

## May 2012 Newsletter

### From the Chair...Koalas listed at last (Lorraine Vass, FOK)



The Council welcomes the announcement on Monday 30 April 2012 that the combined koala populations in New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory are a species for the purposes of listing in the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

The 'part-range' designation has disappointed some koala conservationists because it falls short of a national listing for the koala. We must remember that three previous nominations over the past fifteen years have failed. The national listing battle has and will continue to be hard-fought.

Minister Burke's decision is an encouraging step forward. At long last the federal government is acknowledging that some of the nation's koalas are in serious trouble, needing careful management if they are to survive. In itself however it is by no means a silver bullet.

An intriguing omission from the Minister's announcement was reference to the focused Recovery Plan for the combined 'northern' populations recommended by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee. Perhaps this was because it will not commence until the expiration of the *National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy* in 2014.

Much of the information informing the Federal Government's decision is to be found at: [Koala \(\*Phascolarctos cinereus\*\) - Listing | Threatened Species | Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities](#)

NWC along with numerous others responded to the announcement by issuing a media release.

Media Officer, James Fitzgerald did a brilliant job in drafting a release which acknowledged the listing's

moment while highlighting the failure of the country's wildlife protection system to provide for the beneficial relationships of co-existence in the natural world.

At the invitation of a Northern Rivers editor James has since expanded the release into an essay which we thought worthy of sharing with you.



### More needed to save the Koala

(James Fitzgerald, LAOKO)

The Federal Government's decision to list the Koala as threatened in NSW and Queensland is a small step in the right direction but unfortunately does not prevent logging in the Koala forests of NSW or Queensland.

Prior to British settlement the Australian Koala population was estimated at over 10 million Koalas. A population of this size would reduce bushfire risk by providing over 2 million tonnes per year of hazard reduction eating of gum leaves. Gum leaves are the most explosively flammable part of the Australian bush. Too often little recognition is given to the positive services Australian wildlife would provide if normal population levels were re-established.

A significant factor in the fragmentation of the Australian Koala population was the large scale killing of Koalas for their skins in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In Queensland in just one month August 1927, some 584,000 Koala skins were sold. Australia's fragmented Koala population could be as low as 40,000 and declining.

It is a long established scientific fact that fragmented populations of animals become genetically weaker over time. The genetic weakness then causes the fragmented populations to start to die out as they are no longer able to fight diseases or adapt to changes in their environment. The correct approach to save the Koala is to restore habitat within a system of wildlife corridors to enable the Koala gene pool to flow via the normal dispersal of young males.

There is a growing concern that the current system of protection is failing Australian wildlife. It is often too little too late. Some koala conservationists would go so far to claim that legislation aimed to protect actually enables the destruction of koala habitat.

In any case current protections allow animal numbers to get down to low numbers creating genetic bottle necks which significantly reduce their long term survival prospects.

The NSW Wildlife Council believes that a benchmark based on pre-British settlement population estimates should be used to restore wildlife populations to at least 10% of the estimate by re-establishing gene pools, habitat and wildlife corridors. Using pre-British estimates as a benchmark recognises the inter-relational connectivity of species. The current wildlife protection system does not provide for the many mutually beneficial relationships that exist in the natural world.

It is important to consider that even the largest National Park is just a gene puddle if it is not connected to other habitat.

Wildlife rehabilitation groups know that male animals are over-represented in road kill because of their need to disperse and find another population. In past times the Koala gene pool flowed up and down and across most of eastern Australia.

For Koalas to survive in the long term, the fragmented populations need habitat restored and most likely a supplementary breeding program guided by geneticists to reconnect the populations. The aim to rebuild the Koala population to at least 10% of pre-British estimates using this method is not unachievable. All it needs is community and political will.

As the Koala population is rebuilt it would be necessary to re-establish animals like the Powerful Owl, as this predator would play its role in ensuring survival of the fittest by taking the occasional young Koala from an unfit or inattentive Koala mother.

Other animals like the glider possum which help pollinate trees and is also a prey species for the Powerful Owl would need to be rebuilt so that the Powerful Owl didn't focus all of its attention on the Koala. It is these types inter-relational connections across species and the roles they play in the natural world that are not recognised in the current system of wildlife protection in Australia.

Wildlife corridors need to be defined and wildlife friendly people and businesses encouraged to buy land along the corridors with conservation agreements and reduced rates. The bang for the buck is that wildlife corridors of re-established and connected habitat will

benefit not just the Koala but many other native plants and animals. It might be appropriate to reduce some of the native vegetation controls outside Wildlife corridors. People would then have a choice based on their belief systems and or business needs as to where it would be best for them to live and or own land.

The 2007 United Nations Global Environmental Outlook 4 report (GEO-4), identified species collapse as a major environmental threat. We are now in the world's 6<sup>th</sup> great extinction event. Current man-made extinction rates are 100 times higher than the base level in the fossil record.

Australia has the worst record for animal extinctions. The failure of the current protection system will end up with more animals endangered... not a functioning ecosystem. Fertility is a product of nature that is needed to replenish the depleted soils on which farmers and human food production ultimately depend.

Is the Australian public happy that since British settlement we have destroyed 99.5% of Australia's Koala population? Most Australians have not seen a Koala in the wild because of this destruction. It is now well overdue for Australia to rectify the wrongs of the past and rebuild a 1 million strong healthy connected Koala population.

\*\*\*\*\*



James cared for a koala for three months during last year.

Todd was found to the north of Cooma starving in open farmland without a gum tree in sight.

He was a young dispersing male looking for a new population to join. So much habitat had been cleared he ended up lost in open grassland and was underweight, dehydrated and starving.

Having regained weight and condition, Todd was cleared by the Vet and successfully released back into the wild on 30 November 2011.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Threatened Species Scientific Committee estimates NSW's koala population in 2010 to be around 21,000 animals.

In 2010-2011 the State's rehabilitation groups admitted into care some **950** or so koalas, or 4.5% of the population. Of those 950 animals, approximately **415** koalas were released back into the wild.

*(This newsletter is compiled by Philip Machin ([machin4@bigpond.com](mailto:machin4@bigpond.com)). Please distribute it widely.)*