



AUSTRALIAN KOALA FOUNDATION

The international organisation dedicated to saving the koala and its habitat

Conservation of the wild koala and its habitat is of global significance

January 18th 2010

The Honourable Peter Garrett AM, MP
Minister for Environment, Heritage and The Arts
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister Garrett,

On behalf of the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) thank you for your letter of January 8, 2010. I am delighted to read that you feel that the assessment of the status of the koala should be carried out with the 'appropriate consultative and robust scientific processes so as to ensure that the final decision on listing is properly informed by the relevant science.' It is our desire for this also, but sadly the AKF feels that the nomination process is currently being undermined by an inadequate and unbalanced appraisal of existing data.

Following the experts workshop, (a copy of our comments is attached) it was clear to AKF scientists that the data suggests significant declines across Australia. These declines have been driven by a myriad of complex reasons. Yet the summary prepared by DEWHA officers almost ignores this evidence. Instead, the summary plays up the possibility of post-drought recoveries and the occasional good news story where animals may have shown small insignificant increase. Your officers are clearly wearing rose tinted glasses.

The document is oblivious to current climate science, which states categorically that future scenarios will see increases in the intensity, duration and frequency of drought events. These issues were raised in the workshop, these issues were discussed in the workshop, yet officers of your department have ignored this data and are instead are providing the TSSC with an unbalanced view to the contrary. Similarly, the document plays up reports of recoveries in Gunnedah and Eden; yet your officers have failed to indicate to the TSSC that these recoveries are amounting to a couple of hundred animals, and are insignificant in comparison to the declines of thousands and tens of thousands of animals reported in other parts of the country. DEWHA are misleading the TSSC into a belief that there is nothing wrong with koalas in Australia.

It is the opinion of the AKF scientists in attendance at the experts workshop that the only impediments to a national listing are numbers tabled for the Strathbogrie Ranges and the Otway Ranges in Victoria by Victorian Government managers, none of whom could give credible data to support their argument; they have not been able to do so for years. Yet while DEWHA officers and the chairman of the TSSC continue to question the voracity of AKF estimates, your department turns a blind eye to the lack of evidence underlying DSE estimates for these areas. AKF estimates for abundances in these two areas are far below those proposed by DSE. This lazy science has not been treated with a sufficiently critical eye, and may instead prove to be the latest stumbling block for meaningful protections for the koala. Might I suggest your department has one rule for the AKF, and another for everyone else?

To allay our concerns, and to allow us to reconcile our own figures with those proposed by DSE and produce the best quality science we can, we hope you will be able to provide us with the data and methodology used by DSE to support their assessments of the abundance of koalas in the Strathbogrie Ranges, and in the Otway Ranges. Additionally, the workshop summary alludes to a 'looming issue of overpopulation in the Adelaide

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Hills.' We therefore request the data and methodology used by the DEH to support their assessments of the abundance of koalas in the Adelaide Hills. We are confident that such a document does not exist (yet this assertion has been included in the workshop summary).

In order to provide baseline data for our own methodology, we would also request the data and methodology used by Mr. Roger Martin to support his assertion that there were 180,000 koalas in the Strathbogie Ranges in 1999, and the data and methodology used by the Queensland Government to support their assertion that there were 100,000-300,000 koalas in Queensland in 2006. While I had previously doubted that either of these documents exist, they have both been cited in advice to the minister from the TSSC (whilst under the chairmanship of Professor Beeton). Given the strong indications from both yourself and Prof. Beeton, can we now assume these documents do exist, and were subjected to a rigorous review by the TSSC before they were cited in advice to the minister?

We don't believe so.

Yet we ask for them in an attempt to convince you, the Minister, that the TSSC fails to properly assess available data that suits their political agenda – one rule for the AKF, another for everyone else. This is where you have misinterpreted my previous letter. AKF is not “shocked” that you have to rely on advice from the TSSC, we are “shocked” that you and your Chairman are unwilling to use a precautionary approach and instead choose to pretend to both the AKF, the media and the public that you have superior data to our nominations when clearly you do not. As AKF has said on many occasions, your Department spends more time defending than acting and again we ask you – list the koala temporarily while the TSSC conducts its review.

It is touching that you have written to me stressing the importance of ‘robust scientific processes’, but might I suggest you look to fix your own department before you seek to lecture to the AKF on such things because the current process is instead being conducted with anything but ‘robust scientific processes.’ When I worked for a Minister during the Vietnam War in the 1970s, the continual reluctance of any department to provide the Minister with good advice would have heads rolling and perhaps it is time for you to consider such action.

I am confident the koala people of Australia – should this nonsense continue - will take their concerns to the ballot box in due course.

Finally to recap. Please instruct Dr. Ivan Lawler to provide the following to Dr. Kerlin for our evaluation:

1. The data and methodology used by DSE to support their assessments of the abundance of koalas in the Strathbogie Ranges, and in the Otway Ranges
2. The data and methodology used by the DEH to support their assessments of the abundance of koalas in the Adelaide Hills
3. The data and methodology used by Mr. Roger Martin and assessed by the TSSC to support his assertion that there were 180,000 koalas in the Strathbogie Ranges in 1999
4. The data and methodology used by the Queensland Government and assessed by the TSSC to support their assertion that there were 100,000-300,000 koalas in Queensland in 2006

Yours Sincerely,

Deborah Tabart OAM
Chief Executive Officer
Australian Koala Foundation