

Inquiry into the Status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population

The Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala
by Diana Tomkins.

Introduction

I am a community member who greatly values our unique and iconic wildlife and as such feel that they need and deserve the highest level of protection.

Purpose of this Submission

The purpose of this submission is to provide further information, evidence and observations in relation to the following terms of reference:

- The iconic status of the koala and the history of its management;
- Estimates of koala populations and the adequacy of current counting methods;
- Knowledge of koala habitat;
- Threats to koala habitat such as logging, land clearing, poor management, attacks from feral and domestic animals, disease and roads, and urban development;
- The listing of the koala under the EPBC Act;
- The adequacy of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy;
- Appropriate future regulation for the protection of koala habitat;
- Interaction of state and federal laws and regulations; and
- Other related matters.

Evidence and Observations

1. The iconic status of the koala and the history of its management

Koalas are at great risk because of the present piece-meal approach of each state to their protection.

Issues which have contributed to this risk are that although koalas themselves are protected by law, around 80% of any remaining habitat occurs on privately owned land, almost none of which is protected by legislation.

Evidence or observations that I have to support this position is the rapidly dwindling sightings of koalas and disappearance of their habitat. The iconic status of the koala is made evident by the many tourists and overseas family and friends that I have spoken with and who want to especially see and hold a koala.

Recommendations for Consideration by the Committee

The Australian Federal Government should be responsible for the protection of the koala and its habitat on both public and private lands.

Decision makers must take immediate and more action to protect the koala and the rest of Australia's unique and iconic species.

2. Estimates of koala populations and the adequacy of current counting methods

Koalas are now at great risk because the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) estimates that in 1788, there would have been 10 million koalas. There are likely to be less than 80,000 koalas remaining in Australia today.

Issues which have contributed to this risk and hampered adequate protection is the federal government's decision not to list the koala as 'vulnerable to extinction' under Federal legislation.

Evidence or observations that I have to support this position is that in order to protect the species, the AKF needed to have confidence in how many koalas remained in the wild and where they were located. Initially, National Vegetation Information System (NVIS) data was used by the AKF to map potential koala habitat on the east coast of Australia. Then modeling was undertaken utilizing the proportion of habitat occupied by koalas and potential koala densities and home range sizes in each class of habitat to predict the number of koalas in each area. This data was validated and adjusted using information provided by published sources and local community groups around the country. Significant experience has been developed by the AKF in the course of collecting this data and satisfactory levels of confidence gained through the validation process. The methodology is currently being developed for publication and provides reliable evidence for estimates of populations when stated in this submission.

Recommendations for Consideration by the Committee

List the koala as vulnerable under the EPBC Act on the basis of reliable data from the AKF which shows a drastic decline in koala populations.

3. Knowledge of koala habitat

Koalas are at great risk because 80% of their habitat has disappeared since European settlement.

Issues which have contributed to this risk are that the AKF maps depict more than just the trees we have lost over the last three centuries, but also the mass deterioration of the habitat of over 400 endangered species. Humans and koalas are competing for real estate and the koalas are losing out. As a result of habitat loss, around 4,000 koalas are killed each year by cars and dogs alone.

Every day evidence that I have to support this position are the images of devastation - observations as I drive around S.E. Queensland of more and more large areas of land being cleared for development.

Recommendations for Consideration by the Committee

End all land clearing and large scale developments.

Greatly increase green spaces and wildlife corridors.

4. Threats to koala habitat such as logging, land clearing, poor management, threats from feral and domestic animals, disease and roads and urban development.

Koalas are at great risk because since 1997, more than 10,000 have died in S.E. Queensland alone.

Issues which have contributed to this risk and evidence that I have to support this position are:

- *around 4,000 koalas are killed each year by cars and dogs alone as a result of habitat loss.*
- *deforestation is the main threat to koalas and they have no place to go as their home trees are cut down around them.*
- *disease rates such as Chlamydia skyrocket because of the stress brought about by the pressures of irresponsible development and habitat loss.*
- *speeding cars cause death and injury to many koalas as they attempt to cross roads in their home range.*
- *many koala road deaths are a result of irresponsible urbanization.*
- *a whole koala colony can be wiped out in a bush fire where habitat is surrounded by development.*
- *fragmented and degraded habitat means attempts at escape from any such threats are futile.*

Recommendations for Consideration by the Committee

End all land clearing and logging of native forests and greatly increase green spaces and wildlife corridors. Install speed cameras in known koala areas.

5. The listing of the koala under the EPBC Act

Koalas are at risk because they have been nominated as 'Vulnerable to Extinction' by the AKF.

Issues which have contributed to this risk are the lack of adequate Federal Legislation to protect the koala and its habitat.

Evidence or observations that I have to support this position is the estimates of their rapidly dwindling numbers from 10 million to less than 80,000 koalas remaining in Australia today and that 80% of their habitat has disappeared since European settlement.

Recommendations for Consideration by the Committee

List the koala as vulnerable under the EPBC Act.

6. The adequacy of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy

Koalas are at risk because the current National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy is clearly inadequate despite its key aim of conserving koalas by retaining viable populations in the wild throughout their natural range.

Issues which have contributed to this risk are the koala's dwindling habitat which is rapidly being destroyed and that there appears to be inadequate laws in place to protect koalas and their habitat.

Evidence or observations that I have to support this position is that every day the AKF gets e-mails from all over Australia asking for help to save the koala and its dwindling habitat that is in danger of being destroyed. Additionally, Senator Bob Brown has called for a Senate Inquiry into why the koala has not been adequately protected and Simon Baltais, Wildlife Preservation Society of QLD Bayside Branch has stated that the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy will not stop the decline of the koala.

Recommendations for Consideration by the Committee

The Federal Government must seriously review the conservation status of the koala and rewrite the Management Strategy as a matter of urgency.

7. Appropriate future regulation for the protection of koala habitat

Koalas are at risk because there have been and are pending a large number of proposed developments in areas where koalas are known to occur.

Issues which have contributed to this risk are the lack of recognition of koala habitat by policy instruments and underlying mapping which have been sanitized to protect the interests of developers.

Evidence or observations that I have to support this position is that according to Simon Baltais, Wildlife Preservation Society of QLD Bayside Branch, there are numerous court appeals trying to stop inappropriate development promoted as sustainable by developers and supported by the state

government. These claims are far-fetched nonsense claiming development can enhance the natural environment.

Recommendations for Consideration by the Committee

The Federal Government must prevent the further loss to development of all areas of significant existing koala habitat. Restrictions must be put on land clearing, population growth and development in areas such as South East Queensland.

8. Interaction of state and federal laws and regulations

Koalas are at risk because the Federal Government appears to be leaving the actual work of legislating for their conservation to the State Government authorities, despite clear evidence that the states have been unwilling and unable to conserve and protect the koala.

Issues which have contributed to this risk is that State Government policy has proven ineffective at reducing habitat loss, the major cause of koala declines.

Evidence that I have to support this position is that since 1995, there have been 12 pieces of legislation passes through the Queensland Government to protect koalas, yet the state's koala population continues to decline. During the operation of the Nature Conservation (Koala) Conservation Plan 2006 and Management Program 2006–2016, the Koala Coast koala population has moved from 'vulnerable' to 'critically endangered'. Similarly, data suggests that koalas within Pine Rivers Shire have experienced declines, and may now satisfy the criteria for listing as an endangered species.

Recommendations for Consideration by the Committee

The Federal Government must take overall responsibility for koala conservation and adequately understand and address the many serious issues that koalas face in fragmented habitats.

9. Other related matters

Koalas are at risk because there appears to be inadequate laws in place to protect koalas from callous attacks from those who cause their death or injury.

Issues which have contributed to this risk include that perpetrators either evade the law or get off scot-free. I have never heard of anybody being caught or punished for such crimes.

Evidence that I have to support this position is the shocking incidences where koalas have been deliberately shot causing death and injury. The most recent incidence reported in November 2010 with the death of a mother koala and severe injury of her infant Frodo as a result of 15 shotgun pellets .

Recommendations for Consideration by the Committee

Ensure that legislation is in place and adequate laws are upheld and applied to those inflicting any harm or causing the death of these vulnerable species. A very strong message must be sent that any harm to Australia's vulnerable and precious icons will not be tolerated.

In summary.....

Time is running out for wild koalas and their habitat. To survive, koalas need large areas of healthy, safe and connected bushland. Without national protection, local populations will continue to quietly disappear.

Koalas bring around \$1 billion of tourism dollars into Australia each year. The koala is part of Australian culture; a symbol of the bush and our unique wildlife. Saving koala habitat will additionally help thousands of other species.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this submission to you for consideration by the Committee. I would be pleased to discuss these matters with the Committee further.