

# Are koalas in decline?

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When I want to know how many sheep there are, I just look up the Australian Commodity Statistics. There were 174.3 million sheep in 1970, 118.6 million at the turn of the century (year 2000) and 99.3 million in 2003—obviously a species in decline. But it is never as easy when I want to know how many native animals there are. The best advice on koalas seems to be that there are somewhere between 100,000 and one million in Australia. That's an order-of-magnitude difference of 1,000 per cent—extracted from a published paper in a reputable journal.

So I began my fortnightly column for *The Land* newspaper in March. After I sent the piece off, I was half expecting to be corrected, to discover that there had been a recent koala census after all. Instead, I received an e-mail from a scientist actively involved in koala research suggesting that 'you have identified an issue there for sure'.

How is it that, as a nation, we can care so much about koalas but have no real idea about how many there are?

There is a *National Koala Conservation Strategy* that has been developed by the Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council. This strategy states that 'on a national basis the koala is not yet threatened with extinction, however, there is no doubt that it is declining and the time to act is now'. The main management issues for koalas in the wild are identified in the strategy as '(tree) clearing, fragmentation and degradation of habitat, disease, natural disasters, roads, dogs and over-browsing'.

The strategy contains no information on the relative impact, or potential impact, of these threats on koala population numbers locally or nationally, nor any information to substantiate the claim that koala numbers are in decline.



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It is generally agreed that thousands of koalas were killed and many hundreds maimed in the January 2003 bushfires. Indeed, in terms of outright destruction to wilderness areas, the bushfires were an environmental disaster of incredible proportions. The many reports published since the bushfires indicate that advances in fire science and fire-fighting technology are being negated by a political reluctance to reduce massive fuel build-ups. Yet, interestingly, the national koala strategy does not identify controlled burning as a potential programme for safeguarding koala habitat. Furthermore, an influential environment group, the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF), categorically denies that 'fuel reduction' is an issue for koala conservation.

The AKF formed in 1986 with its purpose to 'save the koala'. The organization has raised millions of dollars for koala conservation and even successfully campaigned to have koalas listed

in the United States as an endangered species in Australia. The political and fund-raising success of the group has been aided by its claiming that there are fewer than 100,000 koalas remaining, with numbers on the decline.

Yet by simply counting up a few of the known koala populations, it is evident that there would be well over 100,000 koalas in Australia—59,000 in the mulga-lands of southwest Queensland, 25,000 in southeast Queensland, 8,200 in North Coast NSW, and 27,000 on Kangaroo Island South Australia. This quick count does not include Victorian koala populations, with a Monash University researcher suggesting in 1998 that the Victorian koala population could total one million.

We know that the sheep is a species in decline in Australia, but it seems we have no idea how koala numbers are trending. If it is true to say 'if you can't measure it, you can't manage it', then koala conservation is far from secure.

The lack of information and honest reporting on koala numbers perhaps reflects a broader issue for conservation in Australia. It is the koala as victim, the koala as a species in decline, which attracts funding, and thus power and influence for organizations such as the AKF. There would be no incentive to report that koala populations are doing just fine. Indeed, what incentive really exists to develop appropriate management strategies? This same dilemma has worked against the development of effective management plans for the protection of other icon species, including the Murray cod.

It might well be concluded that the economics of conservation in Australia currently favour ignorance and failure. What a sorry state of affairs!

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