

Many predators putting vulnerable koalas at further risk

Bob Brown
May 5, 2012 - 3:00AM

Advertisement

"Whenever they see a koala in a tree they do not cut it down, they wait till the next day when the koala has gone and then they cut it down," a Walcha forestry official reassured one inquirer in the 1980s.

Logging at Eden on the NSW south coast this year has similarly eroded the habitat of about 50 remnant koalas. Scientists believe this isolated pocket of koalas is genetically important for the survival of the species. Koalas, like Tasmanian devils, have little genetic variety and so are vulnerable to new disease outbreaks. Retaining the genetic diversity is critical for their survival.

The announcement on Monday by the Environment Minister, Tony Burke, that the koala will be listed as "vulnerable to extinction" in Queensland, NSW and the ACT is a breakthrough after a century of inaction in Canberra.

In 1927, after years of mounting slaughter for the global fur trade, nearly 1 million koalas were shot in Queensland. It took a presidential decree in the US, banning koala fur imports, to end the cull. The local indifference of the 1920s was echoed in Queensland when the Premier, Campbell Newman, denounced Burke's listing as "more mindless greentape and delayed obstruction by Canberra".

Watch that word "greentape" coming from the vocal cords of more politicians and resource exploiters in the future as they move to dismantle the already inadequate environment protection laws.

Left to his own devices, Burke would have done nothing. In 2010, his predecessor, Peter Garrett, decided not to list the koala as endangered, saying the states could deal with it.

There was no acceptance of that failure from the feisty head of the Australian Koala Foundation, Deborah Tabart. The foundation mapped every region's koala population and habitat, estimating the nation-wide count to be less than 100,000. Even optimistic experts put the number at 400,000. Compare these figures with the natural population of some millions before the 1927 Queensland slaughter when more than double the present koala population was killed in one shooting season.

Tabart has long insisted on a national rescue plan. I contacted her and promised a Senate inquiry, which I referred in 2010.

The inquiry met last year in Brisbane, Melbourne and Canberra, drawing big audiences and 101 submissions. Some contained startling material. Threats to the koala's survival include loss of its woodland habitat and diseases such as chlamydia and an HIV-like virus. Seven koalas were mauled to death by dogs in a Queensland suburban backyard, the Brisbane hearings were told.

West of the divide, packs of wild dogs are threatening hapless koalas that come to ground to move from tree to tree. Last decade's drought has reduced the robust koala populations in Queensland and near Gunnedah in NSW by up to 80 per cent. In some areas where, in the 1990s, koalas were found on hillsides and ridge tops, they are now confined to stream-side trees. Suburban sprawl, motorways and destruction of habitat are rapidly eroding once rich koala territory. However, so far as the committee was told, no one has ever been punished for killing koalas.

The Senate committee called on the government and its advisers to think again. Hence, the minister's limited listing this

week of the koala as vulnerable to extinction.

What difference will it make? None, unless he and his successors put money into a recovery plan aimed not just at stopping the decline in numbers but to have the koala population increasing once again. None, in Victoria and South Australia, where Burke's listing does not apply. None, unless the minister polices his listing and is prepared to stop developments such as open-cut coal mines and coal seam gas drilling that destroy woodland habitats. And certainly none under plans by both Labor and the Coalition to cut "greentape" by the watering down and palming off of federal environmental laws to the states.

Before I leave the Senate, Larissa Waters and I will introduce a Koala Protection Bill - another idea from Tabart - in the spirit of the US law of 1940, which brought the American bald eagle back from the brink of extinction by protecting it from human predators.

Greater public and political effort is required in the years ahead if we are to stop this magnificent creature joining the other 18 Australian mammals gone to extinction since 1788.

Senator Bob Brown is the former leader of the Australian Greens.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/many-predators-putting-vulnerable-koalas-at-further-risk-20120504-1y3z8.html>