

Submission
No 70

INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Jane Goodall Institute Australia

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Ms Cate Faehrmann MLC
Chairperson
Portfolio Committee No. 7 Planning and Environment
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

31 JULY 2019

Dear Ms Cate Faehrmann MLC,

Submission for Inquiry into Koala populations and habitat in New South Wales

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to matters relating to *Koala populations and habitat in New South Wales*.

The Jane Goodall Institute Australia (JGIA) is an Australian registered charity (ABN 98 125 319 771) and a not for profit organisation. Our purpose is to inspire actions that connect people with animals and our shared environment. Moved by the work of our founder, Dr Jane Goodall DBE, we recognise the interconnectedness between all living things, including the impact that our choices and actions as custodians will have on present and future generations of life on Earth.

In 2018, JGIA joined the Places You Love Alliance, a network of 57 environment groups representing over 1.5million Australians; people that love our national parks, wildlife, and precious natural beauty. In 2019, JGIA joined the National Koala Network to advocate for better legal protection of one of Australia's most beloved native species.

The Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) occupies a unique place in Australia's cultural identity and heritage. Koalas not only appear as time-honoured local icons in children's literature and film celebrating the spirit of the Bush, but also serve as instantly recognisable international ambassadors representing Australia the world over. Koalas also hold an enduring significance in the millennia-old cultures of Aboriginal Australians, the first custodians of Country, featuring in Dreamtime stories, wooden carvings, rock art and song, to more contemporary sculptures and canvasses.

Australia leads the world on mammalian extinction and Eastern Australia has once again emerged as a global deforestation hot spot. Koalas currently face near-insurmountable odds for long-term survival if urgent action is not taken to secure their future. Population declines and local extinctions have resulted from the destruction and degradation of Koala habitat, particularly in coastal regions of Australia where urban development continues to encroach on Eucalyptus forests. When their habitats are felled, Koalas become vulnerable to dog-attacks and vehicle strikes as they seek refuge. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission stresses that Koalas are true habitat and food specialists, inhabiting forests and woodlands where Eucalyptus trees are present. The



Commission too noted that “of the 600+ eucalypt species present in Australia, Koalas feed only on the leaves of a few tens of species. Further, Koalas in different regions also show preferences for different species.” Where primary tree food species are not present or occur in low density, Koalas must rely on secondary food tree species, however the ratio of animals to hectare is lower. In addition to Eucalyptus, Koalas require a range of tree species across their range for rest and shelter (including turpentine, cypress pine and brush box) particularly in extreme weather conditions. Their reliance on tree species for food and shelter also means that fragmentation undermines the Koala’s capacity to disperse to suitable areas and can intensify problems associated with inbreeding. Further, the presence of one, let alone the cumulation of these threats, can lead to elevated levels of stress, making animals more prone to sickness and diseases, most notably chlamydia in Koala populations.

JGIA is troubled by reports identifying that Koalas inhabit 17 of the 20 NSW deforestation hotspots identified by the NSW Nature Conservation Council, WWF-Australia, the Wilderness Society and the National Parks Association of NSW. According to conservation biologist Dr Martin Taylor, “[i]n just one of these deforestation hotspots, more than 5000 hectares of Koala habitat were bulldozed in 12 months”. The sheer loss of NSW Koala numbers over the last two hundred years is staggering, down from millions to less than 20,000 today. With respect to more recent figures, NSW has lost one in four of its Koalas in a mere 20 years, with the North Coast Koala experiencing a dramatic decline of approximately one half. If current land clearing rates continue unabated, we will potentially see Koalas extinct in NSW as early as 2050.

With the prediction that Koalas could be extinct within our lifetime looming, JGIA is concerned that current decision-making fails to protect critical habitat to address the threats presented by habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation. The current legislative framework needs to include provisions to protect habitat, end self-assessment, and provide meaningful and accessible opportunities for legal challenges in the public interest. Together with the National Koala Network, we express our concern that grants provided by the government through the Koala Research Plan are confined to disease, translocation and the medicalisation of Koalas, completely failing to address the primary causes of species decline.

In their review of the NSW Koala Strategy, Blanch, Sweeney and Pugh found that the primary cause of the emerging Koala extinction crisis is loss and fragmentation of Koala habitat on private land. The review cited to figures of some 65% of wild Koalas living on private land, however the NSW Koala Strategy is silent on how to protect Koala habitat across all tenures. JGIA submits that this is an area rife for reform.

As a grassroots organisation, JGIA supports land-use decisions that are integrative of local concerns, procedurally consultative, and politically responsive. The Southwest Sydney Koala population stands to lose a substantial part of its habitat due to major urban development and we observe that community requests to install overpasses have been rejected. This decision effectively condemns the largest, healthy expanding Koala population to extinction as Koalas will be trapped behind exclusion fences. We note that this is not the only example of community concerns around Koala conservation seemingly being ignored.



Further, the NSW Koala Strategy completely ignores the impacts of climate change on Koalas, identified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission as one of the ten most vulnerable species globally to climate change. Koalas are experiencing malnutrition as Eucalyptus leaves decline in nutrient richness, highlighting the effects of elevated CO₂ levels on plants and, in turn, on the animals that rely on them for food. Increasing frequency and intensity of droughts can force Koalas to descend from trees in search of water or new habitats. This makes them particularly vulnerable to wild and domestic predators, as well as to road traffic, often resulting in death. The collapses of Gunnedah and Pilliga Koala populations due to heatwaves and drought are but two examples speaking to the urgency for swift, sustained, and evidence-based reform in the face of climate change.

Finally, while the current inquiry seeks to address matters relating to Koala populations and habitats, it should be noted that Koalas are an umbrella species whose habitats also protect the resilience of countless other species sharing their natural ecosystems. Protecting bushland areas to conserve Koala populations also protects the habitat of a wide range of species of flora and fauna, including possums, gliders, wombats, quolls, birds, and reptiles.

JGIA hopes that the Committee will recommend solutions towards effective legal protection of the remaining habitat our Koalas and other native species call home.

Sincerely,

James Forbes
Chief Executive Officer

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