

Parliamentary Inquiry into Koalas and Koala Habitat

Visit to The Great Koala National Park IVC 4 Feb 2020

Document tendered by

MS PAOLA FLACK

Received by

ANDREW RATCHFORD

Date: 4 / 2 / 20

Resolved to publish Yes / No

Like the Great Koala National Park proposal, this Great Koala National Park Information and Visitors Centre is a 100% community driven initiative. The centre has been established and is managed and staffed entirely by volunteers.

This fact speaks volumes. It highlights the level of community support that a reserve system focused on the protection of koala habitat, has generated in our region.

This Centre came about because of the vision and courage of the Bellingen Shire Council which recognised the significant opportunities such a National Park would bring to its area.

We were absolutely gob smacked when Bellingen Shire Council approached us offering the centre for a peppercorn rent. Our initial reaction was of pure excitement at the thought of a physical space from which to deliver our message and base our ever-strengthening campaign..... and then reality struck!

How would we staff and run the Centre seven days a week? We needn't have worried.

Such was the community enthusiasm for the Centre, that we received many expressions of interest from those wanting to volunteer. Why?

Because, as we hear time and time again from new volunteers; in these grim times of ever increasing koala habitat destruction, climate change and now raging bushfires, people want to do something useful to help, they want to contribute to something positive and they want to be involved in something that gives them hope for a better future for our dwindling koalas and for our planet.

Once we had decided to take the leap, the New South Wales National Parks Association kindly agreed to sign the lease agreement on our behalf, in late October last year. We formed a management team, developed a business plan and then got stuck into cleaning, painting and rebadging this wonderful facility.

We had five weeks to be ready for the planned opening on 1 Dec, but then bushfires came and with most of our management team directly affected, we had to postpone opening for a fortnight.

But open we did on Dec 16 to a crowd of 135 enthusiastic supporters; t-shirts flew off the rack and Judy our Volunteer Coordinator was deluged with folks signing up to be involved.

We are thrilled with the way the Centre has come together, but we are by no mean finished with our makeover. As you can see, there is still painting to be done, in fact we are hoping to commission a local artist to undertake a forest mural above the front doors.

As funds become available, we intend to place a large sign on the roof, upgrade the three external signs, produce more display material and brochures, expand our merchandise range and purchase café tables and chairs. We also intend to further build collaborative relationships with local businesses and tourism operators.

We have a dual role here at the Centre. Primarily our aim is to raise awareness of and support for the Great Koala National Park proposal and generate funds to further this objective.

Secondly, as part of our lease agreement, we are required to provide tourist information to visitors. This suits our primary purpose enormously for obvious reasons, as we have a steady stream of people coming through who are mostly receptive to hearing more about the Great Koala National Park proposal.

Quite a few visitors have come in asking where the park is and how can they get there. Once they understand that the Great Koala National Park is only a proposal at this stage, they are keen to support the campaign and spread the word.

The misconception that the park already exists is not so surprising given that it was proposed in 2015 and has had considerable exposure since, especially prior to the 2015 state elections. However to ensure that our message is clear and the public is aware that we need their support to see the Great Koala National Park created, we have changed our logo from the Great Koala National Park *"Protecting our National Icon"* to the Great Koala National Park *"Let's Make it Happen!"*.

Once visitors learn more about the proposal and why it is so desperately needed, most are shocked that it has not yet been supported by state government.

As disastrous as the catastrophic bushfire crisis has been and continues to be, there is no doubt it has raised domestic and international awareness of the plight of our koalas. The many images of fire affected koalas have tugged on the heartstrings of people around the world who have donated generously to help save this iconic species from extinction.

Many of our visitors are expressing concerns about the impacts of the bushfires on koalas and koala habitat.

When we inform them that koala numbers have declined by 50% on the north coast due to habitat loss from intensive logging and clear felling, agricultural clearing, highway construction and urban development over a 20 year period BEFORE the bushfire crisis, they are deeply shocked.

They also understand why the Great Koala National Park is urgently needed, now more than ever, since the fires.

But the Great Koala National Park would not just be about protecting koala habitat, it would be a people's park too. Our volunteers are available to show visitors the various concept plans for bush walking trails, a mountain biking network, horse riding trails and 4-wheel driving routes within the proposed park network.

These community developed concept plans are very well received and reinforce our firm belief that our region's sustainable economic future is in well managed nature-based tourism in our public native forests and not logging.

Our visitors are learning that protecting public native forest in perpetuity would not only provide koalas with a chance of survival and regional communities with enormous economic opportunities.

The park would also protect the many values and services that public native forests contain and provide, such as carbon storage and sequestration, clean water for downstream users including

town water supplies, biodiversity, rain generation and Soil stabilisation, especially in our steep hinterland.

We have been open six weeks now and have settled into a routine. We are open seven days a week from 10am to 2pm and are likely to expand our hours as we grow. We are staffed by two volunteers at all times and average around 20 visitors a day. We hope to increase visitor numbers as awareness of our existence grows and once our little café is operational.

Support for our campaign is coming from many directions. Bellingen Shire Council has clearly been most supportive not only with this facility but also grant funding, our new TV and staff assistance.

Recently we acquired a very welcome sponsor, Affirmations an ethical publishing company whose global headquarters are based in Bellingen is assisting us with funding, merchandise, promotion and signage.

Sydney based coffee company Madding Crowd has donated our beautiful espresso machine, coffee and staff training. Also, Sydney based coffee company Single O has donated a top of the range coffee grinder and will send up 15kg of freshly coffee bean when we are ready to start serving, in the next few weeks.

Coffs Harbour media company Magic Cupboard initiative produced our promotional video at no cost and provided free interior design advice for the Centre's refit.

Local conservation groups and individuals have donated time, furniture, plants and goods to help prepare the Centre for opening.

The community members enjoying a breakfast picnic in the park outside are here expressing their support too.

We know that the Great Koala National Park would create significant direct and indirect economic benefits for the region and we are not alone in that understanding.

In fact, several tour operators have dropped in to introduce themselves and express their support for the Great Koala National Park proposal. They can see the business opportunities the proposal will offer.

Up until recently we have had very limited capacity to promote the jobs and economic opportunities of the proposal, but as further evidence of growing support, Bellingen Shire Council, Coffs City Council and Destinations North Coast have each contributed \$25,000 to fund a \$75,000 comprehensive economic analysis of the Great Koala National Park proposal.

We are confident that this report when completed will provide solid evidence of the economic wisdom of ceasing logging in the public native forests within the proposal area and instead, creating an iconic, world class National Park network to protect koalas and their habitat.

Recently we had our first tour bus of international visitors drop in, and we expect this to become a regular occurrence, spring-boarding us to a more international audience.

We aim to stimulate a level of support for the Great Koala National Park that will be difficult for the state government to ignore and we sincerely hope that one day in the not too distant future we can see the Great Koala National Park become a reality.

I sincerely thank the committee for taking the time to visit us here today and hope that after visiting our region, it will appreciate the level of concern for the future of our beloved koalas.

Thankyou