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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

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Consideration in Detail

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Burke, Tony, MP

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Mr BURKE (Watson—Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities) (18:43): I thank the honourable member for the question. The koala listing has been one of the more complex listings that has come before the Threatened Species Scientific Committee. It is a subject that I know the member for Flinders has also taken a keen interest in during his time as shadow minister.

There are a number of problems. First of all, a problem that we have in identifying endangered or threatened species throughout the entire country is that the quality of data is always significantly limited. The work of surveys is very important, but when many of these decisions first come to the Threatened Species Scientific Committee they are grappling with limited data sets. That is the first problem that we have been faced with for the koala. The second problem with the koala has been that if you simply say that whether or not something goes on a threatened species list is based on how hard they are to find and how strong some of the populations are, in some parts of Australia the koala population is unbelievably strong. South Australia is a classic example, where there are actually programs to control numbers. I should add, before anyone gets worried, that it does not involve culling—but there are issues of number control that take place in South Australia.

At first glance, some people work on the basis that, 'If you have anywhere where there are heaps of them and where they are actually in such numbers that they are eating themselves out of habitat, it is hard to argue that they are also in some way threatened', particularly with iconic species. But as a general principle it is a bit much to say that here is a species that used to be found across so much of Australia and that we are just willing to tap the mat and concede defeat in the vast majority of those areas because you can go to South Australia to find one.

I do not want to see a situation where for Queensland or New South Wales—or the ACT, for that matter—the only possibility you have of ever seeing a koala is to visit a zoo. I think Australians have an expectation that protection is afforded. That means that we had to do something which is done rarely, but which has been done previously. It was done, for example, with respect to the grey nurse shark, where you had listings that applied differently in different waters. On this occasion, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee's recommendations to me recommended that a listing that would only apply at the 'vulnerable' status to Queensland, New South Wales and the ACT.

The New South Wales government welcomed the decision. The Queensland government, it is fair to say, did not. I have spoken about that elsewhere in the parliament, but I remain of the view that it was a surprise, so soon after the Queensland Premier had been saying that he wanted to enforce federal standards, that he would be suddenly outraged by federal standards.

Mr Neumann: I did say that, actually.

Mr BURKE: You did. And I have read some of the media clippings in Ipswich about the extent to which Mr Newman disagreed with Mr Neumann. I have seen that in print there.

What a threatened species listing means at the category of vulnerable is a few things. First of all it means that a plan needs to be put in place to try to get the numbers to recover—a recovery plan is to be put in place. We work very closely with the states on that. Certainly New South Wales, as far as I understand, is being completely cooperative in playing that role and they welcomed the decision when I took it. It also means that for development proposals the koala, if we are dealing with koala habitat, now needs to be taken into account. On the simplicity of the question: does that add an extra layer of bureaucracy? Yes, it does. But, let's face it; if we are not going to use threatened species legislation to protect the koala we may as well give up. Occasionally for anyone who holds this job, some species that no-one has ever heard of will be used as a way of trying to ridicule environmental protection. You always get that. There are not too many people in Australia who have not heard of the koala, and there are not too many people in Australia who will not be seriously alarmed at the decline in numbers.

In the state of the member for Blair, since 1990—so this is a fair way into your process of land clearing—we are talking about a further 40 per cent decline in the numbers. The rate of decline has been extraordinary, and with that in mind I think it is not merely good policy but the very purpose of threatened species policy to make sure that the appropriate plans and protocols are put in place.