

# Bid to give koalas legal protection

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ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

CONSERVATIONISTS have applied for southeast Queensland koalas to be listed as vulnerable.

If listed under federal laws, the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act will kick in, forcing anyone clearing land in koala habitat to ensure it does not affect the animal's prospects for survival.

Sustainability Minister Kate Jones last week released a report which confirmed koala numbers had declined by 64 per cent in the past decade.

Australian Koala Foundation chief executive Deborah Tahart yesterday accused the Government of sitting on the damning report for six months and releasing it only after inquiries by The Courier-Mail.

She slammed Ms High, former sustainability minister Andrew McNamara and Ms Jones for delaying its release.

"This document was not released willingly," Ms Tahart said.

"The Government's lack of moral courage is staggering. The data shows the koala is critically endangered. It's one step away from extinction."

Ms Jones said she had promised to release the report shortly after being elected and had done so, and had returned the koala task-force to look at the issue.

A tough new planning policy for koalas would also be in place by the end of the year and greater emphasis would be placed on koala protection in the new South East Queensland Regional Plan.

"Under the new planning policy mapping will identify areas of habitat to which planning and regulatory control will apply," Ms Jones said.

It would force developers to offset any damage to existing habitat.

Ms Tahart said the Government's record showed it was incapable of protecting the koala.

"The Koala Conservation Plan is the most watered down document I've ever seen," she said.

A spokesman for Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett said koalas were being assessed for listing, including whether individual populations should be listed.

The assessment was due for completion by September next year but might be finished sooner.



CRITICALLY endangered ... UK visitor Page Stone at Lone Pine Sanctuary. Picture: Liam Kilduff

Ms Tahart said that in the battle over whether remaining koala habitat should be cleared, the State Government consistently favoured developers.

"(Premier) Anna Bligh had repeatedly refused to meet with me. She won't even discuss it," Ms Tahart said.

At the turn of the last century, Queensland had millions of koalas

but these had been reduced to about 100,000 in the 1980s by shooting and clearing. The Koala Coast was long regarded as having the nation's strongest remaining koala colony but the development hot spot between Brisbane and the Gold Coast has progressively seen vegetation cleared despite state

and local government protection measures.

online

Have you noticed a decline in koala numbers? Tell us your story

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