

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

a. the iconic status of the koala and the history of its management;

The Phillip Island koala population was established from individuals brought to the island from the nearby mainland during the 1870s and 1880s. Additional koalas were brought across from French Island during the 1920s. The Phillip Island population subsequently increased in number to the point where it exceeded the carrying capacity of its woodland habitat, and a translocation programme was begun. The last translocations occurred in 1978 and over the course of the programme, in excess of 3300 koalas were moved to mainland sites where suitable habitat existed. To this extent, Phillip Island has played an important role in the survival of the species particularly in the south of their range. From 1985 until 1993, the decline in koala numbers was tracked through surveys conducted by the Victorian Department of Conservation (and its successors), and continued by the Phillip Island Nature Parks who became the land manager of much of the remaining koala habitat from 1996.

The Koala Conservation Centre (KCC) was established in 1991 to protect a small population of koalas on Phillip Island in the face of this serious decline in their numbers (due to the combined affects of loss of habitat, predation by domestic dogs, road mortality and the impact of the disease *Chlamydia*). The centre is managed by Phillip Island Nature Parks a Victorian crown land committee of management. The small population (<40 individuals) are restricted behind a 1.2m solid metal fence which cannot be climbed by koalas, and trees around the perimeter are managed so as to not provide a means of access or egress. The KCC is managed by Phillip Island Nature Park who raise all recurrent expenditure from tourism enterprises (like the KCC and the Penguin Parade), and visitation by local and international visitors is important to the Park to maintain the viability of the koala population and the habitat on which it relies in both the KCC and throughout Phillip Island Nature Park.

The presence of koalas on Phillip Island has long been a factor in the appeal of the island as a visitor destination, and it has featured in promotional material for much of the 20th century. The Koala Conservation Centre presently attracts around 150 000 visitors each year, thereby contributing significantly to the financial sustainability of the Phillip Island Nature Park.

b. estimates of koala populations and the adequacy of current counting methods;

Over the past 27 years, the number of koalas on Phillip Island has been estimated by publicising a particular weekend and asking residents to survey (their) private land, and report to a central location their sightings. In the following week, volunteers and land managers survey reserves (by line search), and roadsides. As the number of koalas being reported has fallen, records of sightings made during the course of the year and phoned into the Phillip Island Nature Parks or the local 'friends group', the Friends of the Koalas, have been factored into the results to provide a more accurate picture of koala numbers on Phillip Island.

PHILLIP ISLAND KOALA SURVEY RESULTS 1973 - 2006



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1973	847
1978	249
1979	198
1985	172
1986	107
1987	87
1988	89
1989	73
1990	49
1991	38
1992	29
1993	25
1998	29 (including 12 in Oswin Roberts Reserve)
2001	18 (including 2 in Oswin Roberts Reserve)
2002	Oswin Roberts Reserve only -washed out
2005	3 (Oswin Roberts Reserve only)
2006	13

Derived from surveys conducted by the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Phillip Island community groups and the Phillip Island Nature Parks.

n.b. From 1985 to 1993 back young were recorded as individuals. On advice from Kath Handasyde this practise has been discontinued.

c. knowledge of koala habitat;

Despite their low number on Phillip Island (outside of the Koala Conservation Centre), koalas are found in built up areas of the island as well as reserves. These urban areas and the vegetation along road reserves provide the links between the more suitable but isolated areas of higher quality habitat.

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

The experience of Phillip Island Nature Park is that around 30% (or more) of recorded koala deaths on Phillip Island have been the result of trauma inflicted by motor vehicles. This is due to roads bisecting koala habitat and road reserves being used as wildlife corridors as a result of the clearing of adjacent farmland. Other causes of the population decline on Phillip Island are habitat destruction and fragmentation, dog attack, and the disease *Chlamydiophila*. Although vegetation clearing has been reduced by local and state government legislation, and vegetation corridors have been planted on farmland under the auspices of the Phillip Island Landcare Group, much remaining habitat is on roadsides, and some food trees continue to be lost primarily in urban areas due to housing developments and road improvements. Dog attack has been a significant issue in the past but as the free ranging population has declined in number, known incidences have become rare. Attack by domestic stock (cattle and horses), while not common in the past, continue to be reported. During the 1980's, a high incidence of infertility in the population was attributed to the disease *Chlamydiophila*.

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e. the listing of the koala under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*;

It is our contention that the koala is not as a species endangered, but that some populations are in serious decline and may be heading towards localised extinction, including the introduced population on Phillip Island.

Rapid population growth and differing disease status of introduced island populations such as those on French Island and Raymond Island, as well as Victorian forest areas that are "ecological islands" have resulted in significant animal welfare and management issues. Listing of koalas under the EPBC Act 1999 could potentially make management of these "island" populations more difficult and all aspects carefully considered. As stated in Victoria's Koala Management Strategy 2004:

The proclivity of Koala populations in some Victorian forests to grow to unsustainable population densities is a major concern, not only to the Koalas themselves, but also to the ecological integrity of the forest communities they inhabit.

f. the adequacy of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy;

No opinion expressed

g. appropriate future regulation for the protection of koala habitat;

The Phillip Island experience informs us that people and koalas do not easily share the same habitat without the koala population suffering. The ideal situation for the koala is for koala habitat to be identified and protected from development, and safe corridors provided between pockets of habitat. Where development proceeds, it is essential for development of, or within koala habitat to be strictly regulated with regard to vegetation loss, road placement and size, speed limits, and domestic dog regulations (ie, an overall ban or regulations requiring curfews and dogs being restrained in yards overnight and under physical control in public places).

h. interaction of state and federal laws and regulations; and

No opinion expressed

i. any other related matters.

Nil