

Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's Koala population

I am authorised by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service to make this submission on behalf of the Far South Coast Advisory Committee.

The Far South Coast Advisory Committee has dedicated a great deal of its time and effort in trying to obtain state government support for a scientifically based reintroduction programme into the S.E. forest region of NSW. We have made detailed scientific assessments of the koalas on Kangaroo Island, South Australia and Raymond Island, Gippsland where introduced koalas are now in great abundance and have to be sterilised and relocated to save the host Eucalyptus forest from permanent damage from overgrazing!

Unfortunately, doctrinaire attitudes – not based on good science, dictate that koalas cannot be moved between states. This represents a total waste of an irreplaceable resource that, if managed correctly, would prove to be a relatively inexpensive method of circumventing the current critical problem of Koala extinction.

A recently completed survey of the Tantawanglo/Yurammie forests of SE NSW has shown that koalas are now extinct in this region.

We have attached a copy of a letter we sent to the Department of Environment and Climate Change back in 2009 concerning our proposal for a captive breeding program with subsequent reintroduction of koalas into the SE Forests. Unfortunately we did not receive a reply.

Dr David D. Shaw

Far South Coast Advisory Committee

NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service

Species Listing Section
Wildlife Branch,
Department of the Environment and Climate Change,
GPO Box 787
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16 July 2009

Re: National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy

The NSW NPWS Far South Coast Advisory Committee is deeply committed to the conservation of the Koala in the far south coast region of NSW where it was once abundant. Our commitment is focussed principally on two aspects. First, on the question of habitat maintenance and expansion, it is essential that both government agencies and private organisations are encouraged to conserve regions of suitable host trees and revegetate previously suitable areas. Unfortunately we do not have a significant input into these areas of State Forestry but would enthusiastically support any efforts designed to achieve such goals. Secondly, we are deeply committed to programmes designed to reintroduce koalas into forests that they previously occupied. We have assessed all available scientific data to deduce that (a) koalas can all be assigned to the same evolutionary significant unit (ESU) with no evidence of any genetic differentiation across its range in SE Queensland, NSW and Victoria (b) The evidence to indicate inbreeding depression among Kangaroo Island koalas is tenuous, to say the least, and should not be used to prohibit the breeding of these koalas with stock from NSW in a controlled breeding programme specifically designed to maximise genetic diversity among the progeny of such controlled crosses.

The establishment of these captive breeding programmes under carefully controlled conditions using surplus female stock from overgrazed island populations or from the Strezlecki Ranges and males from NSW populations provides an ideal opportunity to generate koala stock for translocation and reintroduction into suitable koala-free habitats. Furthermore the availability of artificial insemination techniques for koalas developed at the University of Queensland greatly increases the options now available for koala conservation.

We would also like to emphasise that the reasoning given by NSW National Parks to justify their opposition to translocation is totally obsolete and has not incorporated new scientific data as it has become available. As an example, they still regard NSW, Queensland and Victorian koalas as genetically distinct even though current genetic analysis using mitochondrial DNA has proved otherwise.

It is clear that over the past 150 years, koala populations have been drastically reduced in numbers, initially by hunting when millions of koalas were killed for their pelts and subsequently by habitat degradation and removal by clearing.

We consider that the koala can be rescued from its current plight by a concerted programme of captive breeding and controlled release into its natural environment. The risks that were highlighted by State authorities to prohibit breeding programmes have now been shown to be grossly overstated and in some cases clearly wrong. It is essential that your conservation strategy includes captive breeding as a viable option together with habitat regeneration for the re-establishment of the koala as an iconic feature of our unique fauna.

Yours truly

Dr David D. Shaw

On behalf of:

The Far South Coast Advisory Committee