Submission to Senate Inquiry on the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population

Additional statements

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KAG was most appreciative of the opportunity to give evidence at the public hearing of the Committee of the Senate Inquiry into the health and sustainability of Australia's koala population in Brisbane on May 3 2011. Unfortunately at that time we had not seen a copy of the letter from the Threatened Species Scientific Committee and would like to add comments regarding this letter. Also, a question was asked of each participant about their opinion on translocation of threatened koalas. The KAG position on translocation is attached and is presented as a question on notice. In addition, there was information on the effect of disease on koala populations given at the hearing which we would now like to comment on.

Threatened Species Scientific Committee letter to Minister Burke dated 30 September 2011.

In the first paragraph the letter accepts that there has been a marked decline in koala populations over three generations and considers the koala to be potentially eligible for listing as vulnerable. The next sentence is contradictory as it suggests that "better demographic data are needed to make this judgement with confidence". Either the koala population has "undergone a marked decline over three generations" or it has not.

The assessment of the committee against criterion 1 was "due to a lack of consistent high quality demographic data across the geographic range of the koala". Our group would suggest that there is always going to be a lack of consistent high quality demographic data across the geographic range of the koala. The logistics of sampling and estimating populations across sparsely inhabited areas is always going to be problematical. Taken to its logical extension this would mean koalas would never be listed even if the dense coastal populations were to become extinct.

There is excellent quantitative data that shows a dramatic decline in coastal populations of South East Queensland and Northern New South Wales. National surveys have always shown these areas to be the stronghold of koalas. If the committee believes that there are other areas that support koalas in numbers that can ensure the viability of the species into the future they must recommend funding the necessary search effort. If this is not forthcoming within an immediate time frame then the precautionary principle must operate.

There seems to be a lack of consideration of the importance of genetics in both the letter from the committee and in the process for listing of species. Studies have shown different genetic groups in South East Queensland [1] which in turn are different from koalas west of the Great Divide.

[1] Lee, K.E., Seddon, J.M., Corley, S., Ellis, W.A.H., Johnston, S.D., de Villiers, D.L., Preece, H.J. and Carrick, F.N. (in press). *Genetic variation and structuring in the threatened koala populations of Southeast Queensland reveals a genetically distinct population in the Koala Coast*. Conservation Genetics.

The IUCN criteria give a great deal of guidance regarding protecting sub-populations and Population Viability Assessment. There is no evidence that any assessment has been carried out to guide the decision of the committee. Recent experience with Tasmanian devils gives an example of a species that was previously numerous but was quickly reduced in numbers by a disease that may prove to be an immune deficiency type similar to the retro-virus that is prevalent in koalas. Genetic variation is vital for the long-term viability of any species. There seems to be no understanding evident in the committee's letter that the southern koalas that are requiring management because of over-browsing are genetically depauperate, having lost their genetic diversity and thus are irrelevant to the long-term survival of the species against the disease threat.

Climate change does not seem to have been considered by the committee. This is in spite of CSIRO evidence that a small change in temperature will reduce the nutrition in eucalypt leaves making an already knife-edge existence impossible. The viability of western populations would also be at risk with higher temperatures and more extreme drought events.

The committee's letter "advocates a genuine national effort to implement the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 209-2014" as a substitute for listing. KAG maintains that the strategy, though worthwhile is not in itself effective without EPBC listing. It essentially provides advice for other departments and levels of government with no obligation on them to act on that advice. The strategy could form an immediate Recovery Plan in the interim before another one is devised.

Disease

The reports on the prevalence of disease in koalas given at the public hearing are extremely concerning. While KAG has always been of the opinion that habitat protection is the most important aspect of maintaining koala numbers, disease is undoubtedly a big factor in the catastrophic declines reported from many of the well-studied populations including the Koala Coast. It is tragic that the koalas that have the resistance to disease are the ones being lost to road trauma and dog attack. The survival of the species in the long-term may well depend on the preservation of these key individuals. Research, while important is not going to help protect these animals in the short term. Funding for research would be a bottomless pit. Measures to prevent premature death of koalas would be more seriously put in place by all levels of government if koalas were listed as Vulnerable.

THE KOALA ACTION GROUP (KAG)

POSITION ON TRANSLOCATION OF KOALAS

1. The translocation issue is largely seen by KAG as a distraction from the central issue of maintaining koala populations in SEQ. The following remain the core imperatives:

    - Protection of existing habitat (and the need for scientific studies which define it)
    - Increasing habitat on a strategic basis rather than an ad hoc approach (heavily dependent on scientific studies)
    - Maintenance and promotion of connectivity in existing populations
    - Protection of existing populations from threatening processes (road trauma and domestic dog attacks)

2. Translocation of koalas should only occur in the case of old development approvals that did not take into consideration koala habitat sufficiently, where habitat would be totally destroyed with no prospects for natural dispersal. These cases should be extremely limited. If more recent approvals are in this category it is a strong indictment of the planning effectiveness of IPA and the SPA. If approvals are still occurring which make it impossible for koalas to survive then this must be addressed immediately or any pretence of sustainability in the planning instruments must be dropped.

3. In the bigger picture translocation is never going to be the answer to koala displacement by development. If accepted as an option the emphasis on designing developments that accommodate koala survival will inevitably shift to removing the impediment to development rather than the measures which help koalas survive.

4. Translocations occur at the expense of remaining populations. It is unlikely that all koalas can be removed in most situations (e.g. Coomera). There seems to be little concern for those left behind. Past experiences such as the removal of significant numbers of healthy individuals at Tucki Tucki led to the disastrous decline of the remaining population. Translocations will in effect hasten and guarantee the extinction of local populations.

5. The high costs of securing receive habitat, studies on send and receive site populations, health checks on translocated koalas and monitoring after translocation will effectively limit the numbers of koalas able to be translocated. It is unlikely that the minimum conditions for maintaining genetic viability (500+ individuals) in translocated populations can be met.

6. The complexity of ecological processes operating on koalas is poorly understood. It is the height of human arrogance to manipulate groups of koalas when so much is unknown, particularly in habitat and nutritional requirements and in long-term genetic effects of translocations.

In conclusion, KAG sees translocations largely as a welfare issue, helping individuals at the expense of the metapopulation, a public relations exercise that makes everyone feel better while having more insidious long-term effects. Accepting translocations as a legitimate tool has the potential to set the conservation of koalas back thirty years with a shifting of emphasis from

protecting existing habitat to giving developers a “get out of jail free” option absolving them of responsibility and culpability in the loss of koalas from the area.

KAG contends that the existing legislation should not be changed. The rules and regulations regarding distances for relocation of koalas are based on many years of field experience and research and should also remain. Instances where the planning laws have been ineffective in protecting koala habitat should be the exception and should never be allowed to happen again. It is considered that Scientific Purposes Permits or Ministerial intervention should be capable of dealing with humane outcomes in what should be increasingly rare situations.