



# Koala Expert Panel

Interim report summary

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## Background

In late 2015, a Uniquist report entitled '[South East Queensland Koala Population Study](#)' showed clear statistical evidence of dramatic declines in koala populations in South East Queensland (SEQ). The report showed a decline in densities of around 80% in the Koala Coast area and 54% in Pine Rivers between 1996 and 2014, despite existing protection measures. In fact, rather than a slowing of the rate of decline, there was some evidence to suggest the rate of decline had actually accelerated.

This report prompted a review of koala conservation policies by the Queensland Government and the establishment of a Koala Expert Panel (the Panel) to review existing measures and make recommendations about the most appropriate and realistic actions to reverse the decline in koala population sizes and ensure the long-term persistence of koala populations in the wild within SEQ.

The Panel is working under Terms of Reference that require an interim report identifying where current policy and management have failed, outcomes from consultation and a work plan for the following six months. The Panel has also provided input into a number of immediate actions that will allow the Queensland Government to continue with koala conservation work, without pre-empting any future changes that arise from the review.

Detailed below is a summary of the Panel's interim report.

## Consultation

Consultation to help inform the Panel's recommendations was conducted between September and November 2016. Consultation was conducted in two parts: an online survey to allow a broad range of groups and individuals to have their say on the issues that are having the greatest impact to koala conservation, and written submissions and/or face-to-face consultations to allow the Panel to capture the views of key stakeholders.

The results of the consultation highlighted that loss of koala habitat is considered to be the threat having the greatest impact on koalas, and that urban development is considered to be the primary cause of habitat loss. The consultation also highlighted that some of the existing state and local government measures for koala conservation are considered not to be working and improvements to these measures, as well as greater ongoing resources, are required to ensure the long term persistence of koalas in the wild. Potential solutions suggested were wide ranging, but focused on greater protection of habitat and enforcement, improved mapping and increased efforts to address direct threats. Further details are included in the attached consultation summary.

## Immediate actions

Before establishment of the Panel, the Queensland Government developed a number of immediate actions as follows:

- a habitat mapping project with the aim of improving koala habitat mapping in SEQ,
- a revised ongoing monitoring program
- the creation of two koala precincts in SEQ.

The Panel was asked to review these actions and provide recommendations. The Panel was broadly supportive of the proposed work to address the current inadequacy of publicly available koala habitat mapping in SEQ and a re-evaluation of the Queensland Government's koala monitoring program. For each of these projects the Panel has provided advice and will continue to work closely with the teams implementing those projects.

With regards to the creation of koala precincts, the Panel supports the idea of strategically focusing koala conservation activities in specific areas that will ensure the long term persistence of koalas in those areas. However, the Panel has recommended the creation of Koala Conservation Landscapes at a landscape scale (e.g. thousands of hectares) that includes legislative protections and direct reduction of threats.

## Summary of key failures

As required by the Terms of Reference, the Panel has undertaken a preliminary assessment of a number of areas where current koala policy and management have failed, including reviewing recent policy initiatives, planning regulation and management. The assessment was based on the consultation results, review of the 2008 Koala Taskforce recommendations, assessment of loss of koala habitat and review of the current and past legislation and management initiatives. The Panel has identified that the key failures from a policy and management perspective are:

Issue	Details
Existing planning and vegetation management legislation is only capable, at best, of slowing habitat loss and impacts on koala populations	Habitat loss data indicates that the introduction of legislation and policy initiatives since 2008 has had very little impact in slowing the rate of loss. Legislation is currently designed to facilitate urban development within the urban footprint, including in areas where koalas occur and therefore is not constructed to halt further loss of koala habitat or impacts on koala populations. This is exacerbated by a focus almost exclusively on impacts on koala habitat, rather than impacts on both habitat and populations. This is an issue, because significant impacts can occur on koalas even where no habitat is lost or degraded.
Complexity of the regulatory framework	Inconsistencies and complexity are major issues with implementing planning legislation, due to the complex interaction between a large number of instruments that apply at the local, state and Commonwealth levels. This makes it problematic to consistently apply the legislation and likely results in inferior outcomes for koalas.
Inability of the legislation to address cumulative impacts	The existing legislation—except partially through the South East Queensland Regional Plan (SEQRP)—lacks the ability to deal with cumulative impacts. This arises from case by case assessment and approval processes that generally ignore the cumulative landscape-scale impacts and requirements for koalas. This issue requires a strategic landscape-scale approach that deals explicitly with cumulative impacts.
State Planning Regulatory Provisions (SPRP) too limited in scope	Although the SPRP is one of the major policy instruments to protect koala habitat, it applies to very few areas outside of the Koala Coast and areas of Moreton Bay Regional Council, severely limiting its ability to protect koalas across SEQ.
Lack of a strategic regional vision	Although the SEQRP provides the regional context, it is lacking in detail, and the application of the planning regulation and legislation occurs primarily at the local and property scale.
Habitat mapping inadequate and inconsistent	Identified issues include a lack of mapping in some areas, the inadequate scale of the mapping, the inability to update and correct the mapping over time, and the inconsistent application of the mapping under the SPRP. Many local governments have also undertaken their own mapping using a range of different approaches and this has led to inconsistency in habitat mapping across SEQ.
Regulation, education and extension has failed to modify community and institutional behaviour	As a whole, community and institutional behaviour has not changed to accommodate the co-existence of koalas and their habitat within urban and rural living areas – especially in regard to koala friendly development, vehicle speeds, dog control, and broad public demands for the installation/retrofitting of protective infrastructure. This is despite vocal, passionate community advocacy, state and local government education and extension, as well as regulation.
Implementation of the offsets framework is problematic	The key issues include: issues around the ability of local governments to offset matters of state significance, a lack of resources for monitoring and enforcement, the inability to offset outside local government areas where the impact occurs, lack of additionality deriving from offset actions, and potential perverse outcomes.
Over-reliance on the planning legislation	The complex nature of threats to koalas in SEQ means that ensuring their long-term persistence will require a multi-faceted approach. The planning framework provides a key mechanism to reduce the impact of future urban development, but does little to reduce existing threats. There has tended to be an over-reliance on this as a single solution which ignores the importance of other issues such as reducing existing threats in urban areas, land management in rural areas, land clearing outside of the urban footprint, and ensuring resilience to climate change. In general these issues have been under-invested in by the State Government.
Resourcing inadequate	Despite a number of new initiatives by the State Government since 2008 the scale of

Issue	Details
	resourcing has generally been insufficient to implement activities at a sufficient size and scale to ensure the persistence of koala across SEQ (e.g., acquisition and habitat restoration activities). This issue received considerable attention in the community consultation.
Monitoring and evaluation inadequate	Although some monitoring of koala populations has been undertaken and this formed the basis of the Uniquist report, there are a number of issues with the monitoring program. These include: the lack of clear monitoring objectives and links to the monitoring activities, monitoring not being designed specifically to evaluate progress toward meeting koala recovery objectives, the limited focus on western SEQ koala populations where there is little information at present, and a lack of explicit links between monitoring outcomes and policy development. There has also been almost no evaluation of the success of specific management activities for the conservation of koalas.
Limited acknowledgment of variation in institutional arrangements and koala conservation needs across SEQ	SEQ is diverse and different local governments have different levels of resourcing, priorities, local institutional arrangements, regional koala habitat, political drivers, local conservation considerations, demographics of their constituents and so on. In addition, koalas in different parts of SEQ (e.g. eastern versus western) have quite different conservation requirements. Current policy and management responses do not deal adequately with these issues to ensure consistent decision making process and outcomes across different local government areas.
Lack of understanding of the distribution and dynamics of rural koala populations and their habitat	Research and monitoring have focussed predominantly on urban koala populations with little focus on rural population in the western part of SEQ.
Coordination is inadequate	Coordination among different levels of government and other organisations is often limited, leading to inconsistent approaches to management and planning and lack of sharing of information and data.

## Next steps

The interim report details the next steps that will contribute to the final report. The Panel will use the work done to date to inform recommendations for government's consideration that will inform a strategy for the protection of the vulnerable koala in SEQ. The final report will include specific recommendations for koala policy and management in SEQ and how the recommendations can be evaluated over time.

Some further consultation will occur with select stakeholders to evaluate draft recommendations to ensure they are feasible, have a high likelihood of success and can be achieved in realistic timeframes.

The final report is due in mid-2017.