

The Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala  
Submission by Colleen Wood

### **Introduction**

I manage and operate the Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter in Rawson (which is voluntarily run and self funded) and licensed by Dept of Sustainability and Environment to rehabilitate and release sick, injured and orphaned Native Wildlife.

This shelter concentrates on the rehabilitation of primarily Victorian koalas – admitting approx 100 per annum.

Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter has cared for koalas from all over Victoria. We operate the largest busiest koala rehabilitation centre in Victoria.

My expertise is in koala care and rehabilitation and I train and mentor likewise carers, zoo keepers and veterinarians across the State.

### **Purpose of this Submission**

The purpose of this submission is to provide further information, evidence and observations in relation to the following:

1. The iconic status of the koala and the history of its management;
2. Estimates of koala populations and the adequacy of current counting methods;
3. Knowledge of koala habitat;
4. Threats to koala habitat such as logging, land clearing, poor management, attacks from feral and domestic animals, disease and roads, and urban development;
5. The listing of the koala under the EPBC Act;
6. The adequacy of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy;
7. Appropriate future regulation for the protection of koala habitat;
8. Interaction of state and federal laws and regulations

### **Evidence and Observations**

#### **1. The iconic status of the koala and the history of its management**

Koalas remain iconic with Sam the Koala, who was cared for by Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter re creating the awareness of their uniqueness and the compromising challenges they continue to face. A koala depicts the qualities and size of a 2 year old child – with a non threatening, helpless, curled up disposition.

Past management practises have only continued to contribute to the decline and disturbance to the existing population with the transmission of genetical and bacterial problems from the islands to the very fragmented mainland.

Previous sterilised translocated programs have failed (ref: 1999 Snake Island translocation where majority of the koalas died soon after translocation)

The most recent management plans with the sterilisation of the over populated koalas is causing long term suffering and illness to the koala that are being treated and translocated. Some koalas are attempting to disperse back to their origin and being impacted by dogs and cars in their 100km + expeditions.

The current hormone implant, Levonorgestrol (a female human hormone implant) decreases the milk supply for the lactating mother and thus the joey is starved. The implant is given at a human rate, with two implants inserted into an animal that weighs 10 times less than a human. There is very little documentation and post monitoring being conducted to show that these recent translocation are successful. Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter has begun to post monitor and take in

sick koalas as result of sterilised/translocated koalas. We recently had euthanased a Raymond Island male koala that had been sterilised (in preparation for translocation), who presented with a peritonitis to the surgical site, eight weeks after his surgery and release.

We are currently have in care a French Island mother koala (sterilised - with two hormone implants) and her female koala joey, who were translocated from French Island to Bunyip State Park. They had remained at the release site for 6 weeks and were retrieved from the base of a burnt gum tree. Blood results have shown anorexia, malnourishment and ongoing renal failure for both individuals. The mothers' health continued to be unstable, the hormone implants were removed 2 weeks after coming into care, and only last week (two months into care), I had no option but to have the mother euthanased. The Post mortem revealed a very pale shrunken uterus along with mottling to her kidneys. Her joey is finally responding to treatment. To date my wildlife shelter has paid just over \$1000 in Veterinary treatment for both of these koalas.

#### **Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee**

The current practise with translocating koalas that are over browsing isolated areas, need to be properly reviewed. The current methodology with sterilisation (both hormone implants and vasectomy) is not working! There needs to be a set criteria and each animal thoroughly examined and all information regarding that individual recorded for future reference. Wildlife Shelters need to be informed and prepared for any issues that may arise and supported with such. Post monitoring of any translocated koala needs to be done for a minimum of one year following translocation to ensure success/failure of projects. It is an animal welfare issue with what is currently transpiring. Dedicated, experienced vets, need to be encouraged and supported to ensure adequate treatment is being provided to the care of koalas, with initial assessment and ongoing treatment, to ensure a viable outcome.

## **2. Estimates of koala populations and the adequacy of current counting methods;**

The koala population in Victoria has only ever been estimated. There are no accurate mapping methods currently in place.

Victorias Koala managements Strategy shows a map of koala sightings/locations in Victoria which was solely produced by school children completing a survey sent to a number of schools Victorian wide. How validated would be this research?

Koalas in Victoria are more social than their cousins in NSW and Qld, however there is very little known, minimal research conducted, about how large their territory is.

Framlingham forests koala population was estimated at 4000. In the 2007 Framlingham forest fires no more than 300 koalas were brought into care. For each one that was retrieved, four were found dead which would make the original estimation 1500 – significantly lower than the 4000 estimation. The Strzelecki koala is genetically unique and has been severely compromised as result of 2009 fires.

#### **Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee**

Proper mapping methods done on sight should be implemented such as those designed and utilised by koala biologist Dr Stephen Phillips, rather than inaccurate estimations done by a produced map via a computer program based behind a desk without stepping foot in the actual region. Significant effects such as drought, fire and disease needs to be incorporated into such plans.

## **3. Knowledge of habitat**

Koalas are at risk due to habitat fragmentation and thus isolation. Koalas are being forced to live on the fringe and in urbanisation which in turn is compromising their health, whether it be by disease or human impact eg cars, dogs, fuel reduction fires etc.

The eucalypt, to which their nutritional needs are completely dependent upon, is becoming drier and less palatable due to the climate changes and increased fire frequencies.

Their home ranges have to increase due to the inadequacies of quality feed and shelter.

Due to the koalas dependency on the leaf for water consumption there is a significant increase in renal failure. >90 % of koalas admitted to Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter need fluid replacement on

admittance due to dehydration. This is evaluated by blood and urine testing. This number has greatly increased over 15 year period when only <20% of koalas needed fluid therapy.

Scientific research needs to be conducted in Victoria to test soil and leaf samples for water and nutrition in koala areas and former koala areas.

There are regions in Victoria where populations are becoming locally extinct.

#### **Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee**

That resources be implemented to protect and restore koala habitat and research conducted in areas both where koalas reside and where they have previously been.

#### **4. Threats to koala habitat such as logging, land clearing, poor management, attacks from feral and domestic animals, disease and roads, and urban development**

Reasons koalas come into care at Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter

- Orphaned
- Renal failure
- Road hit
- Dog attacked
- Diseased
- Fire – displaced and burnt
- Other : cow attack, **tree felling**, displaced, malnourished, starving, genetical issues etc

Due to their slow metabolism with healing, koalas with an open injury are often in care for up to three months, and fire victims can be in care for up to 12 months. There is neither funding nor encouragement thereof for research on the epidemiology and pathogenesis of diseases impacting on the Victorian koala.

More support is needed to wildlife carers who provide adequate care for this species. They are very expensive (Veterinary costs) and timely to care for and one has to be completely dedicated to ensure this intrinsic animals needs are met. Eg: collecting eucalypt daily etc. Inappropriate care is also having an impact on the koala.

Due to some of the population being in isolated areas we are seeing greater genetical impact on certain population which will in turn is compromising and will impact on the future of this animal (ref: Attachment 1 – Sandy Point Koalas)

#### **5. The listing of the koala under the EPBC Act**

The koala needs to be listed under the EPBC Act as the current status in Victoria does not reflect the threats to this species and the population decline as a result of fire activity and climate changes, an increase in disease and poor management.

#### **6. The adequacy of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy**

This document is not being adequately implemented. There is a failure to better understand this animal and lack of funds to better understand the health and disease that they are susceptible to. In Victoria it is currently up to Wildlife Carers to present feedback relating to significant deaths and unusual presentations (which are being missed). Very few wildlife carers know of the existence of the Koalas Management Strategies and Koala Conservation, and as a result vital information is lost. There have been instances of the genetically unique Strzelecki koala being released well away from their region, as a result of this ignorance. As well as locating information on ear tagged individuals as they present for care.

All koalas that are admitted to Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter are thoroughly examined and each case documented and if for any reason an animal dies or it is euthanased it is then post mortemed to gain more knowledge regarding this cryptic species.

The Victorian Koala Management Strategy has listed as high priority that the koala be dealt with by specialised carers. This species needs specialist assessment in addition to specialised care. Incorrect

ageing or diagnosis by well-meaning carers in the long-term is a waste of time, money, as survivorship of aged or diseased individuals is greatly reduced. Plus it only further encourages cross transmissions. (Without aging, proper diagnosis, carers attempt to rehabilitate what might be an aged or diseased individual and in turn will and have release such back into the wild.) Due to their slow metabolic rate and hence healing, effects of mismanagement are not immediately seen. The efficiency of the shelter has recently been compromised due to DSE's eucalyptus supply recently being dismissed (January 2011). The Department had given their support from 2004, when Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter took on a large number of translocated Raymond Island koalas and the local DSE were instigated to help by collecting gum from areas that were being track cleared or fuel reduced, three times per week. This took some pressure of the shelter and allowed Southern Ash to rehabilitate large numbers of koalas without too much pressure on seeking gum twice daily.

**Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee**

There needs to be a State Database for all information regarding koalas that is easily assessable by those who deal with these animals on a periodical basis.

Significant funds needs to be allocated to ensure and encourage research for understanding the health and disease, and for assessment, and post monitoring of potential translocated koalas and rehabilitated released animals. This animal needs to be recognised as a 'specialised care' species amongst wildlife carers due to their intrinsic needs and specialised care. This will help with implementing care standards and research and ensuring the koala is adequately raised, rehabilitated and released. Support needs to be given to carers looking after this iconic animal.

**7. Appropriate future regulation for the protection of koala habitat**

Encourage support with interested parties eg: koala carers, Wildlife Management Staff, Friends of Groups, Landcare, timber industry, Shires and Departments to ensure that adequate care and management is being implemented

**8. Interaction of state and federal laws and regulations**

The koala needs to be listed as a specialised species with wildlife shelters/carers in Victorian to better manage and equate all the issues that are impacting on them.

**Other**

The reason I became so involved with this animal was due to wildlife carers refusing to care for koalas, because of their special needs and failure to survive. I actually found the opposite and have had much success with rehabilitation; however they are intrinsic, and for each life lost a reason has to be sought. I believe that the Victorian koala will be the first koala species to be impacted by climate change due to their mass size and their dependency on damp/wet forest where the gum has higher moisture content. I believe I am already seeing these signs - but there is no research being conducted. All Victorian veterinary procedures, blood evaluations, drug recommendations are based on NSW and Qld sub specie koalas. We know morphologically these animals differ and I am convinced that internally they also do. Eg. Penicillin based drugs leading to high death mortality in Vic koalas.

I am hopeful we can one day invent a small transmitting microchip, which can satellite in on koalas that would be less invasive than a radio collar, and be able to record date for the duration of a lifetime, to enable us to post monitor rehabilitated or translocated individuals from a distance.

## **Summary**

**Overall funding is required for further research and care of this animal and it needs to be listed as Threatened under the Flora & Fauna Act and Vulnerable under the EPBC Act to help secure the koalas future.**

**It is also imperative that it be listed as a specialised care species in Victoria so proper care and rehabilitation can be instigated.**

**In Victoria there needs to be ongoing support and resources provided, to vets and wildlife carers, to enable successful rehabilitation and research.**

**Research into the Strzelecki koala and appropriate habitat and corridors be left to enable this genetically unique animal to survive.**

**That a Database be established to monitor the State-wide issues.**

Thank you for the opportunity to present this submission to you for consideration by the Committee. I would be most pleased to discuss these matters with the Committee further.

## SANDY POINT KOALAS

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### Introduction

Southern Ash Wildlife Shelter (SAWS) is a voluntary, not for profit, incorporated wildlife shelter. We are licensed by the Department of Sustainability & Environment to raise and rehabilitate sick, injured and orphaned Native wildlife, and ensure release back into the wild.

As per our licence conditions - what cannot be successfully rehabilitated has to be euthanased.

SAWS concentrates on caring for koalas, larger gliders, endangered species, and is highly experienced with dealing with burnt wildlife. There are currently seven foster carers that are being mentored by the shelter who care for other Native species.

We admit over 100 koalas per year from over Gippsland and other parts of Victoria.

### Background of Sandy Point Koalas

The koala overpopulation problems in Victoria are often the result of habitat fragmentation which does not allow adequate dispersal. Severe overpopulation and degradation of habitat to the point of large-scale koala mortality has been well documented and Sandy Point is an area pinpointed and was impacted with such in 1988-89

Reduction of koala populations to small numbers, whether by translocation or by population die back, leads to a 'genetic bottleneck' as the populations' genetic diversity is greatly reduced. The low genetic diversity, as a result of inbreeding, reduces fertility and reproductive success, and can affect the koalas' immune system and increase the mortality rate through disease (as you are aware death rates have increased in Sandy Point)

Inbreeding will pose a serious threat to the koalas' long term survival

*Southern Ash* has admitted a total of 6 Sandy Point koalas.

All these koalas have been female. With tooth wear class signifying ages were from 9months - 4years.

These koalas display morphological differences from what is seen in the 'general' population

- heads are significantly rounder/flatter
- narrow mouth
- eye sockets smaller – thus creating 'pin eyes'
- Limited muscle mass in upper shoulders
- Odd behaviour
- Clumsy and uncoordinated movement

They have a tendency to overfeed; this may be due to the narrow mandible. Their pelt is light coloured and varies from fluffy to spindly.

Of the six koalas that have been transferred to shelter:

- One koala has been released today.
- Two hand raised joeys are still in care
- Three have been euthanased

## Inquiry into the Status, Health and Sustainability of Australia's Koala Population

An old aged koala in poor condition; and a mother and joey were euthanased due to their unusual behaviour showing inability to react/survive in the wild.

The female koala released has a red ear tag for monitoring purposes (this is done under and in conjunction with a Scientific Permit). It is inserted in her Left ear and has number '41' on one side and 51653583 (shelters ph no) on the underside.

I feel these koalas have genetical issues that are impacting on these individuals, and the population, as a result of inbreeding. We have done some basic blood analysis on each of these koalas. The blood results show renal failure and anaemia. This could be due to a lack of moisture in the eucalyptus leaf, or chemical compound imbalance in the soil and leaf or possibly something yet undetermined eg disease.

Without scientific research being conducted into the Victorian koalas we are limited with diagnosing the issue.

Currently any analysis from dead specimens is dealt with using limited resources at Melbourne Uni and unusual samples sent to the Koala Research Team at Sydney Uni.

SAWS is determined to ensure that this unique icon animal is given the best care and treatment possible. Very important to us that research is conducted into the Sandy point koalas. MRI's are going to be a less invasive methodology as well as blood work eg: Chromosome count, DNA analysis

Any work such as blood analysis, PMs, vet procedures is funded by SAWS. We are limited with time and money and the shelter will not be able to sustain such without ongoing support.

For the reasons listed above, it is important that the Sandy Point koalas be released back to the origin of capture and I encourage any local persons to partake in the post monitoring of the Sandy Point koalas.