



Koala News



Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland Bayside Branch

Volume 14 Issue 2

May 2012

THE COMMONWEALTH ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION (EPBC) ACT 1999

What bigger news could there be for the Koala News?

The Queensland Koala population is considered to be one of Australia's most at risk Koala populations, and is now protected under Australian Environmental Law along with the New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory populations.

The "Vulnerable" listing announced by the Federal Minister for the Environment on 30 April 2012 means that any development in Queensland that has a significant impact on Koalas and their habitat must be approved by the Federal Minister. Ordinarily, there is cooperation between the State and Federal Governments in the environmental approvals process to avoid developers having to "double up" on the information provided. However, as the Koala is considered to be "Common" under State Environmental legislation outside south-east Queensland (where it is listed as Vulnerable), there has formerly been no need for developers to specifically assess the impacts of their projects on Koala populations over most of Queensland.



The million dollar question is - what constitutes a significant impact? It is only where there is considered to be a significant impact that the Federal Government will become involved.

Any ecologist knows that firstly defining the boundaries of an affected population is difficult enough. There needs to be long term data for spatial distribution of the population, resource use, genetic interaction and the numbers of animals involved. Is the population healthy? declining? increasing? Only long term monitoring can provide these answers. Koalas west of the Great Dividing Range are sparsely distributed, reflecting the quality of available resources. This is not to say that a sparse population is not an important population, the available resources are simply a limiting factor for population numbers. Populations are known to increase in number across the landscape during good rainfall years, and shrink back to riparian zones during times of drought. Removal of riparian vegetation may therefore have long term, significant impacts on a population, whereas the proportion of available habitat that it represents is quite small. An assessment of significance cannot therefore be based simply on the amount of habitat affected, but has to come from a detailed knowledge of the needs of a population to remain viable in the long term.

The federal environment department is in the process of preparing guidelines for the listed Koala populations that will help landowners, landholders, business and industry determine whether a proposed action is likely to have a significant impact on the listed Koala populations.

A 'significant impact' under the EPBC Act is an impact which is important, notable, or of consequence, having regard to its context or intensity. Whether or not an action is likely to have a significant impact depends upon the sensitivity, value, and quality of the environment which is impacted, and upon the intensity, duration, magnitude and geographic extent of the impacts. All of these factors should be considered when determining whether an action is likely to have a significant

impact on matters of national environmental significance. You can find the generic details of "significant impacts" under the act on the following web page:

<http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/pubs/nes-guidelines.pdf>

It will be important for us all to be aware of these and make sure that information being provided to the Federal Government on which the decisions of the Minister will be based is of an adequate standard and not simply consultant-speak. Lack of data may mean that there will be times when the Precautionary Principle should be invoked. While this is a cornerstone of ecologically sustainable development – when is the last time you saw it in action?



DROP BEARS – SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

Not being a native Australian, I find it very amusing and totally endearing (now that I am in on the secret) that an entire nation is quite happy to play a long-standing, completely outrageous joke on the rest of the world about the existence of “drop bears”. I have met foreigners that are truly afraid to walk in the Australian bush as a result of this prank.

Each Australian has a slightly different take on what these vicious creatures actually look like, but one thing is unanimously agreed on they are out there. The Australian Museum adds some clarity to the debate (as scientists should), naming the creature as *Thylarctos plummetus* and describing it as a large, arboreal, predatory marsupial related to the Koala. Further detail is provided as follows:

Identification: Around the size of a leopard or very large dog with coarse orange fur with some darker mottled patterning (as seen in most Koalas). It is a heavily built animal with powerful forearms for climbing and holding on to prey. It lacks canines, using broad powerful premolars as biting tools instead.

Size range: 120kg, 130cm long, 90 cm at the shoulder.

Distribution: Drop Bears can be found in the densely forested regions of the Great Dividing Range in South-eastern Australia. However there are also some reports of them from South-east South Australia, Mount Lofty Ranges and Kangaroo Island.

Habitat: Closed canopy forest as well as open woodland on the margins of dense forest. Never encountered near roads or human habitation.

Feeding and Diet: Examination of kill sites and scats suggest mainly medium to large species of mammal make a substantial proportion of the animal's diet. Often, prey such as macropods are larger than the Drop Bear itself. Drop Bears hunt by ambushing ground dwelling animals from above, waiting up to as much as four hours to make a surprise kill. Once prey is within view, the Drop Bear will drop as much as eight metres to pounce on top of the unsuspecting victim. The initial impact often stuns the prey, allowing it to be bitten on the neck and quickly subdued. If the prey is small enough Drop Bears will haul it back up the tree to feed without harassment from other predators.

Danger to humans and first aid: Bush walkers have been known to be 'dropped on' by drop bears, resulting in injury including mainly lacerations and occasionally bites. Most attacks are considered accidental and there are no reports of incidents being fatal. There are some suggested folk remedies that are said to act as a repellent to Drop Bears, these include having forks in the hair or Vegemite or toothpaste spread behind the ears. There is no evidence to suggest that any such repellents work.

If you have visitors coming to Australia, you may like to direct them to the Australian Museum webpage <http://australianmuseum.net.au/Drop-Bear> so that they are fully informed and have an opportunity to take some preventive action.

If you would like to contribute to future editions of the Koala News, please contact Paulette Jones
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