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Koala survey to assess animal's future

By Paul Jobber

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Decreasing numbers: Koalas like Stoney, named after Billabong Zoo owner Mark Stone, have dropped 30 per cent in the past 20 years.

IT might only be a matter of time before one of the most well-known animals in Port Macquarie - the koala - is not around.

Over the last 20 years there has been a 30 per cent drop in the koala population which has been worsened by most of them living outside protected areas.

Port Macquarie Koala Hospital supervisor Cheyne Flanagan said it was important for the local community to participate in the survey.

"Something like this engages the community into being aware of what is in the surrounds of their home," she said.

"It's not a physical count, but it is about actually going out and having a look which means the community is being involved so it won't hurt to go out and contribute.

"The count is more from a sightings viewpoint than any specific record of numbers.

"We have the data which we will use, but by getting the community to become involved it means we can compare what we have to what they've seen."

She said the 30 per cent drop in the koala population filtered through to a severe lack of admissions at the hospital this year.

"We know there has been a great drop in admission numbers to the hospital which is of great concern because it could be a signal for something far greater," she said.

"In previous years the average has been relatively stable, but this year there has been a spike down which is potentially not good.

The count will take place between November 7 and 22 and will be run by the National Parks Association of NSW.

Results can be entered at www.koalacount.org.au (<http://www.koalacount.org.au>) or if you have a smartphone, a free GPS-enabled app called NatureMapr makes it easy to record any sightings.

All data will add to existing records and provide a valuable resource for planning future conservation and management strategies to help protect our precious Australian icon, the cuddly koala.

"We already have the hard data, but it will be good to compare that to what people are seeing," Ms Flanagan said.