



# Australia delays decision on koala listing

By Hilary Whiteman, CNN

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A koala is trapped in a tarpaulin after being rescued from a bushfire in Australia. Bushfires are forecast to become more prevalent in the country due to climate change.

## Koalas under threat

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Campaigners are urging koalas to be considered endangered

As few as 43,000 of the national icons are left in Australia

Habitat loss, disease, car accidents and dogs are killing them

Minister says he needs more time to consider new information

(CNN) -- The Australian government has angered koala conservationists by again delaying a decision on whether to add the national icon to the country's endangered species list.

Last year, a Senate inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population heard that there could be as few as 43,000 koalas left in the country.

Millions have been killed since the arrival of European settlers in the 18th century. Numbers were slashed again during open hunting seasons in the early 20th century and in recent decades tens of thousands have died as a result of habitat destruction, disease -- including Chlamydia and retrovirus -- and dog attacks.

On average, four koalas are admitted every week to Australia Zoo Wildlife Hospital, the country's largest wildlife hospital, after being hit by cars. The animals are also vulnerable to bushfires and drought.

However, environment minister Tony Burke says he needs 10 more weeks to consider new information from the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC) on where the marsupial is under the greatest threat. It's the second time he's delayed the decision, which was initially due in October.

### I can't provide a blanket threatened species listing across Australia when there are many places

"I can't provide a blanket threatened species listing across Australia when there are many places where koala numbers remain high," he said in a statement.

While the Senate report found there had been a "marked decline" in Australia's national koala population -- with the largest losses reported in the states of Queensland and New South Wales -- it said that in some areas of Victoria and South Australia koala colonies were "flourishing."

Some say the disparity between survival rates in different



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# where koala numbers remain high

Tony Burke, Australian environment minister

parts of the country is complicating what should be a simple decision to grant koalas greater protection.

"In the Senate documents there wasn't one submission that said the koala as safe. Not one," said Deborah Tabart, chief executive of the Australian Koala Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to saving the species.

Currently, koalas are listed as "vulnerable" under state legislation in Queensland and New South Wales, and as "rare" in South Australia. However, they are currently not granted any extra protection under federal law. Campaigners say a national listing is necessary because state governments have clearly failed to stop population declines.

A national listing would offer greater protection to the koala under Australia's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999. Currently, more than 1,700 species and ecological communities face the threat of extinction, according to government figures.

Tabart said the federal environment minister's decision to delay his verdict was a deliberate tactic to avoid it becoming an issue before the upcoming Queensland state election on March 24. Most koalas in the state are found in the south-east near the capital Brisbane, a growing city which is suffering a shortage of affordable housing.

# Unless Minister Burke has a group of volunteers scouring the bush looking for koalas, this 10-week delay is nonsense

Deborah Tabart, Australian Koala Foundation

"We are absolutely convinced it has nothing to do with koala biology. It has to do with politics and I'm ashamed of our minister," Tabart said. "There's nothing that they could gather in 10 more weeks that hasn't been gathered by a 200-strong page Senate report that says the koala is in trouble."

"The data that we have presented -- and 100 other submissions -- has taken us 25 years to gather and 26,000 man hours. So unless Minister Burke has a group of volunteers scouring the bush looking for koalas, this 10-week delay is nonsense," she said.

Burke's office denied the delay was politically motivated and said that the minister was seeking more precise information on habitat boundaries. The minister says he doesn't expect the decision to be delayed beyond April 30.

The question of whether koalas should be considered endangered has been considered three times in the last 15 years by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC).

Each time, the committee found there was not enough data on koala populations to conclude that populations had fallen far enough to reach the threshold needed to declare them endangered under federal law.

Internationally, the koala is listed as of "least concern" on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List. However, the U.S. considers the marsupial a threatened species.

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