

MINISTER FOR SUSTAINABILITY, ENVIRONMENT, WATER, POPULATION AND COMMUNITIES

Senate Question No. 7

Senator Brown asked the Minister representing the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, in writing, 28 September 2010:

(1) Given that the Australian Koala Foundation estimates the number of koalas left in Australia at just 43 000, does the Government recognise this as an accurate figure; if not, what is the Government's estimate of the koala population.

(2) Given that the Minister has floated the idea of listing the koala as 'conservation dependent', even though both Queensland and New South Wales already list it as 'vulnerable', why is this lesser protection being considered before the Threatened Species Scientific Committee has made a decision on listing under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

(3) Why is the Government considering giving state governments responsibility to protect koala habitat when the widespread destruction of its habitat, through logging and land-clearing, has occurred on the watch of state governments.

Senator Conroy: The Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities has provided the following answer to the honourable Senator's question:

(1) The Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities has been aware of the Australian Koala Foundation's koala population estimates, ranging from approximately 44,000 to 85,000 (excluding South Australia), since November 2009. An explanation of the methodology by which that estimate was calculated was provided to the department and the Threatened Species Scientific Committee on 15 June 2010.

The Threatened Species Scientific Committee has previously noted that there is currently no published, scientifically peer-reviewed estimate of the total number of koalas in Australia and no definitive past estimate within an appropriate timeframe to enable comparison. The report on the 1986-7 national survey of koala distribution noted that a total population size was "impossible to estimate as survey techniques varied greatly from area to area".

(2) The status of the koala under state law varies across its range. The koala is listed as 'vulnerable' in south-east Queensland and New South Wales, with some New South Wales populations listed as 'endangered'. In other parts of its range it is listed as 'of least concern' or is not listed as a threatened species. The 2010 *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* lists the koala as 'of least concern'.

The Threatened Species Scientific Committee must first assess the eligibility of the koala for listing as a threatened species under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), and then the category under which it should be listed. Because there is a national plan of management for this species, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee has considered whether the koala is eligible for listing in any appropriate category, including 'conservation dependent' and 'vulnerable'.

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The final decision on listing will be made by the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, taking into account the advice provided by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee and public submissions on the listing nomination.

(3) As the koala is not currently listed as a threatened species under the national EPBC Act, actions that are likely to have an impact on this species do not currently require assessment and approval under the EPBC Act prior to commencement. Nevertheless, the reason that the then Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts asked the Threatened Species Scientific Committee to assess the koala for possible listing was because of concerns about the pressure on koala populations. That is the best process by which to objectively assess the status of the koala nationally and the severity of the threats it faces.