

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report examines the committee's inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of one of Australia's most loved and iconic native animals – the koala. The koala is an instantly recognisable symbol of Australia as well as being an integral part of Australian cultural heritage.

Complexity

The committee was surprised by the complexity of this multifaceted issue. Many features and factors influence Australia's koala population. For instance in some areas (such as Queensland's Mulga Lands) their population is in sharp decline, whilst in others (such as Kangaroo Island in South Australia) their numbers are being actively managed because of an overabundance and resulting over-browsing. A key challenge is the paucity of data on the national koala population. The koala's diversity is another aspect of added complexity, with northern koalas being far more diverse than their southern cousins. The range of threats is also varied, for example habitat loss, disease and motor vehicle strikes. As a result there are no easy solutions.

The duration and level of interest generated by this inquiry is an indication of the complexity of the issues raised. On four occasions the committee extended its reporting timeframe in order to gather more evidence and to conclude its deliberations.

Commitment

The committee was also surprised by the level of commitment and passion openly displayed by koala advocacy groups and concerned individuals. Over 70 of the total 101 submissions received by the committee were from community-based koala conservation organisations and interested individuals. Seating in the public gallery at each of the committee's three public hearings was fully occupied which is not a usual occurrence.

The need for action

The status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population is not a new issue. It is one that the Environment Minister's chief advisory body on threatened species, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC), has formally considered on no less than three occasions in the past 15 years. Without significant commitment and proactive conservation measures, it is the committee's view that the question of the koala's threatened species status will continue to recur.

The committee agrees with the evidence presented to the inquiry on the need for early conservation action. It will be more cost-effective, and more importantly, improves

the ability of species recovery, to act now rather than allow the koala to drift ever closer to the threatened species list.

Threats

The koala population is being impacted by a multitude of threats. The report separates these threats into: threats to koala's habitat (Chapter 3) and threats to individuals (Chapter 4). Threats to habitat include direct human induced pressures such as urban development, forestry, mining, as well as climatic events such as droughts and bushfires. Direct threats to individual koalas also impact the overall koala population include disease, dog attacks and motor vehicle strikes.

Impact of different threats

It was recognised that while these types of threats are common across the koala's range, the relevant importance varies greatly from region to region. As one koala expert put it: 'the major reason for the decline in coastal populations is habitat loss and fragmentation, chlamydia disease, dog attacks and vehicle collisions, with habitat loss the primary causal factor. For western populations the major cause of decline is land clearing, drought, heatwaves and drought stress on eucalypt trees.'¹

Habitat degradation

The committee agrees that habitat degradation is the primary cause of koala population declines and is the major threat to the koala's long-term population viability. In this regard the committee has recommended the Australian Government support habitat mapping in priority areas, a review of Commonwealth land management, and initiatives to encourage private land owners to undertake conservation activities (Recommendations 6–9).

Disease

The committee received evidence from a range of veterinary specialists and academics about the increasing prevalence and impact of disease in koalas. Although there was disagreement on the level of magnitude, the committee notes the significant impact that disease, and in particular chlamydia and the koala retrovirus, is having on the koala population.

It appears that the cumulative impact of the threats faced by koalas is making them more susceptible to disease-related infection. This in turn results in a less resilient koala population and lowers the probability of future recovery. The committee accepts there is an increased prevalence of serious disease-related infections in the koala population.

1 Associate Professor Clive McAlpine, Spokesperson, Koala Research Network, *Committee Hansard*, 3 May 2011, p. 2.

To address this problem the committee has recommended the Australian Government provide funding to koala disease research (Recommendations 10).

Dog attacks

The committee receive evidence about the growing number of fatal domestic dog attacks as well as the body of research about the significant impact of wild dogs. In this regard the committee has recommended the Australian Government consider further wild dog control options in priority koala areas (Recommendations 12).

Motor vehicles

Motor vehicles are also an increasing threat to koalas for two reasons. The committee heard that in some areas direct koala strikes by motor vehicles are the second most common cause of koalas being admitted into care and the second most common cause of mortality.

The committee also heard that roads present an insurmountable physical barrier for koalas to cross leaving them isolated in pockets of bushland.

To reduce the impact of motor vehicles, the committee has made several recommendations including encouraging the building or retrofitting of koala 'friendly' infrastructure (Recommendations 13–15).

Population and threatened species listing

It is clear that Australia's national population has undergone marked decline.² It is also clear that koala numbers in certain areas of its range (including most of Queensland and New South Wales) have experienced much larger declines than the national average. Declines of 80 per cent in some areas and even localised extinctions in other areas have been documented. By contrast, in parts of Victoria and South Australia numbers are flourishing, despite the declining trend nationally.

However, what is not clear, or at least insufficient in the view the TSSC, is the demographic data available on koala numbers. On three occasions the TSSC has advised the Environment Minister that despite significant decreases, koala population data is insufficient to confidently conclude that the declines meet the indicative thresholds required under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act) and associated guidelines.

In the committee's view it is unsatisfactory for a paucity of population data on a nationally important species such as the koala to stymie an effective threatened species listing assessment. Accordingly, a key recommendation of this report is that

2 Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC), 'Letter to the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities regarding the conservation status of the koala', 30 September 2010, p. 1.

the Australian Government fund a properly designed, funded and implemented koala monitoring and evaluation program across the full range of the koala (Recommendation 2). The committee has also made a number of complementary recommendations including the establishment of standardised methodologies for estimating koala numbers and greater funding for research into the genetic diversity of the koala population (Recommendations 1 and 4). The data deficiencies in these areas make it very difficult to prioritise conservation activities effectively.

The committee has also made a recommendation on the broader subject of monitoring significant Australian species: that the Australian Government establish a nationally coordinated and integrated program for population monitoring of threatened species and other culturally, evolutionary and/or economically significant species (Recommendation 3).

Finally on this topic, the committee carefully examined the 2010 advice from the TSSC to the Environment Minister regarding its assessment of the koala for threatened species listing. The committee expressed concerns about the TSSC's advice which in the committee's view omitted several critical items of information and analysis. Primarily the committee's concerns relate to the fact that the TSSC did not provide to the Minister a national estimate, a 'plausible lower bound', nor the necessary figures for historical comparison, despite providing such information to this inquiry. The committee also noted that there was a range of new information that had emerged since TSSC's advice was prepared, such as the 80 per cent decline in the Mulga Land population.

Accordingly, the committee has recommended that the TSSC provide clearer information in all future threatened species listing advices, review its advice to the Minister, and that the Environment Minister consider the evidence provided to this inquiry when making his final decision on listing the koala as a threatened species (Recommendations 5 and 16). The committee has also recommended that the Environment Minister consider options to improve the conservation status of the rapidly declining koala populations in New South Wales and Queensland to ensure a nationally resilient population is maintained, including the option of listing the koala as vulnerable under the EPBC Act in areas where populations have declined significantly or are at risk of doing so (Recommendation 17).

National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy

The final chapter of the report considers the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy, which was described as an overarching framework for the national conservation of the koala. However, concerns were raised about the strategy's effectiveness. The committee also received evidence criticising the adequacy of the strategy's identified measures. The committee made two recommendations in this regard:

- that an independent external review be conducted on the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy to monitor the adequacy of progress (Recommendation 18); and
- that the Australian Government adequately resource the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy, and ensure that it is properly implemented through committing to a much stronger leadership role (Recommendation 19). and

Conclusion

The most prominent issue raised during this inquiry was whether the koala should be listed as a threatened species. Although the committee does not have the technical expertise of the TSSC, and therefore believes it is not qualified to determine whether or not the koala should be listed as threatened, the committee is deeply concerned about the sustainability of Australia's koala population.

On one hand, the committee is pleased that the koala may not yet be eligible for listing as threatened. The committee believes that to have such a significant Australian icon included on the threatened species list would be a national shame.

On the other hand, the committee believes there are parts of the koala population that require much greater protection. This is occurring to some extent in Queensland and NSW where the koala is listed in some areas under state environment protection legislation. However, state listing has not stemmed the marked decline in the population. If declines continue it will only be a matter of time before the koala is nationally listed as a threatened species.

The EPBC threatened species listing process is reactive and not well suited to the conservation needs of the koala. In the committee's view, there ought to be processes available to enable proactive protection for the koala as well as other significant Australian species. In this regard the committee notes the possible mechanisms announced as part of the government's response to the review of the EPBC Act which could enable a more proactive approach to koala conservation. Perhaps, building on the TSSC's proposal to monitor species of cultural, evolutionary and/or economic significance, there ought to be a category of nationally significant species.

Ultimately, the committee would like to see Australia's koala population return to plentiful numbers of healthy individuals, in resilient habitats, across the koala's natural range.

