



# Koala News



Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland Bayside Branch

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## THE STATUS, HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY OF AUSTRALIA'S KOALA POPULATION

### SENATE INQUIRY REPORT – SEPTEMBER 2011

It seems that the Koala issue was more complicated than the Senate Committee anticipated. The matter of the status, health and sustainability of Australia's Koala population was referred to the Environment and Communications References Committee on 17 November 2010 for inquiry and report by 1 June 2011. The reporting date was subsequently extended by the Senate to 24 August and later to 20 September 2011 to allow full consideration of the broad range of issues confronting the species throughout its range.



In its report the Committee remarked on the brimming public gallery during the inquiry and took this as a testament of the depth of public feeling and concern for this species.

The report has made recommendations for consideration by government, some of which may directly affect us here in south east Queensland. Some of these recommendations are reproduced below:

#### **Recommendation 13**

**4.90 The committee recommends that local and state governments:**

- **introduce appropriate speed limits in priority koala areas; and**
- **that where appropriate, build or retrofit underpasses or overpasses for major roads in priority koala areas as well as installing koala fencing adjacent to major roads.**

#### **Recommendation 16**

**5.78 The committee recommends that the Environment Minister consider the evidence provided to this inquiry when making his final decision on listing the koala as a threatened species.**

#### **Recommendation 17**

**5.82 The committee recommends the Environment Minister consider options to improve the conservation status of the diverse and rapidly declining koala populations in New South Wales and Queensland to ensure a nationally resilient population is maintained. These options include listing the koala as vulnerable under the EPBC Act in areas where populations have declined significantly or are at risk of doing so.**

A full copy of the Senate Inquiry Report can be viewed at:

[http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/ec\\_ctte/koalas/report/report.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/ec_ctte/koalas/report/report.pdf)

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN WHEN A SPECIES OR POPULATION IS LISTED UNDER THE EPBC ACT?

There is some excitement amongst the section of the community interested in Koala welfare with regards to the Senate Inquiry recommendation that the Environment Minister consider the option of listing the New South Wales and Queensland Koala populations as “Vulnerable” under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (*EPBC Act*) 1999.

While there is an intergovernmental agreement between the states and the commonwealth for the consideration of environmental impacts that defers to state environmental legislation, policies and procedures - where EPBC Act species or communities are involved, the commonwealth has a specific referral role.

This is a backup to the state legislation if you like. While state policies often have “get out of jail free” exemptions for clearing and or offsetting of habitat depending on the nature of the development (e.g. state road infrastructure), commonwealth legislation does not. And where state or local political decisions may colour the decision for acceptance or refusal of a development application – the commonwealth is at arm’s length from these influences.

Listing of the Koala as Vulnerable under the EPBC Act will require proponents to prove that there is **no significant impact** on the species or its habitat as a result of the proposed development.

But to make this work we need to get better at assessing the cumulative impacts of multiple, small developments and the resulting ‘death by 1000 cuts’ that has been the fate of the Koala Coast for so many years. This is unlikely until guidelines for doing so are developed and information on all approved and pending development applications is made public.

At present it is government that is in the best position to do this work, yet it is left to applicants or their consultants to make the call without full information.

The recently emerging allowance for offsetting when clearing the habitat of listed species under both state and commonwealth legislation may see the protection of significant areas of Koala habitat and the regeneration of habitat suitable for Koalas in the future. Perhaps it could even see improvements in connectivity between existing habitats. Fortunately, the Koala is a species that does not necessarily require old growth forests for survival – and young, healthy trees and can provide valuable habitat, as long as they can be accessed safely.



For the commonwealth to accept offsets for habitat loss, it needs to be first proven that there are no reasonable alternatives for the development, and that the impacts cannot be avoided. How the ‘unavoidability’ of impacts would be interpreted by officers of the commonwealth would play an important role in determining how much more existing habitat is removed and fragmented.

As an additional tool for a wary public, with Koalas listed under the EPBC Act, projects which do not appear to be appropriately assessing significance for Koalas could be referred to the commonwealth by any interested party.

**If you would like to contribute to future editions of the Koala News, please contact Paulette Jones [paulette@biodiversity.tv](mailto:paulette@biodiversity.tv)**

*Opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the author and/or contributors and are not necessarily those of the Society.*