



Youth for Conservation Submission to the Senate
Standing Committees' on Environment and
Communications Inquiry into the Environmental
Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment
(Save the Koala) Bill 2021

8/4/2021

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Canberra ACT 2600

Re: Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications' Inquiry into the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Save the Koala) Bill 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to an inquiry into the Amendment Bill proposed by Senator Hanson-Young to protect the vulnerable populations of koalas. Youth for Conservation is supportive of balanced and empirical conservation efforts, but does not support the Amendment Bill in the absence of broader reform.

Youth for Conservation takes issue with the complete removal of ministerial discretion under the proposed s 139(3). Such a measure will inhibit the Minister for the Environment's ability to respond to changing environmental decisions pertaining to koala populations, and it is an overtly blunt approach. Furthermore, it is the view of Youth for Conservation that the broad definition offered under s 572F of 'koala habitat' is too vague and has the potential to overregulate an unreasonably large area of forest, woodland and bushland - this could have detrimental environmental, social and economic effects.

Youth for Conservation fully endorses further conservation efforts aimed at protecting wild koala populations. The koala is a national icon that contributes massively to our economy. The koala is responsible for generating around 30,000 jobs as well as bringing in approximately \$3.2 billion for the Australian economy. More than that, the koala is an integral part of the Australian cultural tapestry, featuring prominently across a wide array of media as a fundamental symbol of the Australian identity. The importance of koalas in maintaining native ecosystems is also acknowledged by Youth for Conservation.

Removal of Ministerial Discretion

The Amendment Bill, as previously mentioned, effectively removes any ability for the Minister for the Environment to exercise discretion. Therefore, the Amendment Bill removes any flexibility that the Minister currently possesses to respond to changing environmental conditions. This is unacceptable at a federal level, where the Minister is responsible for maintaining the koala populations across all of Australia. The situations faced by koalas in different regions differ according to context, thus necessitating a degree of discretion that the Amendment Bill expressly forbids.

To illustrate this point, it is useful to look at two contrasting situations. In NSW, koala populations have been under severe threat due to human encroachment, climate change and the destruction of their habitats. This is a salient issue and one that must be addressed. However, in koala populations in South Australia do not face the same existential threats. In fact, as was observed by Senator the Hon. David Fawcett during this Bill's second reading, in South Australia's Mount Lofty Ranges there is a population of approximately 150,000 koalas that are thriving and the reasonable development within such areas would have little to no material impact on the species. The proposed Amendment fails to take this into consideration.

Ministerial discretion allows the Executive to weigh the risks and benefits of decisions relating to koala habitats. The Minister must have discretion to make decisions, with full expert advice of the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, and in consultation with key stakeholders. The Amendment Bill, in removing this discretion, prohibits any proposal surrounding koala habitats regardless of the surrounding environmental context. This is a broad overreach that threatens the ability of the government to ensure economic growth, as well as protect koala populations and other native species.

The Value of Koala Populations

The koala (*Phascolarctos Cinereus*) has been popularised and commodified for decades. The species is internationally recognisable as an Australian icon and is heavily linked to our national identity. Evidence of the cultural significance of the koala can be illustrated by the fact that it is the faunal emblem of the state of Queensland. Moreover, the imagery of the animal has been practically inescapable. The Australian children's classic *Blinky Bill* and the famous children's

book *The Magic Pudding* exemplify the magnitude of the koalas' importance with respect to our national identity. In 2011, the General Manager of Life Sciences Dreamworld told the Australian Parliament:

I can show a picture of a koala to a child in Kenya and he will tell me it is a koala. If I show him a picture of a bilby he will not know what it is. That is the iconic status of the koala...

This perfectly sums up how the cultural significance of the koala has permeated throughout not only here in Australia, but around the globe. This cultural significance is why the decline in their population as a result of continuous threats to their habitat is a great cause for concern.

In the year 1997, the then South Australian Minister for Natural Resources heeded to public outcries to not go ahead with plans to 'humanely cull' the koala population, stating that "[t]here have been few issues that have attracted so much emotion ... world wildlife groups, school children, parents, community groups, tourism associations and many, many others have continued to make representations to my office on this issue ...", representing views that the protection of koalas would not only preserve a significant part of our cultural identity, but also serve our economic interests. The economic benefits provided by koalas is seen in their widespread commodification by means of the sale of toys, clothes, accessories and various other goods. They also provide substantial boosts to the Australian tourism industry. It was estimated by the Australian Institute in 1997 that the contribution that koalas made to the Australian economy was \$1.1 billion per annum, which translated into approximately 9,000 jobs. As mentioned in the introduction of this submission, this rose to up to \$3.2 billion per annum and 30,000 jobs in the year 2014. If this species were to become extinct, as is predicted, this would come at great financial cost to the Australian tourism industry.

There are also positive environmental impacts that the species has upon the ecosystem. The clearing of the eucalyptus trees, which represent the habitat of the koala, represents a simultaneous clearing of some of Australia's best carbon storage. This affects our ability to reduce carbon emissions. Additionally, koalas consume excess foliage in areas of eucalyptus vegetation. This has the benefit of reducing biomass fuels that can accelerate the devastation caused during the Australian bushfire season. Koalas also break branches and drop leaves from the trees above, which serves as nutrients for various insects and other small animals. In protecting koalas, the ecosystem is therefore also protected generally. These examples of the species' cultural, economic and environmental significance illustrate the necessity of their

protection. However, Youth for Conservation advocates for such protection to be done sensibly and is of the opinion that this Amendment fails such criteria.

Endorsement of the *Samuels Review Approach*

Instead of this Amendment Bill, Y4C throws its full support behind the principles established in Professor Samuel's recent review of the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act).

The final report is a comprehensive blueprint for reform. Youth for Conservation supports Professor Samuel's recommendations and considers them essential to protect Australia's native biodiversity. In particular, Youth for Conservation encourages the government to examine whether Regional Forestry Agreements should be subject to the EPBC Act as this would likely increase the protection of koala habitats and go a long way in reversing the negative impacts of logging on native species.

Youth for Conservation opposes devolution of Commonwealth environmental approval processes in isolation of wider reform. Professor Samuel states that an implementation of National Environmental Standards and the establishment of an enforcement body are a necessary prerequisite in the pursuit of effective bilateral agreements with states and territories. On this, Youth for Conservation commends the reforms pursued thus far by the Government in adopting a target framework. The government should pursue the standards provided in the final report, which were agreed to after extensive consultation with stakeholders.

Youth for Conservation comes to this view as the current statutory regime has few supporters. Business, environmental and industrial groups are in agreement that the EPBC Act as it currently stands is not fit for purpose. Youth for Conservation believes development is necessary for Australia so that we may continue to enjoy our economic prosperity. Development that encroaches on natural environments can be avoided by pursuing higher standards of sustainability through effective mitigation and offsets.

To avoid the current complexities and potential overregulation, such as is the case with this Amendment Bill, the reforms proposed by Professor Samuel must be adopted. The reforms will remove the duplication in approvals that currently required, as well as benefit business.

Significantly, the environment will also benefit from the standards set out in the *Samuel's Review* against which new development proposals must be assessed. This will also provide the Minister for the Environment with greater clarity in such assessments. These new guidelines will ensure unsustainable development ceases, and the community can be also be confident that the Government will continue to work in the best interests of the environment and of our beloved native species'.

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