

# KOALA ACTION PINE RIVERS INCORPORATED

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Koala Action Pine Rivers Inc. (KAPR) is a volunteer not for profit group made up of 67 individuals concerned about the sustainability of the koala population in the Moreton Bay Region. Our members assist koalas by lobbying local, state and federal government as well as businesses to retain native bushland habitat, rehabilitate degraded bushland to increase its carrying capacity and replant koala food trees and other natives in parks, reserves and open spaces. Free koala education and awareness presentations are provided to community groups, schools and private enterprise. KAPR members are involved in the rescue of sick, injured and orphaned koalas, actively facilitate the creation of koala food tree plantations, improve degraded bushland habitat and replant koala food trees and other natives wherever possible. In addition, KAPR provides support to those raising koala orphans from their homes.

## **SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE STATUS, HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY OF AUSTRALIAN'S KOALA POPULATION**

Statistical and anecdotal evidence indicates that the koala population is in decline all over its natural range. Habitat destruction and fragmentation as well as the devastating impact of high intensity bushfires and flooding have taken its toll on the koala population in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Add to that the impact of motor vehicle strikes, attacks by domestic animals and disease Koala Action Pine Rivers Inc. (KAPR) and Moreton Bay Koala Rescue (MBKR) considers the situation to be serious.

The key issues this submission will highlight are:

1. Widespread anecdotal evidence and minimal statistical evidence of declines in most areas (scientific verification is required);
2. Inadequate protection of habitat;

3. Inadequate protection and management of koalas during vegetation clearing and after rehabilitation from wildlife hospitals;
4. Extreme prevalence of disease and infertility in Queensland and New South Wales populations;
5. Not enough research, a poor understanding and no current management of disease impacts.

There has been a failure to adequately mitigate the negative impacts of urbanisation and transport infrastructure in this state and elsewhere. In fact, KAPR and MBKR posit that many local koala populations in Queensland and along the eastern seaboard of Australia are already on the brink of extinction.

### **1. Evidence of the decline in koala populations**

KAPR and MBKR consider that estimates of koala populations are inaccurate in all the states of Australia supporting koala populations. In addition, sufficient research is now in place to suggest that the competence of current counting methods is questionable. Combine that with minimal efforts to survey regions known to support koala populations (evidenced historically by koalas being present, sighted and/or rescued) leads KAPR and MBKR to question whether in fact the species is sustainable anywhere in its natural range under current management practices.

Although the knowledge of koala habitat as in appropriate tree species is available for most regions it has not been aligned with rigorous surveying to ensure that all areas supporting koalas have been examined and classified accordingly. Surveying has been piecemeal in Queensland and in most parts of New South Wales. Research that MBKR and KAPR have conducted suggests koala surveying has been and continues to be non-existent in Victoria and South Australia.

Surveying undertaken to date is far from accurate, a typical example to illustrate the types of inconsistencies evident in Southeast Queensland is Raynbird Road in Caboolture, Moreton Bay Regional Council. It was and still is classified as prime koala habitat in spite of the fact that there is not a single tree standing at this site. The area was illegally cleared by developers some time ago and maps not updated. Other examples can be provided should you wish to have them made available to you.

Other significant areas have been entirely excluded from the surveying process for reasons known only to the State Government. The Bruce Highway in the Moreton Bay Region was the demarcation line for surveying. Koala habitat to the west of the Highway was surveyed whilst that to the east has been totally ignored in spite of it supporting a healthy residential koala population.

It is crucial that local, state and federal government bodies obtain an accurate picture of the number of koalas remaining, the size of the population, their health and location. For only then can koala management plans do the job for which they have been created and that is to ensure that koala populations are sustainable across their natural range. Disappointingly that is not the case to date.

## 2. **Inadequate protection of habitat**

Gross and incremental loss and fragmentation of koala habitat continues to occur. Remaining koala habitat is being cleared at an escalating rate to make way for development and its accompanying infrastructure. Existing wildlife corridors are too small and inadequate to the task of facilitating the dispersal of koalas. Many blocks of remaining bushland in the urban area and along the urban/rural interface have no connectivity to other areas. This makes the process of dispersal to locate new territory, finding mates and seeking alternative food sources extremely challenging to koalas already stressed from crossing major roads and dealing with domestic animals.

Those animals displaced by clearing in urban areas then move into nearby parks and reserves already supporting a residential koala population. Competition for the remaining resources of food and shelter then takes place stressing the new comers and residential population alike. Insufficient funds have been set aside to replant parks, reserves and open spaces with additional koala food trees and other native plants to support extra koalas. Further resources must be provided to rehabilitate secondary habitat and increase its carrying capacity in order to support animals displaced from other areas.

In Queensland, statistics and numerous surveys conducted in specific areas over many years confirm that all efforts by local and state government authorities to halt the escalating decline of koalas have failed. Numerous koala management plans and legislation put in place years ago have not halted the destruction of koala habitat nor have they prevented the fragmentation of other areas. Existing koala management plans have failed to educate the community sufficiently to reduce the number of koalas hit by cars or attacked by dogs. It is clear that to date urban and peri-urban koala populations have not been managed in a considered and scientific way by any government bodies.

To ensure the sustainability of the koala population a different approach is obviously required. There are several aspects that require rethinking and these are detailed as follows.

3. **Inadequate protection and management of koalas during vegetation clearing and after rehabilitation from wildlife hospitals**

There has been a failure to truly protect individual koalas from being injured and/or killed during the land clearing process. When development does take place and bushland has to be cleared extensive earlier planning is required to ensure a future for those koalas displaced during the clearing of vegetation. Fully trained koala spotters and catchers need to remove the animals well before the trees are felled. Relocation may be an option in some instances but has to be addressed before hand to ensure the new location has the appropriate food trees and carrying capacity to support additional animals. Wildlife corridors at least 100 metres in width (as supported by current research) need to be developed to ensure connectivity to other bushland sites.

Many members of KAPR and MBKR work as volunteers at the Australian Wildlife Hospital (AWH) in Beerwah looking after sick, injured and orphaned koalas from all over the state. The only other facility available to treat sick, injured and orphaned koalas in Southeast Queensland is the Moggill Koala Hospital (MKH). In spite of repeated complaints relating to “Duty of Care” and animal welfare issues at MKH the inconsistency in standards between the two primary koala care facilities remains. This must be addressed urgently.

Volunteers at the AWH observe that many koala patients are readmitted on more than one occasion after they have been successfully rehabilitated. DERM requires that koalas be returned to within 5 kilometers of their rescue location. This isn't always appropriate because their home ranges have been reduced and/or destroyed to make way for development and other infrastructure.

Then there is the issue of releasing hand raised joeys who have come into care because their mothers have died as a consequence of their injuries or been euthanased. Raising koala joeys to sub adulthood in preparation to be returned to the wild requires specialised skills and attention. Research conducted by DERM shows that 60% of hand raised joeys released back to their mother's suburban home range die in their first year. This is an appalling outcome considering the time and resources committed to their care.

It makes sense to release hand raised joeys into areas that will not be cleared in the future. They don't have the same skills as those joeys raised by koala mothers and should be provided with the opportunity to reach adulthood where the chances of being hit by a motor vehicle or attacked by domestic animals is minimal.

The government needs to deal with the issue of relocation on an individual basis. Generic solutions to complex circumstances have not worked in the past and still don't. The release of rehabilitated koalas from wildlife hospitals requires a case by case solution. A lot of time and money has been invested into their care and

many of these animals return more than once with other injuries or are found dead.

4. **Disease and infertility in Queensland and New South Wales**
5. **Insufficient research combined with a poor understanding of and no current management of disease impacts**

There has been and continues to be a poor understanding of disease in koala populations. Statistical evidence now points to disease becoming a major issue for koalas living in Queensland and New South Wales.

The impact of Chlamydial disease has serious implications in these regions as infections are severe, debilitating and life threatening. The impact of KoRV (koala retrovirus discovered by Doctor Jon Hanger in 1999) has not been factored into the sustainability equation. This AIDS like disease affecting the immune system has resulted in a range of different cancers emerging in the koala population and must be addressed immediately. Additional resources need to be provided to researchers to ensure that the northern and central species of koalas can survive into the future.

KoRV has now been found in koala populations in Victoria suggesting that the transference and emergence of this AIDS like disease could become problematic in states purporting to have a stable koala population. KoRV may well prove to be just as insidious and destructive to the koala population as the cancerous facial tumors have been to the Tasmanian devil.

With thanks for the opportunity to comment on this important issue.

Vanda Grabowski  
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Koala Action Pine Rivers Inc.