

A GREATER ROLE FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND LANDOWNERS IN KOALA CONSERVATION

This submission from Australian Wildlife Services proposes that private land holders should be playing a much greater role in the conservation of koalas. It argues that if land holders had *defacto* ownership by paying for the transfer of animals to their properties, koala populations would expand and be re-established in previously occupied habitats. Australia would follow overseas experiences with such policies. Incentives would be created for private firms and individuals to conserve habitat and establish koala populations. Koala conservation would be innovative with a regulatory role for government.

Our Aims

Australian Wildlife Services is a wildlife management consultancy focused on:

- wildlife population assessment and habitat management
- developing wildlife industries and markets that support conservation
- strategic research priorities in natural resource and wildlife management
- integrating traditional knowledge and wildlife science into the management of Indigenous and Aboriginal land
- veterinary wildlife services.

AWS is led by Dr George Wilson who has more than 35 years experience in wildlife management, aerial survey, tourism, strategic policy analysis, and research program management.

Dr Wilson is an [Adjunct Professor](#) at the Australian National University, Fenner School of Environment and Society and is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the University of New South Wales, Institute of Environmental Studies. He was previously Assistant Secretary / General Manager in Federal Government Bureau of Resource Sciences at level of Senior Principal Research Scientist.

Our submission addresses the following inquiry terms of reference:

- a. the iconic status of the koala and the history of its management;
- f. the adequacy of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy;
- g. appropriate future regulation for the protection of koala habitat;
- h. interaction of state and federal laws and regulations; and
- i. any other related matters.

1 Key Points

- ⊙ Koalas are indeed under threat, as evidenced by their patchy distribution and apparent incapacity to recolonise suitable habitat.
- ⊙ Current policies and programs are very dependent on limited Government funding. They have not rectified the situation which continues to get worse.
- ⊙ Overseas experience, particularly with such an iconic animal, is that the private sector can play a major role in species and habitat conservation.
- ⊙ Private landholders in Australia are ready to become more involved in koala conservation but perversely they are excluded from doing so by current policy and legislation.
- ⊙ The key is to permit translocation of overabundant populations and encourage the creation of suitable habitat on private lands.
- ⊙ If Australian Governments allowed such innovation koala populations would increase and widen their distribution. Government agencies would still have a role in authorising transfers of animals, ensuring improvements in the genetic status of koala populations, and in enforcing animal welfare regulations and codes of practice.
- ⊙ Involvement of the private sector in koala management, and in effect 'ownership' of koalas, would mirror that which already occurs through the activities of private zoos and animal parks
- ⊙ The widening of the 'koala market' would enable private landholders to be involved in conservation projects thereby expanding the distribution, health and security of Australia's koala population.

2 Koala ecology and natural history

Koala populations have undergone significant changes since economic development of Australia. Whilst their distribution remains wide in eastern Australia, populations are fragmented and overall the koala population is probably declining. In some areas they are locally overabundant, whilst in other areas they are rare or absent. They are no longer found in large expanses of suitable habitat.

Human **predation** of koalas is now low, hunting with rifles ceased more than 90 years ago and koalas are no longer part of Aboriginal Australian's diets.

Disease, in particular Chlamydia, affects reproduction and the rate of increase in koala populations. Disease is of particular importance when considering relocation management options proposed in this submission.

Genetics. There is a broad cline in the size of koalas from north to south, with terminal populations strongly genetically differentiated. These latitudinal clines may reflect important differences of adaptation to factors such as temperature. Koala populations in the south east have been through a bottleneck in last 100 years.

They have much lower levels of genetic variation than in north east. Changes in genetic variation may result in adverse conservation outcomes for koalas. There is preliminary evidence that koalas sometimes have lowered fitness due to inbreeding.

The influence of **fire** on koala ecosystems is increasingly important. Fragmented and isolated populations, in combination with increased fire frequency and intensity, create added pressures on conservation strategies. They probably also contribute to the low genetic diversity seen in many populations in southern Australia.

Koalas are facing a further decline in suitable **habitat**. As a result of broadacre clearing, changing ecosystems and peri-urban development, over 80% of koala habitat has disappeared. Of the remaining habitat, 80% is located on private land.

So we ask the question, are these factors sufficient to have prevented koalas returning to locations where hunting was once commonplace such as southern NSW? Are the other population limiting factors that koalas have to contend with such as increased predation from feral animals and motor vehicles sufficient to cause the observed patchy distribution? In a landscape in which habitats are more fragmented, are they incapable of expanding naturally? Is translocation a necessary requirement to correct the situation?

AWS argues for much more proactive koala management to address these threats. We are for translocation to reduce the impact of habitat fragmentation, correct inbreeding and provide options in land use disputes.

3 Enhancing the commercial value of koalas

Koalas already have great value, both cultural and economic to Australians and the rest of the world. One study in 1997 placed the value of koalas to the Australian economy at \$1.1 billion (Hamilton & Hundloe, 1997).

The number of private institutions which benefit from and create this value is currently limited to zoos and animal parks. They base some, if not all, of their commercial success on holding koalas. In return they contribute to koala conservation. Lone Pine, Featherdale, Australia Zoo and San Diego Zoo are high profile examples.

Involving other sectors of the private economy, especially landholders in the management of koalas would enhance this value and create an incentive for them to invest in a wide variety of research and management projects.

To do so would follow the lead from overseas where the private sector is much more involved in wildlife conservation. In South Africa there are now more than 20,000 private landholders conserving the iconic species on their properties. They do so for a mixture of idealistic and self-interest reasons including commercial value that benefit the species and themselves. AWS advocates following this example and believes koala management plans and strategies should embrace and include private landholders and the private sector in proactive management.

4 Land use conflicts

Where koala populations occur on land set aside for residential, road or other development, conflicts often arise, causing major public controversies and expensive decision-making processes for governments. Consequently much current management is reactionary. Interventions seek to resolve land use conflicts which have a koala component.

Indeed we believe governments are loath to increase koala populations or translocate them to new habitats for fear of creating subsequent land use conflicts.

5 Priorities for Government funding

Too many scarce conservation dollars are spent in dispute resolution. High-profile species like koalas absorb funding which could go to other more threatened species. A key issue is determining what is an appropriate expenditure for the koala's current status, and ensuring management expenditure does not result in an over prioritising of the koala and allocation of scarce conservation resources to one species.

On Kangaroo Island in South Australia, a koala sterilisation program to control an overly abundant local population has been an expensive and inefficient way of controlling numbers. At the same time in NSW large areas of suitable habitat remain vacant. In a policy environment where private landholders could trade koalas, those with the excess would have an asset which could be available to those who wanted them. The recipients would not only have an incentive to conserve habitat, they would cover the costs of translocation. This would alleviate the need for sterilisation programs, and release government resources for other un-resourced conservation issues.

6 Translocation and ownership

Whilst translocation of koalas is nothing new, very few translocation programs have crossed state borders. As such trials of interstate relocation programs from over-populated communities to vacant or low population habitats are recommended. Among other things, this will aid in the development of key wildlife service markets.

There are many landholders, farmers and graziers groups willing to become involved, however they are constrained by current policy.

In order to achieve the integration of a market based conservation model into wildlife management, a relaxation of wildlife ownership laws is needed. An expansion of the provisions of *defacto* ownership which apply to zoos in regards to handling and captive housing of koalas and other native mammals. Or it could be similar to the provisions which govern the holding of native birds and reptiles and some other native mammals.

The creation of a market which allows trade in koalas, and other native wildlife, would increase the security of koalas and native species within Australia. In the short to medium term overcrowding and habitat destruction in locally overpopulated communities would be reduced. Analysis of the ecosystems recovery can quantifiably measure the effectiveness of this management strategy and its application to free ranging populations.

7 Addressing genetic issues

As previously discussed, habitat fragmentation and isolation are a major issue facing koala populations. As a result of this fragmentation, significant inbreeding takes place creating genetic bottlenecks. The ability to trade and relocate koalas would create self-funded surrogate corridors between populations. This would reduce genetic bottlenecks in isolated and fragmented communities.

8 Complement to current koala conservation strategies

These proposals would complement current koala conservation strategies advocated by organisations such as the Australian Koala Foundation which focus on protection. Protection of habitat and compatible land use projects are vital to both strategies. The private ownership model creates an incentive for landholders to actively conserve habitat rather than simply enforcing it through legislation.

9 Risks

Enabling the development of the changes we are proposing presents a risk of criticism from sections of the conservation movement and most animal rightists. We believe however that the benefits out-weigh the costs.

Opponents believe it is un-ethical to allow private financial benefit based on the market value of any of Australia's wildlife. They feel this most strongly for charismatic and iconic species like koalas and will oppose the proposal presented here.

Further, there will most likely be resistance from zoos which currently have exclusive rights to 'own' koalas. One could argue they have an interest in maintaining the rarity value of koalas and keeping numbers low.

The cuteness and cuddliness of koalas generates for many humans strong emotions and affinity. This translates into political pressures that have the ability to cloud ecological and economic decisions surrounding the koala, potentially leading to misallocating resources and management. On the other hand, those making ecological and economic decisions need to be mindful of these social attributes when decisions are made regarding the koala and the ecosystems they live in.

10 Conclusion

This submission advocates a much greater role for the private sector thereby freeing Government dollars for less charismatic species. It proposes a more outcome-

focused management regime to increase Australia's koala population and re-establish koalas across all their former range throughout Australia.

Our position is not focused on the question of whether koalas are vulnerable or common. This submission aims to help alleviate the conflict the question creates, and focuses on the underlying issue of how best to manage the koala, and ensure its long-term survival.

Changes to legislation and policy which allowed private land holders to acquire and manage koalas on the properties would lead to engagement of a wider section of the community in koala conservation.

A market based koala strategy could be used as a template for an Australian wildlife market based conservation system.

11 Recommendations

The following recommendations could be incorporated into a National Koala Conservation Bill should one be drafted or at least into a koala strategy.

- ⊙ Recognise the pivotal role to be played by landholders and other private organisations in koala conservation.
- ⊙ Enable private landholders to acquire and breed koalas, provided doing so leads to net conservation gain and no animal welfare risks.
- ⊙ Restrict the primary role of government agencies to overseeing initiatives of the private sector in a supportive and positive manner, focusing in particular on animal welfare and genetic issues.
- ⊙ Expand the provisions which apply to zoos in regards to handling and captive housing of koalas to also apply to private land holders who wish to have koalas free ranging on their properties.
- ⊙ Ensure that koala translocation and release programs seek to redress the lack of genetic diversity in many koala populations.
- ⊙ Facilitate the interstate movement of koalas and development of a truly national perspective on their conservation.

Source material

Hamilton, C. & Hundloe, T. 1997. *Koalas and Tourism: An Economic Evaluation*. The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper No. 13, July.