Submission to the Senate inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population

Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (DECCW), New South Wales

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Koala Management in NSW

- Koalas were formerly widespread in NSW. Remaining populations are concentrated on the central, mid-north and north coasts, and west of the divide in the northern part of the state. Small and isolated populations also occur on the south and far south coasts, and on the tablelands of the Great Dividing Range. Koalas are concentrated on fertile, flat land much of which is found on land outside the reserve system.
- The principal threats to koalas are land clearing, habitat fragmentation, fire, dogs, cars, drought and climate change. In NSW climate change is likely to result in higher maximum temperatures, increased fire frequency and prolonged drought[1]. This will increase stress on koalas making them more susceptible to the impact of diseases such as those caused by the chlamydia bacteria.
- The koala is listed as a vulnerable species under the NSW *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* (TSC Act). Two koala populations: the Hawks Nest and Tea Gardens population; and Koala in the Pittwater Local Government Area, are listed as endangered populations under the TSC Act. Listing of the species and these populations affords them protection in NSW under both the TSC Act and the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*.
- Along with the koala populations listed as threatened under the TSC Act key populations for conservation efforts in NSW include populations in Gunnedah, Campbelltown, along the north coast in the Port Macquarie/Coffs Harbour/Lismore areas and in the Southern Highlands including north east Monaro and Tolwong and declining populations along the far NSW south coast, in the Taree area and on the Tweed coast.
- The State Environmental Planning Policy 44 – Koala Habitat Protection, which came into force in 1995, aims to encourage the proper conservation and management of areas of natural vegetation that provide habitat for koalas. This is achieved through the identification and protection of areas of core koala habitat.
- The *Native Vegetation Act 2003* contributes to koala conservation by minimising the effect of land clearing and fragmentation on habitat for wildlife, including the koala.
- The NSW Recovery Plan for the Koala (Attachment A) was released in 2008 and establishes a landscape-scale conservation framework for koala conservation and management using existing legislative mechanisms. The plan provides a framework for localised koala recovery efforts throughout NSW. At least $1.2 million in NSW Government funding over five years has been committed to actions identified in the plan, in addition to in-kind support provided by government agencies. Implementation of the plan is progressing well. The plan is scheduled to be reviewed in 2013.
- The National Koala Management Strategy 2009-2014 provides a framework for coordinated cooperation and strategic action amongst the wide range of stakeholders in koala conservation across Australia. It sets priorities and focuses attention on the most important issues in the national context. The strategy was developed jointly by relevant State and Territory Governments and the Australian Government. Implementation of the strategy by the NSW Government is progressing well (Attachment B), although no Australian Government funding has been made available for implementation activities.

[1] NSW Climate Impact Profile, DECCW, 2010, http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/climatechange/understanding.htm

- DECCW works with a range of land managers to effect conservation of koalas. These include National Parks managers, Forests NSW, local councils and utility operators such as the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA). The RTA makes considerable investment in implementing connectivity measures to mitigate road impacts on koalas, such as land bridges and underpasses in the Pacific Highway upgrade.
- In adopting a landscape scale approach to nature conservation NSW continues to develop a range of policies and strategies designed to maintain and enhance the environmental conditions conducive to healthy koala populations across NSW. Specifically, a draft NSW Biodiversity Strategy 2010 – 2015 has been developed and is on public exhibition until 11 February 2011. The strategy will lead to prioritising investment in habitat conservation and restoration as well as threat control and abatement that will directly benefit koalas.
- In addition a climate change statement of intent has been developed in response to the listing of anthropogenic climate change as a key threatening process under the TSC Act. The statement of intent, entitled 'Priorities for Biodiversity Adaptation to Climate Change', identifies strategies for biodiversity adaptation to climate change that are relevant to koalas.
- Many koala conservation programs in NSW are well advanced. A range of studies and on-going monitoring is being undertaken to examine the effectiveness of implemented recovery actions. Although many populations in NSW are still in decline, past investment in koala conservation has significantly contributed to our knowledge of koala populations and conservation methods. This knowledge is being used to improve the effectiveness of current and future koala conservation efforts.
- Regulatory regimes for the private native forestry industry in NSW also provide clear protections for koalas and their habitat. Under the Private Native Forestry Code of Practice, there are prescriptions that either prohibit or require modified logging practices where koalas are present. Essentially private native forestry operations are not permitted where there are known records or site evidence of koalas in areas is identified as 'core koala habitat', within the meaning of State Environmental Planning Policy 44 – Koala Habitat Protection. There are also koala habitat protection provisions that apply in areas that are not 'core koala habitat'. At sites where there is a known record or site evidence of koalas, forest operations must be modified to include retention of trees where koalas are present, retention of at least 15 feed trees per hectare, where available, and protection of the retained trees through ensuring they are not damaged by forestry operations.
- Further information on koalas in NSW can be found at: http://www.threatenedspecies.environment.nsw.gov.au/tsprofile/profile.aspx?id=10616

Methods of koala monitoring

- The most effective method of monitoring and investigating koala populations should be determined based on the aims of the particular study, its location and geographic scale and the characteristics of the population under investigation.
- Counting is often not the most effective method of monitoring koala populations as it is costly, time consuming and has questionable accuracy. DECCW does not recommend that counting koalas across NSW will be an effective investment for koala conservation.
- In some circumstances, such as where small populations are in significant decline or to examine the effectiveness of localised conservation measures, undertaking direct population counts may be appropriate and methods are available to undertake these counts in an effective manner.

Attachments:

Attachment A	NSW Recovery Plan for the Koala
Attachment B	NSW Input into the Implementation of the National Koala Strategy Report 2010