



THE LITTLE AUSSIE PHILLIP ISLAND WOULD HATE TO LOSE FRIENDS OF THE KOALAS INC.

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Submission to Senate Inquiry into the Status, Health and Sustainability of
Australia's Koala Population

History of Friends of the Koalas

Friends of the Koalas was formed in 1990 in an endeavour to preserve and protect free ranging koalas on Phillip Island.

The koalas were under extreme pressure from loss of habitat, road kills, disease, and dog attacks.

Despite our best efforts the numbers have continued to fall and now only a handful of free roaming koalas remain.

Our group continues to work to preserve habitat. Most of the work is in association with the Phillip Island Nature Park.

Friends of the Koalas is also involved in education and lobbying on matters affecting koalas and other wildlife on the island and further afield.

Koalas on Phillip Island

Koalas were introduced to Phillip Island and their numbers became excessive. This led to relocations of koalas from the island for many years.

Large areas of Victoria were repopulated with koalas from Phillip and French Islands.

The increased development of Phillip Island led to a sudden and dramatic decline in koala numbers from the late 1980's.

This illustrates just how quickly a koala population can decline to non viable numbers.

The Koala Conservation Centre, run by the Phillip Island Nature Park, opened in 1992 and has a captive breeding program.

The current population of koalas at the centre is 38.

This centre has been successful in breeding a genetically diverse population to help preserve the species while providing excellent viewing opportunities for tourism as well as providing education and research.

Decline of other koala populations

Koala populations in Queensland and northern NSW are now experiencing the same problems as Phillip Island's koalas did in the 1980's (the only difference being the Queensland and NSW populations were not introduced).

The decline in numbers of koalas especially in southern Queensland is dramatic with animals in some areas facing local extinction. At present, with insufficient environmental protection, there is a lack of will and incentive to take steps to protect their habitat from being progressively destroyed.

Excessive numbers in some koala populations

Some koala populations have numbers too great to be sustainable e.g. Kangaroo Island SA and French and Raymond Islands in Victoria. These populations are isolated and cannot naturally disperse.

Some mainland populations are also isolated in pockets of bushland which are then destroyed by over-browsing. The problem is that most of these populations have a lack of genetic diversity which is very detrimental to the future survival of the koala.

In Victoria koalas relocated from French Island have not been exposed to chlamydia and they breed prolifically. These crowded populations then need to have reproductive controls which are costly and intrusive and can have detrimental effects on the animals' health. Relocation is no longer an option due to a lack of available habitat and also because of the poorer genetic makeup of many of these animals.

Lack of genetic diversity

Despite the existence of koala populations where numbers are unsustainable this is not a good omen for the future of the koala. As stated previously many of these animals are inbred and their numbers could crash. It is vital that genetically pure koala populations, which are in decline, are sustained and their habitat be preserved.

In Victoria for example, the Strzelecki koala is vitally important as one of the few koala populations occurring in their natural range. Sadly the Strzelecki koalas are under great threat from land clearing, forestry and too frequent bushfires and controlled burns.

Captive koalas and increased handling

Sadly most people see koalas only in captivity and there is an increasing trend to allow the public to pet and handle them. Friends of the Koalas believes this handling is detrimental to the koalas.

The recent decision in Victoria to allow koala petting, at the insistence of tourism interests, was a regrettable decision. It would be of interest to have an **independent** study of the long term effect on koalas who are constantly handled especially during daylight hours when they would normally be resting and sleeping. Thankfully, the Koala Conservation Centre has retained its no handling policy and prevents visitors from disturbing animals. Friends of the Koalas feels this is actually a much better way to view koalas as they act in a more natural fashion. The close viewing boardwalks allow visitors to view koalas at eye level while koalas in the woodland area give the experience of seeing them pretty much as they are seen in the wild.

Need for upgrading of koala's environmental status

It is imperative that serious consideration be given to declaring the koala an endangered species.

The continuing decline in free ranging koalas in Australia should give cause for alarm.

The koalas' range continues to shrink alarmingly. Upgrading its status to show its vulnerability would give weight to attempts to preserve its habitat and ensure greater consideration would be given to its needs when planning decisions are made.

At present there is a false belief that koala numbers are healthy, based on those areas where unsustainable koala populations are trapped in unrealistic pockets of habitat.

The example of Phillip Island shows how quickly a large koala population can crash.

Conclusion

Friends of the Koalas Inc. believes that the future of Australia's koala population is in the balance and now is the time to raise the status of the koala environmentally.

Without increased protection of free ranging genetically diverse koala populations the long term survival of Australia's much loved animal is uncertain.

Patricia Hunt
(President)

enc. newsletter and brochure