

# Koala listed as endangered after Australian governments fail to halt its decline

**No recovery plan for the Australian marsupial was in place despite it being identified as a requirement nine years ago**



Conservationists hope the endangered listing and proposed Koala recovery plan will serve as a 'turning point' to save Australia's iconic species. Photograph: Mark Evans/Getty Images

**Lisa Cox**

Thu 10 Feb 2022 16.30 GMT

The Australian government has officially listed the koala as endangered after a decline in its numbers due to land clearing and catastrophic bushfires shrinking its habitat.

The environment minister, Sussan Ley, accepted the recommendation of the threatened species scientific committee that the koala populations of Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory should have their conservation status upgraded.

The stronger listing under national law is recognition that the koala's plight has become more urgent and that successive Australian governments have failed to turn the much-loved animal's circumstances around since it was listed as vulnerable in 2012.



'A drop in the ocean': government's \$50m koala pledge won't tackle root cause of decline

It comes after the Morrison government last month **announced** \$50m to help the species. The funding was welcomed by environment groups but described as a "drop in the ocean" if the root causes of the species' decline were not addressed.

Ley said in addition to the endangered listing, the government planned to adopt a long-awaited national recovery plan for the koala.

"Today I am increasing the protection for koalas in NSW, the ACT and Queensland, listing them as endangered rather than their previous designation of vulnerable," Ley said.

“The impact of prolonged drought, followed by the black summer bushfires, and the cumulative impacts of disease, urbanisation and habitat loss over the past twenty years have led to the advice.”

Environment groups have long argued the koala’s conservation status should be upgraded. Three organisations – Humane Society International (HSI), WWF-Australia and the International Fund for Animal Welfare – nominated it for the endangered listing.

“The koala has gone from no listing to now being declared endangered on the Australian east coast within a decade,” said Dermot O’Gorman, WWF-Australia’s chief executive.

“That is a shockingly fast decline for one of the world’s most iconic animals. The endangered status is a grim but important decision by minister Ley.

“There is still time to save this globally iconic species if the uplisting serves as a turning point in koala conservation. We need stronger laws and landholder incentives to protect their forest homes.”

The endangered listing will provide additional protection for koalas because it lowers the threshold at which a development must be assessed under national laws for potentially significant impacts on the species.

The recovery plan sets out the key threats to the koala and actions needed to prevent its extinction.

Such a plan had been identified under national environmental laws as a requirement for the species for the past 10 years but no Australian government had developed one, making it one of **almost 200** recovery plans for Australia’s threatened species and habitats that were overdue.

It took the black summer bushfire disaster to prompt consultation on a draft, with a final version delivered to the minister late last year.

Once a recovery plan is adopted, ministers are legally bound not to make decisions that are inconsistent with it, however governments have no obligation to actually implement the plan.

The koala is under pressure from multiple ongoing threats including disease, global heating and clearing of its habitat for development.

In 2020, a NSW parliamentary **inquiry found** the species would be extinct in that state by 2050 unless governments took urgent action to protect its habitat and turn the declines around.

Alexia Wellbelove, a senior campaign manager at HSI, said Ley's decision should prompt Australian governments to do more to address the declining state of the country's environment.

"Although it's devastating for the koala it's an important action for their protection," she said.

"It's a cue for governments really to take a stand against continued habitat clearing for koalas. We can't just continue business as usual."

Wellbelove said the decision needed to be followed by action on the review of national environmental laws by the former competition watchdog head, Graeme Samuel.

Samuel **found** Australian governments had comprehensively failed in their duty to protect the environment and the country's iconic wildlife had suffered because of it.

He made 38 recommendations to transform the act, including a proposal for new **national environmental standards** that require clear outcomes for Australia's plants and animals.

"Until such time that we have strong national environmental standards that specify no-go areas around critical habitat for species such as the koala, habitat destruction will continue and this must be addressed urgently," Wellbelove said.

## Why the Heck Do So Many Koalas Have Chlamydia?

By [Mindy Weisberger](#) published May 09, 2018



Chlamydia in koalas is no laughing matter. (Image credit: Shutterstock)

One of the leading killers of Australia's endearing koalas is a debilitating bacterial infection: [chlamydia](#).

The idea of [koalas](#) with chlamydia — a common sexually transmitted infection in people — recently drew chuckles on HBO's "Last Week Tonight," but the disease, which is affecting koalas in epidemic proportions, is hardly a laughing matter.

Chlamydia-infected koalas made the news on Sunday (May 6) when the show's host, John Oliver, mentioned the dedication of a new koala ward at the Australia Zoo Wildlife Hospital, called the John Oliver Koala Chlamydia Ward, to treat the sick marsupials.

But chlamydia is no joke to koalas. Surveys have shown that some wild populations demonstrate a 100 percent rate of infection, which frequently leads to blindness, severe bladder

inflammation, infertility and death. And treatment with antibiotics could create further problems for the marsupials, upsetting their gut microbes and making it difficult for them to digest the eucalyptus leaves that are a staple of their diet, researchers recently discovered. [[Marsupial Gallery: A Pouchful of Cute](#)]

Though chlamydia has sickened koalas for decades, it has long been unclear why they are so vulnerable to the infection. But scientists now suspect that a virus in the same family as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) could be the culprit, according to a study published online in the March issue of the [Journal of Virology](#).

Researchers learned that koalas infected with this virus, called koala retrovirus type B, were more likely to be infected with chlamydia, and were also more likely to develop severe symptoms, such as infections in their urinary and reproductive tracts, conjunctivitis and cancers.

Adult koalas catch chlamydia just as people do — through sexual transmission — but young koalas can also become infected by eating pap, a nutritious type of feces, when it is excreted by infected mothers, according to a study published March 12 in the journal [Peer J](#).

Diseased koalas are treated with antibiotics, but the koalas often lose weight and die even after receiving treatment, scientists discovered. In the Peer J study, the researchers questioned whether the drugs meant to save the koalas might

be upsetting the balance of their gut diversity and interfering with their ability to digest their food. Eucalyptus leaves, which provide much of adult koalas' nutrition in the wild, contain a compound called tannin that can be highly toxic if it isn't broken down by certain types of gut bacteria, and if those microbes are absent, koalas might be unable to process their eucalyptus meals, the scientists wrote.

They also found that there was "a strong correlation" between the composition of a koala's gut flora and its prognosis for survival after treatment with antibiotics. This was especially true for the microbe *Lonepinella koalarum*, which is known for its ability to break down tannin, according to the study.

Over the past two decades, koala populations in parts of Australia have declined by as much as 80 percent, researchers reported in February 2017 in the journal [Scientific Reports](#). Surveys of records from treatment facilities found that chlamydia was the most lethal of all diseases affecting the animals, second only to injury from cars as the most frequent cause of koala death. While the new John Oliver Koala Chlamydia Ward will no doubt help some infected koalas, there is clearly much more work required to preserve a future for these iconic animals.

**Conservation documents for half of all critically endangered species don't mention climate change**

This article is more than 1 month old

## **Australian Conservation Foundation report found that climate change was not mentioned for 178 out of 334 critically endangered species and habitats**



The spectacled flying fox, like this pup orphaned by a heatwave, is one of a slew of species for which climate change is briefly mentioned or not at all in conservation documents. Photograph: Amanda Hickman/The Guardian

### **Lisa Cox**

Mon 13 Dec 2021 22.00 GMT

Conservation documents for more than half of Australia's critically endangered species and habitats fail to mention climate change according to new analysis that argues there is a significant "climate gap" in the management of Australia's threatened wildlife.

The **report** was commissioned by the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) and prepared by the Australian National University's GreenLaw project, which is led by students in the ANU's law faculty.



The analysis examined the extent to which conservation documents for Australia's most imperilled wildlife discussed and addressed the threat of global heating.

Lost, then found, then lost again: can we learn from the extinction of the paradise parrot?

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It found that for 178 out of 334 critically endangered species and habitats the threat of climate change was not mentioned in the government's conservation information at all.

When it was mentioned, the analysis found the information "tended to be brief and generalised" and the recommended actions to mitigate the threat were limited.

"Our results demonstrate there is a significant climate gap in the management of Australia's threatened species," said GreenLaw chief executive and lead researcher, Annika Reynolds.

The report argues that without such an analysis there was a risk that management of wildlife or decisions about developments affecting it would not factor in the impact of the climate crisis.

"It means that the recovery actions that are meant to be happening are not going to be informed by the latest and most up-to-date information about the threat of climate change to those critically endangered species and communities," said Brendan Sydes, the ACF's biodiversity policy adviser.

"Recovery plans are supposed to inform recovery efforts, so if they're not actually capturing the threats and the actions that are required to address them, there is a risk those actions could be misdirected."

When species and habitats are listed as threatened under Australia's environmental laws, information is generally prepared that describes the level of decline, key threats and actions to help their recovery.

These conservation documents can take the form of either a [recovery plan](#), which the environment minister is legally bound not to act inconsistently with;

or, more commonly, a conservation advice – a similar document but which does not have the same legal force under national law.

GreenLaw examined these documents for all species and ecological communities listed as critically endangered under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

The group found in addition to some documents not mentioning global heating at all, there were others where the threat was mentioned but no actions that could be taken to address it were discussed because this was “outside the scope of the plan”.

They found climate was omitted from some documents where there was scientific uncertainty about its likely impact for that particular plant, animal or habitat.

But Reynolds said the information gap was also evident for some species that “were known to suffer from extreme heat and drought”, such as the short-nosed sea snake and the leafscaled sea snake. Documents for those species do not discuss climate change directly despite listing coral bleaching as a major threat.



Truffle-eating marsupial on ‘brink of extinction’

There were also other species that fell outside the scope of the analysis because they have a lower threat status but whose documentation excludes up-to-date information on the climate crisis.

The **conservation advice** for the spectacled flying fox lists climate change as a “potential” and “future” threat despite the animal being **uplisted to endangered** in 2019 after almost a third of its population was wiped out by a heatwave.

The report found that conservation documents that had been written or updated in the past three years were more likely to include a detailed analysis of the climate threat.

The ACF said the government needed to increase funding for threatened species recovery, including funds to update its scientific information about the impacts of the climate crisis on individual plants, animals and habitats.

“There’s just a political commitment that’s lacking at the moment,” Sydes said.

Recovery planning for species has come under the spotlight in recent years.

Guardian Australia has **previously reported** that fewer than 40% of listed threatened species have a recovery plan. A further 10% of all those listed have been identified as requiring a recovery plan but those plans haven’t been developed or are unfinished. Even more plans are out of date.

In September, the government announced it would **scrap recovery plans** – in favour of a conservation advice – for almost 200 endangered species and habitats including the Tasmanian devil, the whale shark and the critically endangered Cumberland plain woodland.

A spokesperson for the environment minister, Sussan Ley, said the minister had reviewed and made several new recovery plans and conservation advices that included new research, bushfire impacts and other factors.

“A number of plans are currently with states and territories, and are in the process of being updated to include multiple factors including climate,” they said.

“Where relevant, information on climate change informs the development of conservation advice at the time a species is listed and in the development of any recovery plan.”

The spokesperson added that the government’s \$200m for bushfire recovery had contributed to significant scientific research on species affected by extreme weather.

The new threatened species strategy for 2021 to 2026 had eight action areas, including one focused on climate change adaptation and resilience to “reduce the impact of established pressures on threatened species and assist them to adapt to a changing climate”.