush fires raged this month, Ms. Tabart said in [another statement](#) that "it is difficult for the Australian Koala Foundation to make any meaningful comments regarding the current Australian bush fires until the fires are over and people on the ground have evaluated the situation."

The Forbes article on Saturday also noted that "[some researchers](#) call into question" whether koalas were functionally extinct, "noting how difficult it is to measure total koala populations and that populations could be a [much larger](#) than estimated by the A.K.F."

On Monday, another contributor to Forbes [criticized the use of the phrase](#) "functionally extinct" to describe koalas.

The writer of the Saturday article, Trevor Nace, said in an email that "the use of the term 'functionally extinct' was Tabart's term, not mine, and was reported on by me, along with alternate views from experts."

On Monday afternoon, Forbes removed the phrase "functionally extinct" from the headline and changed the beginning of the article to put less emphasis on the term.

## The tumult over a turn of phrase

In an interview, Ms. Tabart defended her use of the term and said that the threat of the end of a species should galvanize action, not discourage it.

"I want this fight," she added. "Bring it on."

She said that she defined functional extinction as a situation in which a species would be gone by the third generation, and that she based her population estimates on extensive research, including land and tree surveys across eastern Australia. The data is [available on her organization's website](#).

"I have driven to pretty much every part of the country," she said. "I absolutely know that there's not one koala population that's safe. I don't care what anyone says. I have been there. I've seen it. I've written about it. I've been dedicated to this job for 31 years."

But Mr. Greenwald said he thought the term could have negative effects. "I think it's premature to call them functionally extinct," he said. "That would almost suggest that we give up hope, and I don't think it's at that point yet."

Dr. Gill said there was a lot of space between a dire situation and a point of no return — space for people to understand and to act.

"My main concern is that trust is one of our biggest assets when it comes to the scientific community and the conservation community," she added. "And I don't want to see that squandered."

