

Koala science pledged to help assess population decline

After the findings of the Senate inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's Koala population were released on the 22 September, the Australian Koala Foundation has pledged its comprehensive bank of scientific research to aid assessment of the conservation status of the iconic animal, now extended until February 2012.



Credit: CSIRO/Robert Kerton

Recognising urgency for comprehensive assessment of declining Koala numbers, Australian Greens Leader Bob Brown worked with the government to establish the [Senate inquiry](#). It digested the latest population data and 101 submissions from a comprehensive range of stakeholders, including researchers, non-government organisations, administrators and personal advocates.

The Koala Research Network (KRN), The Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) and scientific representatives for the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC) were key presenters of research data on the current distribution of the species and growing pressures on it. The data is ultimately being re-considered by the TSSC, the government's principal advisory body, up to the new February deadline.

Both the KRN and the AKF are urging rapid protection of the Koala, alarmed at the drop in their numbers across eastern Australia in the last ten years. Pressures from human expansion are taking a toll. There is, however, enduring debate over whether Victoria's Koala numbers are expanding or contracting.

The KRN records that there are now between 50 000 and 100 000 koalas left in the wild. The AKF, meanwhile is more precise, having so far spent 8 million dollars over the last 20 years conducting an extensive [national koala distribution mapping project](#) with various research partners. It puts total Koala numbers at between 43 515 and 84 615 – an appreciable difference.

In response to the inquiry report's Recommendation 6: '...that the Australian Government undertake habitat mapping across the koala's national range...', and Recommendation 7: '...that the habitat maps be used to identify and protect important habitat in known koala ranges', CEO of the AKF, Deborah Tabart OAM wrote to Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Tony Burke committing her organisation's comprehensive mapping data and process to compliment and support the identification of remaining koala strongholds.

'The Koala Habitat Atlas (KHA) mapping technique developed by the AKF identifies and ranks habitats, irrespective of whether there are Koalas resident or not, and is clearly addressed by the Senate Inquiry. Identifying these empty areas can pave the way for recovery or reintroduction of koalas,' she wrote.

'More research about how dramatic the decline is can wait – protecting the habitat is vital at this stage,' says Tabart. The KRA, made up of 60 Koala researchers, concurs. It has also said it stands ready to further assist the government. 'Conservation actions need to be based on the best available scientific evidence,' it submitted to the Senate inquiry. 'The case of national action to fund koala research is urgent.'

Queensland hosts the majority of the Koala's range. Surveys by the Queensland Government (2008) and the KRN report Koala reductions of up to 80 per cent between 2005 and 2008 on the fringes of the state's densest development areas.

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