



Saving our national icon: An ecological analysis of the 2011 Australian Senate inquiry into status of the koala

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1. Saving our national icon

If comprehensive policy and legislation are all that stands between a species and its extinction, then the foundations of that policy and legislation must be robust. National policies and legislation have a flow-on effect on regional and local conservation policy, which taken together, should have a positive impact on the conservation of the species at risk. This problem is particularly relevant to Australia, which has three levels of government: Commonwealth, state and local. All levels of government have environmental legislation focused on biodiversity conservation. The Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation 1999* (EPBC) Act is the overriding national policy, although its application is limited to ‘matters of national significance’, which reduces its effectiveness in protecting species that do not fall within the aegis of the Act. There are a number of reasons why conservation policy in Australia may be ineffective including conflicting interests between levels of government, changes in political ideologies, and inadequate funding (Waldron et al., 2013) or ineffective allocation of the available funding (Bottrill et al., 2011; Carwardine et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2009). The division and overlap of responsibility may cause conflict or confusion within all levels of government, leading to gaps in policy implementation (Treby et al., 2014). In addition, current policy changes, such as ‘green-tape’ reduction schemes continue at the state level and recent attempts to amend the EPBC Act to allow for a

‘one-stop shop’ for environmental approvals (Department of the Environment, 2014b) may result in regulatory savings for businesses at the cost of weakening the protections in place for endangered species conservation (McGrath, 2014; Ritchie, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2013). An amendment, before the Senate at the time of writing, would allow states the power to assess and approve matters that are nationally protected, undermining one of the key components of the EPBC Act, Commonwealth oversight of State government decisions (McGrath, 2014). Policy is only as effective as the funding and implementation it provides, and without the political will in place to make difficult decisions, the resulting ineffective planning and implementation will fail to conserve native species.

The EPBC Act has seen the listing of approximately 465 species of fauna, of which approximately a dozen have since been delisted (Department of the Environment, 2015a). From 2007 to 2011, five times more vertebrate species were listed than de-listed (McDonald et al., 2015). However, some species may not fall clearly within the EPBC guidelines for legislative protection (Shumway and Seabrook, 2015); for example if declines are only occurring in part of the range, or because of inadequate data availability on population trends (e.g. Endeavour Dogfish, *Centrophorus moluccensis*; Spotted Wobegong, *Orectolobus maculatus*; Hooded Plover, *Thinornis rubricollis tregellasi*) (Department of the Environment, 2015a). Another such example is the koala, *Phascolarctos cinereus*, which is a marsupial folivore endemic to eastern and southern Australia (Fig. 1). In the north and eastern part of the koala’s range, a number of populations have declined significantly over recent decades or become locally extinct due to habitat loss, declining habitat quality, diseases and increased vulnerability to mortality

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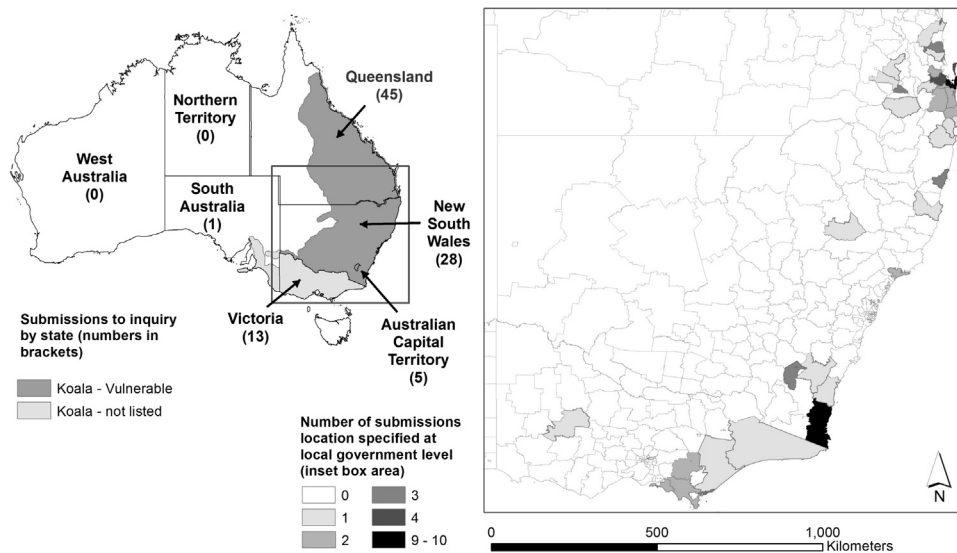


Fig. 1. Map of koala distribution and area of submissions. Koala distribution (north and south populations) with current listing status, and the location of the submissions to the Senate 2011 inquiry into the koala by State (number of submission in brackets). Subset of number of submissions specified to Local Government Area (LGA).

from vehicle strikes and dog attacks (Department of the Environment, 2015b; Lunney et al., 2002; Seabrook et al., 2011). However, in the southern part of the range in Victoria and South Australia, overpopulation is the foremost management problem, with action being taken to reduce koala numbers by culling, sterilization, and relocation (Lunney et al., 2007; Masters et al., 2004; Menkhorst, 2008). An additional problem for widely distributed native fauna species, such as the koala, is that they are not limited to protected areas, which provide more specific conservation targets, but are found across urban, peri-urban and rural areas where threats are often diffuse and incremental, and hence difficult to manage. The variability of koala population trends meant that prior to 2012, the species was not listed as threatened under federal legislation, although in certain local areas, such as the South East Queensland bioregion, the population had been listed as vulnerable since 2004 (Department of the Environment, 2015b).

In 2011, a Senator lobbied for a Senate inquiry to assess the appropriate conservation status of the koala, and this ultimately led to the listing of the koala as vulnerable in the northern and eastern parts of its range. The outcome was a high point in the public awareness of koala conservation. The recommendations of the Senate Committee were based on evidence gathered during a consultation period and are likely to underpin the Australian government's forthcoming koala conservation and management strategy. While it may seem to be self-evident that the recommendations of a Senate inquiry on koalas should provide such a foundation, we contend that the Senate Committee's recommendations may not form a suitable basis due to the nature of the inquiry process, and hence a critical analysis is required to determine if gaps or flaws exist. The need to do so is particularly urgent now that a national koala recovery plan is being drafted to replace the expired *National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009–14* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

We examine how the Committee gathered its information, and assess its conclusions. The submissions and other inputs with respect to location and entity of origin, and content to the inquiry were analyzed. The Committee's recommendations were reviewed through the eyes of wildlife ecologists, and considered not just the management issues, but also the planning and policy context for action, including the legalities, practicalities and politics.

1.1. Background to the inquiry

On 17 November 2010 the Australian Senate referred 'the matter of the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population' to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee (the Committee). The terms of reference (p1) mandated that the Committee have regard to such things as the status of the koala; estimates of population sizes; threats to koalas and their habitat; and a range of policy and management issues (Senate, 2011).

The Committee advertised the inquiry on its website and *The Australian* newspaper, wrote to relevant organizations inviting submissions, and held public hearings in Brisbane, Canberra and Melbourne. It received 101 submissions, two petitioning documents, and a large amount of evidence in the form of answers to questions on notice and additional information.

The Committee commented in their report entitled *The koala—saving our national icon* (Senate, 2011) that, 'it is likely that this is the last opportunity to properly conserve Australia's koala population before its threatened species listing becomes a *fait accompli*' (p137). This warning was heeded just one year later, when the koala was listed as vulnerable by the Commonwealth under the EPBC Act 1999 in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (QLD). The koala was not listed in Victoria or South Australia where it also occurs (Department of the Environment, 2015b). The Senate inquiry thus captured a crisis point in koala conservation. A vulnerable listing means that a species is heading towards extinction, unless action is taken to avert that catastrophe; however, what comprises the most effective action is a primary concern that initiated this analysis.

2. The submissions to the inquiry

To assess the extent and focus of public concern over koala conservation, the public submissions ($n = 101$) to the Senate Committee were reviewed in their entirety, along with any accompanying information. Each submission was read and reviewed by one author (NS), and organized by various factors including the name, type and location of the author, location of concern, type of submission (group or individual), any concerns mentioned in the document and suggestions to address them

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