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Ref: 11MEC0769



21 March 2001

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
PO BOX 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

**RE: THE STATUS, HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY OF AUSTRALIA'S KOALA
POPULATION**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this Inquiry. The purpose of this submission is to provide information, evidence and observations in relation to the status, health and sustainability of South Australia's Koala population. The terms of reference were used to guide and structure the preparation of this submission, with amendments as necessary to headings to better reflect South Australia's circumstances.

Iconic status of the Koala and its history in South Australia

The Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) is one of the most widely recognised and well known species of Australian wildlife and an iconic feature of Australia's biodiversity. The Koala, through its appeal to international visitors, contributes significantly to Australia's tourism industry.

In South Australia the natural range of Koalas is restricted to the South East of the State. Between the 1920s and 1950s they were introduced to areas outside of this region, namely: Kangaroo Island, Lower Eyre Peninsula, Adelaide Mount Lofty Ranges and the Riverland regions. Today in some areas (including the Adelaide Hills and Kangaroo Island) they are abundant and increasing in number.

With the exception of a potential, remnant original population in the South East, Koalas in South Australia are genetically very closely related – generally being descended from those very small numbers of Koalas which were originally introduced

onto Kangaroo Island. Genetic diversity is an important consideration in the context of population management.

Koala populations in South Australia – estimates, management and habitat

Protecting and managing abundant Koala populations in South Australia is a complex task, with much of their suitable habitat occurring on private land or in peri-urban environments. Management is generally directed towards the maintenance of the existing populations for their contribution to national rather than State goals. Koalas can be found living in urban settings, occupying trees around homes and in surrounding streets. This urban living has its share of problems for Koalas. In effect, the main threats identified and being acted upon in South Australia are the grazing impact caused by abundant and increasing population size relative to available habitat, vehicle collisions and dog attacks.

A State-wide policy framework has been developed by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to guide the actions which may be taken to respond to Koalas which are posing a safety hazard to members of the public, are in dangerous situations or which show clear signs of sickness or injury. DENR have also developed recommended *Guidelines for the Captive Management of Koalas in South Australia*.

Kangaroo Island

The Koala population on Kangaroo Island increased dramatically between the 1920s and the 1990s. In 1997, DENR began a program to reduce (through non-lethal methods) the population of Koalas on Kangaroo Island to sustainable levels. This was necessary because:

- the highly selective browsing of Koalas represents a significant threat to Kangaroo Island's unique vegetation communities;
- Koala preference for Manna Gum has resulted in the loss of Manna Gum in some areas and poor tree health across a broader area;
- in 2001, an island wide survey showed the Koala population was larger and more widespread than previously thought, with an estimate of 27,000 Koalas; and
- in 2006, the survey was repeated, with the population estimated at 16,000 Koalas.

The next Island wide survey took place in late 2010. Preliminary results from this survey indicate that the Koala population on Kangaroo Island continues to decrease. An updated population estimate will be determined soon.

The Kangaroo Island Koala Management Program is based on the surgical sterilisation of Koalas to reduce population growth, relocation of Koalas from critically damaged areas to the mainland, and habitat restoration. Culling has not been considered an appropriate management option for Koalas on Kangaroo Island, as per the guidelines of the *National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009-2014*, which rejects culling as a management option. Since the program began, 9,892 Koalas have been sterilised, of which 3,801 have been relocated to the mainland of South Australia. In 2009–10, 633 Koalas were sterilised with 160 being relocated to the South East of South Australia, 940 trees were planted, and 55 sites on Kangaroo Island and in the South East were monitored for tree condition and Koala density.

DENR is not relocating Koalas to the South East of South Australia in 2010-11, as available funds are being used to obtain an updated population estimate for Koalas on Kangaroo Island. Ongoing management is necessary to maintain declining Koala densities and conserve important vegetation communities.

South East

The regional distribution, status and abundance of breeding resident Koalas in the South East (irrespective of their origin) is not clear, which unlike the other parts of South Australia with Koalas, is within the species' historical range. Available habitat for Koalas varies significantly across this region but there is little available data to show Koala density, the presence of Koalas which may have travelled across from the Victorian border or any impact they may be having upon key vegetation communities.

The listing of the Koala under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act)

In June 2010, the South Australian Government contributed a submission to the public consultation process concerning the assessment of the Koala, and the draft nomination for its inclusion as 'vulnerable' or 'conservation dependent' under the EPBC Act.

The South Australian Government supported the proposed listing as vulnerable for those populations of Koalas, within their natural range, which are declining significantly in number. However, this submission also requested the exclusion from listing of introduced populations of Koalas, which are outside of their historical natural range, and are abundant or increasing in number.

The South Australian Government also requested that should the Koala be listed, it be explicitly noted that South Australia (and Victoria) will at times have to undertake adaptive management activities to mitigate the over-browsing impacts of abundant Koalas, for both the long-term benefit of the species and the ecosystem upon which they depend.

The adequacy of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy

The South Australian Government, through DENR is a representative on the National Koala Conservation Strategy Steering Committee, which contributed to the development of the *National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009 - 2014*. The Strategy provides a national framework for the conservation of Koalas.

DENR is also a member of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy Implementation Team. The Implementation Team is involved with promoting and coordinating the actions identified in the *National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009-2014*. Successful implementation of the Strategy depends on the sustained commitment of a range of stakeholders.

Interaction of State and Federal laws and regulations

Koalas are protected by law in South Australia under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*, but due to their abundance and increasing numbers are not considered to

be rare or threatened. Currently there are no issues regarding State and Federal laws and regulations as they relate to Koalas in South Australia.

Yours sincerely

PAUL CAICA
MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION