The Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala

Submission by Marg & Ian Pratt

Introduction

Marg Pratt is a wildlife carer on Raymond Island, Victoria who operates a registered native animal shelter which primarily deals with koalas. She is particularly concerned about issues relating to the care, management and welfare of koalas.

Ian Pratt assists with the care of the animals in the shelter and is actively involved with environmental issues including finding solutions to restore koala habitat on Raymond Island.

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 (tick as appropriate):

- 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
- ✓ Any other related matters.

Evidence and Observations

1. Knowledge of koala habitat

Koalas are at risk because the agricultural and urban development that has taken place since European settlement in Australia has significantly reduced the available habitat for koalas. Past management practices that relocated koalas to habitats that where islands (physical islands surrounded by water such as Kangaroo Island in South Australia and Raymond Island in Victoria) have lead to significant degradation of suitable habitat.

Issues which have contributed to this risk include poor management of koala numbers and their habitat. The inability to accurately determine koala populations and manage numbers to prevent over-browsing has caused significant environmental damage and placed the populations under stress. The management of "island" populations has largely been aimed at reducing koala numbers through translocation and/or sterilization programs. While this results in a short term reduction in population little or no effort is put into restoring and extending the damaged habitat to support the remaining koala population.

Evidence or Observations that I have to support this position includes the situation on Raymond Island, Victoria has a population of koalas that started from 32 koalas from Phillip Island that where released in 1953. Raymond Island has an area of approximately 760 hectares of which 125 hectares is, or was, koala habitat. Of this 125 hectares, 88 hectares where Coastal Manna Gum (eucalyptus pryoriana) which is a preferred koala food source and could be considered as prime habitat. Koala numbers increased from the original 32 to reach a total of 589 in June 2003 and, after a sterilization and relocation program, 262 in March 2010. There appear to be some inconstancies in actual population. These are probably due to errors in counting and poor management of counts. Much of the Manna Gum Woodland that provides the primary food source has been significantly degraded to the point of total destruction (i.e. complete loss of tree cover). It is generally accepted that the over population of koalas has destroyed the trees. My observations over a period of eight years lead me to a contrary view. While it is clear that koalas have a major role in the final defoliation of a tree, the tree is generally in a highly stressed state when this occurs. I have observed koalas eating all growth from highly stressed trees (i.e. trees with less than 5% canopy remaining) that have produced new growth after rainfall. Koalas show a preference to this type of leaf growth and ignore other trees in the immediate vicinity that have a healthier canopy. I believe that there are many factors that have contributed to the habitat degradation. These include:

- *Poor land management practices including inappropriate fire management*
- *Lack of enforcement of Native Vegetation Protection Laws by local government which has allowed clearing of habitat*
- *Increased sub- soil salinity*
- *Insect attack on trees*
- *Prolonged period of below average rainfall (i.e. drought)*
- *Over-browsing by koalas*

The end result of the destruction of the tree covering canopy is the creation of almost a mono-culture dominated by Austral Bracken Fern that prevents almost all natural regeneration. A revegetation trial conducted on Raymond Island has shown that it is possible to easily restore the biodiversity of the habitat by using selective herbicides to control the growth of Austral Bracken Fern.

Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee
I believe that it is essential that any management plan for addressing the habitat degradation of “island” populations of koalas include the following:

- A strategy to accurately determine koala populations prior to and after any relocation
- A clear plan for translocation and/or sterilization that conforms to accepted standards for the humane treatment of the animals
- Monitoring of selected translocated animals using technology such as GPS tracking to satellite to enable an estimation of the survival rate of the animals
- A detailed plan for the restoration of the degraded habitat
- A funding model that includes the cost of habitat restoration

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

Koalas are at risk because the success of many of the well considered aims and objects that are included in the “National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy” rely on implementation by state and local governments. There are inconstancies how the states incorporate the aims and objectives of the Strategy in their individual state strategies.

Issues which have contributed to this risk include the failure to protect from, or minimise the effects of, development on koala habitat. Much of the habitat of koalas is in areas that are under considerable development pressure. Development not only causes a net loss of habitat but also creates issues with attacks from domestic animals and conflict with vehicles on roads.

Evidence or Observations that I have to support this position includes:

In Victoria the status of koalas is not given any consideration in Planning Schemes. In the Shire of East Gippsland in Victoria there is little attempt made to prevent the removal of habitat trees and reluctance to prosecute any breaches of Native Vegetation laws. Raymond Island in the East Gippsland Shire has a koala population living in a greatly degraded habitat which brings the koalas into urban areas and contact with domestic dogs. The Shire has done very little to enforce dog control measures that would reduce the threat of attacks on koalas.

3. Any other relevant matters

Koalas are at risk because the accepted protocols for the management capture and care of koalas is not always being followed and the role of volunteer carers is being given insufficient consideration by state authorities.

Issues which have contributed to this risk include failure to follow protocols such as:

- *Capturing koalas when temperature exceeds 25°C*
- *Leaving koalas in small cages without browse for extended periods in temperatures over 25°C*
- *Taking extended times > 15 minutes to capture a koalas*
- *Using a noose around the neck to lower a koalas from a trees*
- *Using hormone implants on female koalas with small back young*
- *Using lack of care when sterilizing male koalas*

and placing high financial and emotional demands on carers to provide the specialised care required by sick, injured and burnt koalas.

In summary the status of the koala needs to be given much higher priority by all levels of government in Australia. It is easy for Australians to use our unique native wildlife to promote our country and generate income from tourism. We must be aware that even though koalas may appear to be abundant and not under immediate threat there are very many pressures on their habitat and health. These include development, threat of major natural disasters such as wildfires, the as yet unknown effects of climate change and effects of diseases such as koala retrovirus. The history of European settlement in Australia shows that there has been an immense number of species extinction since 1788. Many of these probably occurred due to neglect of apathy to warning signs of decline of habitat or species numbers. We should all take note of the plight of the very recently abundant Tasmanian Devil and take all possible measures to ensure that a similar issue does not arise with koalas.

The only sure way of ensuring the survival of wild koala populations is to raise its' status by listing it under the EPBC Act.

Recommendations for Consideration by the Committee

That the koala be listed under the EPBC Act
That resources are provided to protect and restore koala habitat
That resources be provided for appropriate research into all issues relating to the survival of the koala
That the role of volunteer carers be recognised by providing appropriate support.

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