

Central Queensland Koala Volunteers



AUTUMN EDITION 2019

Goats eradicated from St Bees Island

Congratulations! to the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service – Marine Parks for the eradication of the feral goats from St Bees Island.

The resident goat population was a major part of our island experience from the late 1990's through to about 2007. At the population's peak, we would count 40 or 50 goats on any hill slope. The impact on the vegetation was severe with grasslands being reduced to sparse herb lands dominated by pest plant species, and wooded plant communities being denuded of understorey vegetation. From the koala management perspective, seedlings of koala food tree species (blue gum, poplar gum) were absent and saplings were very rare. This lack was attributed to browsing by goats.

Since 2007 thousands of goats have been destroyed. Vegetation recovery was rapid and we celebrated the appearance of the first seedlings of blue gum and casuarina around Homestead Bay.

This decade long control program required long term resourcing and effort by the Department of Environment and Science Marine Parks team and their persistence is applauded.

Alistair Melzer May 2019

Towards strategic local koala conservation action.

Dr Alistair Melzer

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April 2019

The Commonwealth

It has been seven years since the Commonwealth Government approved conservation advice for the koala in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory (<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species/pubs/197-conservation-advice.pdf>).

It is over four years since the expiry of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009-2014

(<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/national-koala-conservation-mgt-strategy-2009-2014>).

There is no Commonwealth recovery plan for this vulnerable species. The Commonwealth SPRAT Profile (Citation: Department of the Environment (2019). *Phascolarctos cinereus (combined populations of Qld, NSW and the ACT)* in Species Profile and Threats Database, Department of the Environment, Canberra. Available from: <http://www.environment.gov.au/sprat>.

Accessed Mon, 8 Apr 2019 11:16:53 +1000) states: *Recovery Plan required, a recovery plan for the Koala (combined populations of Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory) will be developed and is to commence following the expiration of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy in 2014. This is more than four years overdue.*

The State of Queensland

The Queensland Government's approach to koala conservation was redefined through the deliberations of the Queensland Koala Expert Panel. The mandated focus of the Koala Expert Panel was the South East Queensland Planning District (SEQPD), although it did make broad recommendations for the rest of Queensland

(<https://environment.des.qld.gov.au/wildlife/koalas/pdf/qld-koala-expert-panel-report-2017.pdf>). The Panel recommended that a new direction for koala conservation in Queensland should include six key elements:

- A strategic, coordinated approach;
- Protection of koala habitat;
- Strategic landscape-scale habitat restoration;
- Coordinated threat reduction and koala population management;
- Strategic community partnerships and engagement;
- Targeted mapping, monitoring, research and reporting.

The State Government accepted the recommendations for application to the SEQPD, but decided to await the outcomes from the SEQPD before considering their application to the rest of Queensland.

While the State trials the SEQPD management approach and the Commonwealth delays, the threatening processes to koalas and habitat continue across the state

The report of the Koala Expert Panel noted that outside of the SEQPD koalas and their habitat are facing the same pressures as they have been within the planning district. So, while the State awaits the outcomes of the implementation of the Panel's recommendations in SEQPD, the threats to koalas and koala habitat are ongoing. Irrevocable planning decisions are continuing to decide the fate of koalas and their habitat decades in the future.

A framework for regional action

The lesson from the review of the South East Queensland koala management program by the Koala Expert Panel was the need for conservation management and planning that included multiple levels of government, community, NGO's and industry (Rhodes *et al.* 2017). Without the involvement of all the key stakeholders, the regional long-term persistence of the koala is unachievable. A first step is meaningful strategic planning to ascertain the stakeholders, and to define and prioritise the areas of interest (Melzer 2013).

A recent review of koalas across the Clarke-Connors ranges (Melzer *et al.* 2018) identified three broad management units in that region. These are:

- the Clarke-Connors hills and ranges;
- the coastal hills and low lands around Sarina; and
- around St Lawrence.

Key stakeholders for each zone reflect the principal land-users, associated regulatory and planning bodies in State and Local government, as well as key non-government organisations (Melzer 2013).

Melzer *et al.* (2018) recommended that a broad management framework was required for each of the three zones to manage the diverse and competing land uses, and development pressures, as well as the multiple layers of regulation (especially around Sarina and St Lawrence).

The Koala Expert Panel identified three major drivers of koala decline in Queensland. These are:

- Koala death and injury;
- Habitat degradation;
- Habitat destruction.

There are three primary drivers of gross threatening processes:

- Climate change;
- Land management;
- Land development.

Commonwealth, State and local government legislation and regulation are the predominant constraining factors on the consequences of land management and land development.

Community-based koala hospitals and carer networks are the only agents that remediated the direct threats to individual animals.

Regional initiatives

There are two regional initiatives that are likely to have local conservation benefits.

- Establish a **regional koala recovery group** modelled on the Commonwealth threatened species recovery teams (see <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/recovery-teams>). Such a group should facilitate communication, coordination and prioritisation amongst the primary stakeholders. The group should comprise representatives of the key stakeholders. Matters for high priority attention could include koala friendly

strategic planning, threat mitigation (from vehicles, dogs, fire, clearing), and koala aware land management practices – especially in relation to fire and clearing.

- Establish a **koala welfare community group** to promote the establishment of a regional koala hospital, as well as coordinate the recovery, care and strategic release of sick and injured koalas. This group should include key stakeholders including veterinarians, wildlife carers, land managers, and relevant local and state representatives who are locally based.

It is not clear that undertaking the above strategic actions needs to be government led. Rather, a community base with local champions is likely to achieve local conservation and welfare outcomes. Most likely, Government will support and cooperate with community initiatives that are consistent with State or Commonwealth policy or regulation. Acceptance and/or participation by relevant government agencies in any regional recovery group is a critical element for success.

The *National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009-2014* had recommendations in relation to community engagement and to the care of sick, injured and orphaned koalas.

The *Koala Expert Panel* highlighted:

1. the importance of strategic and coordinated decision making;
2. community engagement; and
3. the role of koala hospitals and carers in attempting to mitigate direct impacts on koala populations.

The regional *Clarke-Connors Range Study* references the need for strategic and coordinated decision making around regional koala conservation efforts.

It is likely that proactive, inclusive, community-based, regional initiatives that are:

1. inclusive and collaborative;
2. evidence-based; and
3. avoid political advocacy

will provide pathways for local koala conservation gains.

References

Melzer, A. (2013) Regional planning for central Queensland koalas: a framework for planning. In Flint, A. and Melzer, A. (eds) *Conserving central Queensland koalas*. Pp. 130-133, Koala Research

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Melzer, A., Santamaria, F., and Allen, S. (2018) *The koalas, koala habitat and conservation management in the Clarke-Connors ranges and associated landscapes*. A report to the Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads. Koala Research CQ, School of Medical and Applied Sciences, CQUniversity, Rockhampton.

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Guinea and Hamil grasses destroy relic koala habitat.

Tall tropical pest grass species are able to destroy northern Australia's tropical eucalypt communities. This destruction is a result of the increased fire flame height, the greater fire intensity, and, in certain circumstances, more frequent fires.

Although we consider our eucalypts being fire adapted species, lower tree heights in tropical Australia leaves the trees vulnerable to repeated burning of the canopy. In central Queensland Guinea grass and the related Hamil grass directly threaten the eucalypts that they grow beneath. Guinea grass grows to about 2m height, while Hamil grass grows to 3.5m. These grass heights raise the flame height 1.5 to 2.5 m above that produced by native rangeland grass species (e.g. black spear grass). Repeated, often annual, burning results in the repeated scorching of the eucalypt canopy.

These impacts directly threaten koalas and eventually destroy koala habitat.

The consequence of repeated burning of Guinea/Hamil grass stands can be seen in the photograph below. Here a relic strip of roadside koala habitat (poplar box, narrow leaf ironbark woodland), near Rockhampton, is subject to frequent burning by the Department of Transport and Main Roads as part of their routine management program. An understorey dominated by Guinea and Hamil grasses is apparent as a darker green in the photo. The paler grass understorey is dominated by thatch grass. Tree death associated with the Guinea/Hamil grass is clearly evident.

The impact of these grasses on koala habitat can be eliminated by grazing or slashing instead of burning.

Membership

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Mission

CQ Koala Volunteers seek the conservation of the koala and other tree living mammals in Central Queensland by

- *Supporting research into koalas, other arboreal mammals and their habitat through (a) providing volunteer support to research projects, and (b) assisting in the raising of funds for research and the volunteer teams;*
- *Developing public awareness of the needs of koalas, tree living mammals and their habitat requirements generally;*
- *Fostering community support for koalas and tree living mammals generally;*
- *Encouraging and assisting with the development of habitat rehabilitation projects where necessary through the region;*
- *Supporting the rehabilitation and release of sick, injured or displaced koalas and tree living mammals.*

The Central Queensland Koala Volunteers are not about stopping development. They seek to encourage planned development, which allows for the co-existence of koalas and other tree living mammals with human activity.

Funds are used to buy equipment for the researchers, to fund volunteer field teams and provide limited support for animal carers. Donations may also be made to the Koala Research Centre of Central Queensland and are tax deductible.

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