

Covering Letter

7 February 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts

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

Ian Bridge is pleased to provide these comments to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts for consideration.

Should you require further information our contact details are as follows:

I would appreciate it if the Committee could (tick as appropriate):

- make the submission and my name public;
 make the submission public but withhold my name; or
 keep the submission confidential

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

Introduction

I am an environmental scientist with 29 years experience in the management of environmental impacts and issues. I am an active member of the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand and the Clean Air Society of Australia and New Zealand and have held executive officer positions in the latter organisation.

I have experience in private industry, consulting, and state (Qld) and local government. My experience in the public sector includes both implementation and policy development in environmental matters.

I have ongoing involvement in the Wildlife Preservation society of Queensland (Bayside Branch) and was invited to participate in the 2008 Koala Forum hosted by Redland Shire Council (as it then was). I am an active member of environmental groups and have opposed developments where there would be significant loss of core Koala Habitat.

My residential property contains a substantial number of Koala food trees and is part of a

key corridor between the Koala populations of Brisbane Forest Park and Redland Bay. Koalas are known to be present on the property: In previous years I had several resident Koalas on the property, although over the last three years the occupancy has reduced to occasional. Whilst Koalas occasionally transit this corridor there are no resident individuals on this property now, in spite of the maintenance of conditions which would be conducive to occupancy (e.g. maintenance of suitable habitat, food trees and no dogs). From discussions with neighbours the sightings of Koalas has decreased over the last few years to the point where it is rare to see individuals.

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

My personal observation of Koalas in the Redlands area is that the Koala population has significantly diminished over the past five to ten years. This observation includes direct sighting as well as evidence of use (such as scratches on trees and scats). My personal observation confirms the findings of reports of the Koala population (such as DERM 2008 Koala Coast Koala Survey).

This report indicates that the Koala population in south east Queensland is in serious decline and requires active intervention of all levels of government (Federal, State and Local) to halt the decline and improve the population.

I respectfully request the committee to recommend including the Koala under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 as a vulnerable species.

1. Threats to Koala

A number of threatening processes are involved in the recorded decline in Koala populations in south east Queensland, including:
Habitat loss and destruction;

Car strike;
Predation by dogs (both domestic and feral) and other animals; and
Disease (which may be linked to stress).

Issues which have contributed to the risk include the failure of Queensland government to introduce effective vegetation management policies. The loss of habitat (which includes fragmentation of corridors) was raised by a number of speakers at the 2008 Koala summit hosted by the Redland Shire Council as the most significant cause of the decline.

Queensland has introduced a number of Koala policies as State Protection Policies (commencing with SPP 1/97) with an objective of conserving Koalas. However each of these policies has failed to achieve the objectives. Habitat loss, due to development, has continued without effective mitigation.

I note that the Regional Framework for Growth Management 2009 - 2031 (Qld Government 2009) (RFGM) contained commitments to conserve existing and potential Koala Habitat (at Page 51). However the actions of the state government fail to achieve the statements in RFGM.

A case study of the interface between two State Planning Policies can be gained at Mount Cotton in south east Queensland. At this location there was a conflict between the State Planning Policy for Extractive Industry (SPP02/07) and various State Planning Policies for the protection of Koalas (including SPP1/97). I have had personal involvement in the interface between the development of Koala policies and development of quarries in the Redlands area. The state government introduced a draft state protection policy for extractive industry in 2004 and used this draft policy (illegally in my view) to justify overriding local government initiatives to protect core Koala habitat and a Koala corridor in spite of the presence of a properly gazetted state planning policy for the preservation of the Koala over the area (SPP1/97).

Subsequent to the gazetting of the SPP for extractive industries the state government has changed the vegetation designation on this site to "Category X" under the Vegetation Management Act removing the planning instrument protection for this area of high value core Koala Habitat.

The failure to provide protection for core Koala habitat is of overriding concern and constitutes, in my opinion, the overarching basis for the decline in the Koala population. The other major threatening processes (car strike, dog predation and disease) may be linked to the clearing of habitat for development, especially where this leads to increased vehicle movements, and/or population of dogs in residential areas with Koalas present, or disease which has at its foundation stress related to clearing and restriction on movements.

Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee

I respectfully request the Senate inquiry to examine the various Queensland Government State Planning Policies made to protect the Koala and determine whether these policies were effective in achieving the desired policy outcome.

I respectfully request the senate inquiry consider recommending that Koala conservation be given effective priority in planning legislation and policy at the state level.

I respectfully request that the Senate inquiry consider including clearing of core Koala habitat as a trigger under the Environmental Protection Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

2. Listing of Koala under the EPBC Act/ Appropriate future regulation for the protection of koala habitat

Koala numbers have declined in south east Queensland as a result of a number of factors (refer above). Official estimates of the population suggest that without active intervention to reduce threatening processes and to actively intervene in other conservation measures then the Koala is likely to become extinct in this bioregion.

I consider that the threat to the population warrants the inclusion of the Koala on the list of species under the EPBC Act. As discussed above the state government has demonstrably failed in its duty to protect Koala populations or core Koala habitat. Effective management of Koalas is sufficiently serious to warrant protection from all levels of government in Australia. The listing of Koalas under the EPBC Act would provide a trigger mechanism for activities which involve threatening processes to Koala populations.

The primary driver of the decline of Koala population has been the decline in suitable habitat. As discussed above the inclusion of regulation over the clearing of Koala habitat should be introduced as an immediate conservation measure to halt the decline in Koala numbers. Over the longer term the clearing of Koala Habitat should be introduced as a trigger under the EPBC Act.

Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee

I respectfully request the committee to recommend including the Koala under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 as a vulnerable species.

I respectfully request the committee to recommend including the clearing of Koala Habitat under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 as a threatening process to the viability of the Koala population.

Summary

I consider that the Koala population is in serious decline in south east Queensland and requires the active intervention of all three levels of government. The major threatening process is the clearing of habitat and this threatening process should be halted in the short

term and included as a trigger under the PEBC in the long term.

I consider that the decline in Koala population is sufficient to justify its inclusion under the EPBC Act as a listed species.

I consider that the protection of the Koala population and core habitat be given priority under planning legislation at the state and local level.

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.

Yours truly

Ian Bridge