

Proposed Koala Policy – Background Information

Policy Purpose

The Noosa Council acknowledges the Noosa public's concerns regarding the viability of local koala populations. Accordingly Council aims to develop a Koala Policy. The proposed Policy will dovetail with the Noosa Council's broader objective of protecting and enhancing Noosa's overall biodiversity values.

The specific objective of the Noosa Council Koala Management Policy will be:

To provide a coordinated and structured framework to effectively manage and conserve natural free ranging koala populations across their range within the Noosa Shire.

Background Information About Koalas

Koalas are an iconic species. As such they attract considerable attention, funding and effort. They are not the most vulnerable species within the Noosa Shire, however they are the species that engenders the most concern.

There are four Australian States where koalas exist in the wild. Although it is often claimed that koalas are nationally "endangered", in fact they are listed under National legislation as "vulnerable" in Queensland, NSW and the ACT. They are not declared in Victoria or South Australia. Nowhere are they currently declared endangered.

In South Australia, particularly at locales such as Kangaroo Island and the Adelaide Hills, koalas have been introduced and are now abundant in places where they do not historically belong. In some Victorian locales, koalas are so abundant that "they put unsustainable pressure on tree species, which poses a direct threat to the health of forests." (Victorian Koala Management Strategy).

At the other end of the spectrum, koala populations in many parts of Queensland and New South Wales are in rapid decline. The animals here face an increasing threat from urban expansion, disease, habitat loss, vehicle strike and predation by dogs.

Koalas are solitary animals and very territorial. They often act aggressively towards other individuals. Males are more aggressive.

The home range of an individual koala will depend on the habitat including available food trees. Within a socially stable group, home ranges overlap at the edges, and that is where any social interaction takes place.

Koalas are very fussy eaters. They consume foliage of certain eucalypts, although some non-eucalypts may contribute to the diet. Females produce just one young per year.

It is not known how many Koalas there are in the Noosa Shire area.

Locally, koalas have been sighted at Peregrin, Weyba, Sunshine Beach, Noosa National Park, Tewantin, Tewantin National Park, Tinbeerwah, Cooroibah, Cootharaba, Doonan, Lake Macdonald, Ringtail Creek, Yurol Forest, Pomona, Cooran, Kin Kin, Woondum National Park and elsewhere. Recently there have been verified reports of a koala on Noosa North Shore.

The current population of koalas in the Noosa Heads National Park Headland section on the northern side of the Park are probably related to the two males and three females purposely released there in 1966. These 5 koalas were translocated from forestry sites on Bribie Island.

As the *Queensland Koala Conservation Plan* notes, small fragmented populations may result in inbreeding and thus a reduction in genetic variation. This in turn can reduce the health potential and long-term viability of fragmented populations.

Koalas are subject to a range of diseases. Most significant and commonplace is *Chlamydiosis*, which causes blindness, infertility and sometimes death.

Translocation of Koalas

Translocation is controlled by the State Government. There are strict rules that must be met. Currently, koalas must be returned in close proximity to their place of origin. This is commonplace amongst regulations covering rehabilitated wildlife generally. It is designed to prevent indiscriminate translocations and to increase survival rates. Translocating animals to new areas has the potential to upset existing territories and also spread pathogens to new populations.

However the practice of sending koalas back to where they came from may mean that koalas in dangerous environments are returned to meet further misfortune.

In discussions about translocation with experts at the Australia Zoo Wildlife Hospital, it appears that:

- a) Koalas tend to be faithful to their home ranges and will attempt to return if moved out of them. Translocating koalas over 4 years of age, and particularly males, can be problematic because they have a tendency to want to find their original territory.
- b) It is not a simple matter to transfer koalas from different habitats. For example, koalas in seaside locales have very different nutrient loads to those in hinterland environments. Trying to put a coastal koala into an inland forest and vice-versa is not considered good practice. The experts also warned that coastal koalas are considerably less healthy as a result of the poor nutrients in trees growing on sandy soil.

Translocation is a complex issue, and rarely the easy solution that some people may believe. Noosa Council will need to take a cautious approach to translocation proposals.

Government Requirements

At the national level, environment protection of the Queensland, NSW and ACT koala populations as vulnerable species has strengthened the existing state protections for koalas. National environment protection doesn't mean that all activities in these areas will require federal environmental approval.

Only projects likely to have a very significant impact on the koala population in Queensland, New South Wales and the ACT will need to be assessed under national environment law.

The federal government has released referral *Guidelines* to assist proponents and decision makers in navigating the requirements of the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999 (EPBC Act)* as it relates to koala conservation.

At the state level, the *South East Queensland Koala Conservation State Planning Regulatory Provisions 2010 (SPRP)* applies to local planning instruments. This incorporates priority koala assessable development areas. Parts of Noosa are included in this designation. The SPRP regulates assessable development only, where that development meets certain triggers. There are a range of developments to which the provisions do not apply - e.g. self-assessable developments or those that are declared to be significant projects under the *State Development and Public Works Organisation Act 1971*, etc.

The *State Government Supported Community Infrastructure Koala Conservation Policy (2014)* outlines how state public sector entities will consider koala conservation outcomes in the planning and delivery of government supported community infrastructure such as roads and buildings.

The *Queensland Environmental Offsets Policy (2014)* provides the mechanism for the Planning Minister to declare an area to be a Biodiversity Development Offset Area (BDOA) for the purposes of achieving a net benefit for koala conservation. Offsets for koalas have already occurred in the Noosa Shire (e.g. Settlers Cove development) and will likely occur into the future.

Meanwhile the state's *Nature Conservation (Koala) Conservation Plan (2006)* and the *Nature Conservation (Koala) Management Program (2006 - 2016)* prescribe outcomes for Koala Habitat Areas and criteria against which development in these areas must be assessed. Parts of Noosa Shire are identified as "Koala Conservation Areas" and also "Urban Koala Areas". Notably the mapping for these areas excludes some urban locales where koalas are known to exist, and also ignores the bulk of the Noosa hinterland where koalas are known to exist. The planning and development provisions in the *Nature Conservation (Koala) Conservation Plan (2006)* and the *Nature Conservation (Koala) Management Program (2006 - 2016)* have now been superseded by the *South East Queensland Koala Conservation State Planning Regulatory Provisions 2010 (SPRP)*.

Noosa Council's own planning scheme includes a biodiversity overlay that identifies potential koala habitat areas derived from state mapping. There are currently inconsistencies and shortcomings in this mapping. For some specific developments this mapping may have an impact on vegetation removal, although not in respect to the clearing for a house site for example.

Koala provisions in the Noosa Plan biodiversity overlay code requires developments to include measures to assist the survival of koalas and provide for koala movement across the landscape. The code calls up design measures in the *Nature Conservation Plan 2006*.

As guidelines and koala mapping are revised over time, the planning scheme will need to be updated to reflect these changes.

It is important to note that there are restrictions on what Council can and cannot do in terms of planning decisions that may impact on koalas. Council cannot, for example, readily prevent construction of houses on private property where that development is in accord with other government instruments and also in accord with aspects of the planning scheme.

What the Koala Management Policy May Consider

The Noosa Council Koala Policy may consider issues such as:

1. Habitat protection - where planning instruments allow and in keeping with other Council policies such as The Environmental Levy.
2. Improved understanding of local koala populations.
3. Improved mapping of local koala populations.
4. Consideration of koala offsets where applicable (see Qld Environmental Offsets Policy above).
5. Infrastructure decisions - such as koala crossing signs, wildlife crossing additions as part of new infrastructure, etc.
6. Pest control - particularly wild dogs.
7. Community awareness and education.