Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

8 February, 2011

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population

I wish to make the following personal submission to the koala inquiry.

I have had the privilege to have worked on koalas throughout my career to date; commencing as a mammal keeper at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary from the mid to late 1980s, as a ranger with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service until the mid 1990s, an ecologist with the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) until 2006, and in my current role as a Senior Conservation Officer with Gold Coast City Council. During my employment with the Australian Koala Foundation I worked on Koala Habitat Atlas projects in South East Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, and in collaboration with a number of local councils on LGA-wide koala conservation planning projects and site-specific koala management planning.

I acknowledge that it is challenging to assess the national conservation status of koalas given factors such as their extensive geographic range, paucity of detailed and standardised monitoring data, and difficulties in reliably estimating koala numbers across regional areas. However, I think these difficulties have tended to overshadow increasing threats now facing koalas throughout the majority of their remaining range. Whilst the main threatening processes can vary from region to region, in my view koalas are at significant risk in all areas where I have been involved in field research on koala ecology and population distribution. I would fully support the koala being listed as a federally threatened species in the 'Vulnerable' category under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. While a listing as 'Conservation Dependent' would be a positive step forward for koala conservation efforts, I feel that this would fail to recognise the severity of current and future threats to koala survival and the extent of population declines and would not afford the level of protection and conservation effort that is now urgently required.

Adoption of the *National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009-2014* is encouraging. However, the national strategy will require comprehensive promotion and resourcing to facilitate broad adoption and implementation by federal, state and local government, and the community. Notwithstanding, I feel that implementation of the national strategy will not be sufficient to halt and reverse the decline of many regional koala populations. I am particularly concerned that the national strategy lacks the legislative powers to require consistent identification and protection of key koala habitat areas.

I feel that it is becoming increasingly important to develop national standards and guidelines for assessing and comparing the overall health status of koala populations

and for deriving meaningful population estimates. This work will be vital for ongoing prioritisation of resources and conservation programs, for monitoring population trends, and for evaluating the performance of conservation measures. Current research being undertaken in South East Queensland suggests that disease prevalence and associated impacts on koala morbidity, mortality and fecundity may be more widespread and serious than otherwise indicated. Evidence of comprehensive prevalence of KoRV and associated disease amongst koala populations in Queensland and New South Wales, substantial prevalence in Victoria, and emerging evidence of potential increasing prevalence on Kangaroo Island is of grave concern, as communicated through the Koala Research Network by Professor Paul Young from the University of Queensland. The lack of genetic diversity amongst the majority of Victorian and South Australian koala populations is also of great concern and could undermine prospects for coping with new impacts associated with disease and climate change.

I am convinced that it is vital for all levels of government to work cooperatively in a coordinated manner in order to effectively conserve koala habitat and populations and to adequately mitigate threats. I believe that local government can, and should, play a key role in developing and implementing local-scale koala conservation programs, with guidance and support from state and federal government agencies.

I believe the following key actions will be vital in order to secure a future for koalas:

- Develop national standards for koala habitat identification, rating and mapping.
- Ensure federal and state legislative powers are in place to protect high quality koala habitat areas and to restore landscape-scale habitat connectivity.
- Identify national koala research priorities and additional funding opportunities.
- Provide improved federal support and resourcing for State and Local Government koala conservation programs.
- Prepare and implement effective local or regional-scale koala conservation plans consistent with suitable national standards across the koala's geographic range.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia’s koala population.

Yours sincerely,

John Callaghan