Response to provide further information to the

"Senate Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population"

Koala
Research Network

Contact Details:
Associate Professor Clive McAlpine
School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Management
The University of Queensland, Brisbane
Email: c.mcalpine@uq.edu.au

Executive Summary

Following a presentation to the Senate Inquiry into the health and sustainability of Australia's koala population on May 3rd, 2011, members of the Koala Research Network (KRN) were invited to provide an estimate of the funding needed to support research and management investigations in areas regarded by the KRN as essential to underpin any successful conservation of the koala across Australia. This document provides a response to that request.

The Koala Research Network is passionate about implementing programs that support the activities outlined in the 2009 - 2014 National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy. However the Commonwealth Government, in conjunction with the State governments, needs to adequately resource the actions identified in this and other plans and strategies.

Australia needs an integrated, holistic approach to koala conservation research, and it must be funded appropriately. Arguably, the koala decline is much more complex and difficult to address than the Tasmanian devil facial tumour disease, and hence the level of funding should reflect that, but with a similar level of urgency. From the submissions to the Senate Inquiry, and the evidence presented at the Inquiry meeting in Brisbane, it has become clear that the issues of koala conservation need to be resolved sooner, rather than later, and that appropriate funding is essential if this is to be achieved. We believe that the KRN, because of its broad membership and expertise across the fields of koala biology, ecology, health and disease and conservation is uniquely placed to provide the scientific research that will underpin koala conservation over coming decades.

In order to address the research priorities identified by the KRN in response to the national strategy, ***we estimate that the funding required to support this proposal would be in the region of $36.5million over a five year period.***

This proposal is presented thematically, with a number of projects combined into each theme. The projects themselves are discrete areas of research, but they have been presented collectively to show the cohesion among the members of the KRN, and the enhanced opportunities that can arise when information and data is shared across research foci. The projects are not ranked preferentially, nor do they cover the full range of potential projects. However, the projects do show how funds allocated would be expended, and demonstrate that the diversity of issues facing koala conservation identified in the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy have been addressed. They also demonstrate that the KRN is well aware that detailed specialist scientific and veterinary skills are required on a wide front and the social element of the work is also covered professionally, such as planning or wildlife care.

We propose five key research themes as a demonstration that, when appropriately resourced, it is possible to identify the factors contributing to the alarming decline in the national koala population, and implement strategies to address these. These themes address:

1. The need to reliably estimate koala population numbers and trends
2. The design and implementation of a national koala monitoring program
3. Investigation and mitigation of disease, particularly Chlamydia and koala retrovirus
4. Prioritisation of conservation actions and adaptive management for climate change
5. Habitat change and population predictions for specific regions

These themes can be expanded into an integrated national koala research strategy, which will enable the Australian Government to achieve the koala conservation goals identified in the 2009 -2014 National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy. Successful implementation of these strategies will then be based on cutting edge scientific knowledge integrated across the full gamut of koala research.