

Submission  
No 72

## INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

**Organisation:** Great Koala National Park Steering Committee

**Date Received:** 1 August 2019

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31 July 2019

## **Submission to the Inquiry into koala populations and habitat in NSW**

Dear Committee,

Please accept this submission to the Inquiry into Koala Populations and Habitat in NSW.

We hope the Inquiry can help the NSW Government implement steps that will see koala declines reversed before it is too late.

The GKNP Steering Committee is a non- incorporated informal group of local citizens who came together to promote the proposed Great Koala National Park (GKNP). The GKNP is a proposed network of existing and new national parks on the mid north coast that will help protect our national icon. The GKNP is proposed by the NSW National Parks Association. Visit [GKNP](#) for more information.

The GKNP Steering Committee was formed once the GKNP proposal was released and includes active members from local and regional conservation groups as well as people from diverse backgrounds who are not associated with conservation groups eg Aboriginal cultural heritage, tourism, education and media. The committee is working together for a common purpose – to see the GKNP become a reality and critical koala habitat protected in perpetuity.

Protecting identified critical koala habitat in a park such as the GKNP would provide koalas with a good chance of surviving in NSW. If we continue with business as usual, koalas will continue to die and slide towards extinction.

The Steering Committee believes strongly that the implementation of the GKNP, if properly supported, will provide considerable social, economic and environmental benefits to the local and regional communities. It can potentially provide a major ecotourism attraction for local, regional, state, national and international tourists.

The GKNP will give our dwindling koala population the habitat it needs to thrive again, by adding 175,000ha of state forests to existing protected areas to form a 315,000ha reserve system within five local government areas; Clarence Valley, Coffs Harbour, Bellingen Shire, Nambucca Shire and a small area in the northern section of Kempsey Shire.

Currently most koalas in NSW live outside of protected areas. In fact, because our national park network [is biased](#) towards higher, more infertile country, it doesn't capture well the habitat that koalas prefer, that is fertile, coastal forests that produce more nutritious leaves.

Analysis of OEH conducted research into where koalas are located (called 'koala hubs') has shown that the GKNP contains 44% of all hubs in state forests in NSW. We are confident

that the government data supports the Steering Committee's view that the GKNP is the most important area of public land in NSW for koalas.

Unlike logging, we are confident that koalas can co-exist alongside well-managed, low impact nature-based tourism activities such as bushwalking, cycling, horse riding and on-road four-wheel driving, in an appropriately resourced, koala focused network of national parks – the GKNP.

This submission presents in depth information regarding the proposed GKNP, relevant to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference in relation to key protection areas and the environmental, social and economic impacts of establishing new protected areas to conserve koala habitat, including national parks.

The GKNP Steering Committee respectfully requests an opportunity to appear before your Committee and invites the Committee to a field trip within the proposed GKNP.

Sincerely

Paula Flack  
on b/h of the GKNP Steering Committee

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Figure 1. Map of the GKNP proposal indicating state forests (pale green) and existing national parks (dark green). The park stretches from Woolgoolga in the north to South West Rocks in the south.

Table 1. Proposed GKNP Indicative “Building Blocks” and “Scenarios”

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## 1 The Submission

Whilst having relevance to many of the inquiry's Terms of Reference, this submission will have an emphasis on the following sections:

“(d) identification of key areas of koala habitat on private and public land that should be protected, including areas currently at risk of logging or clearing, and the likely impacts of climate change on koalas and koala distribution,

(e) the environmental, social and economic impacts of establishing new protected areas to conserve koala habitat, including national parks,”

The submission concentrates on demonstrating that establishing the proposed GKNP will have strongly positive environmental, social and economic impacts. The submission outlines a proposed economic analysis of the proposed GKNP and describes in detail some of the major ecotourism development proposals.

## 2 Identification of key areas of koala habitat on private and public land that should be protected, including areas currently at risk of logging or clearing, and the likely impacts of climate change on koalas and koala distribution.

Conservation groups responded to community reports of dramatic declines in koala populations on the NSW North Coast by, in 2012, commencing a number of koala conservation assessments. Initial assessments were undertaken in five Local Government Areas on the upper mid-north Coast and hinterland areas (northern Kempsey, Nambucca, Bellingen, Coffs Harbour, Clarence Valley and Richmond Valley).

The GKNP and other reserve proposals were derived using community data and expert opinion from within the north coast region. They focussed on describing and mapping the koala populations on the north coast and hinterlands and identifying areas of state forest that contain koala habitat and would be best included within the reserve system.

This project used koala habitat mapping, combined with collated koala locality records and local knowledge of koala ecology and key habitat, to derive a number of mapped outputs relevant to koala conservation assessment and planning in the region, including:

- Likely koala dispersal barriers;
- the identification of seven likely koala regional populations;
- twenty-five likely koala sub-populations as focus areas for further targeted surveys, monitoring and research; and
- three likely metapopulations (metapopulations being groupings of subpopulations that periodically exchange individuals): see;

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0BxrDWhFTAAvBRY1qMnRqVGhFMm8>

The proposals have subsequently been supported by NSW OEH Koala Hubs mapping, strongly supported by the 'koala hubs' data presented in WWF's Koala Habitat Conservation Plan with a high level of correspondence between WWF hubs and priority areas, data and analysis (Koala Hubs and Areas of Regional Koala Significance, ARKS) done by the NSW OEH and by predictive habitat mapping from the Department of Primary Industries.

The community-derived GKNP and other reserve proposals have some additional strengths relative to the OEH & WWF koala hubs data. The koala hubs are based primarily on koala records analysed for a measure of persistence. Therefore, by their nature, hubs are likely to be biased towards areas of greater survey effort and/or areas where more people live and away from more remote hinterland areas and private land (the latter is typically under-surveyed). Using expert ecologist knowledge to analyse the landscape configuration, while incorporating knowledge of koala occurrence, distributions and population trends from local koala carers and conservationists, adds another layer to records-based analysis. Hence many of our reserve proposals include areas that were not identified as hubs.

The fact that the hubs and Arks data in most cases, including that of the GKNP, strongly corroborates the community reserve proposals, provides confidence that the reserves are well designed for koala protection. However, we acknowledge that contemporary surveys of some areas would be desirable in order to confirm the utility of the areas to koalas. For example, recent citizen surveys in Roses Creek State Forest and Scotchman State Forest have identified significant koala numbers in a section of the proposed GKNP outside the OEH Koala Hubs.

The hubs data will likely overlook areas of occupied habitat that need protection to achieve an adequate koala reserve system. There is therefore an urgent need to undertake systematic regional surveys to identify all areas of resident populations to target for reservation, if koalas are to achieve the protection required to halt their decline towards extinction.

The hubs are those areas that the available data identify that we need to urgently reserve to protect resident populations. It will be necessary to protect and restore adjacent habitat to first stabilise, then grow, these core populations.

## 2.1. The Coffs Harbour—Guy Fawkes metapopulation

This is centred on the Coffs Harbour, northern Bellingen and south-western Clarence Valley Local Government Areas (LGA) and extends from the coastal plains at Coffs Harbour/Bongil Bongil National Park west through hinterland and escarpment forests to Guy Fawkes River National Park. **This metapopulation is considered to be of national significance as a koala core area.**

This same forest gradient has also been identified as significant in other conservation assessment and planning programs. It is clear that management programs need to be explored and promoted to ensure the long-term persistence of this critical forest area, where the Great Escarpment approaches the coast.

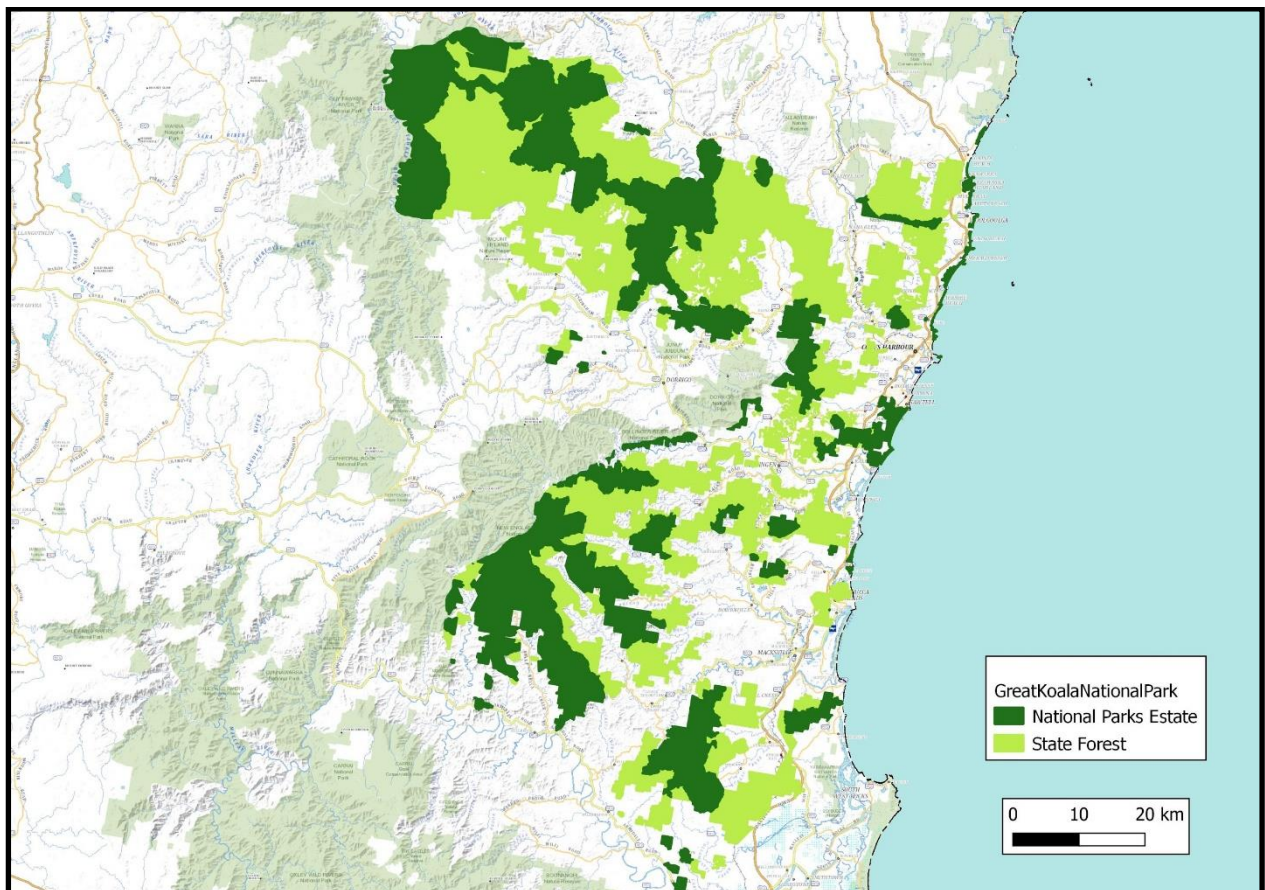
## 2.2 The Bellinger—Nambucca—Macleay metapopulation

This extends south and west from the southern Bellingen LGA to encompass the Nambucca LGA and the northern part of the Kempsey LGA to the Macleay River Valley. **This koala metapopulation is also considered to be nationally significant.**

The GKNP proposal included all public land with the Coffs Harbour - Guy Fawkes metapopulation and the Bellinger - Nambucca - Macleay metapopulation boundaries. It would add 175,000 ha of public state forests added to existing protected areas to form a continuous 315,000 ha reserve of public land (Fig 1). The proposed GKNP adjoins World

Heritage-listed reserves, including New England and Dorrigo National Parks and the Guy Fawkes National Park, to form a proposed conservation complex of half a million hectares extending from the tablelands to the coast.

The GKNP contains 56% of all koala hubs in state forests on the north coast of NSW. It is therefore no exaggeration to identify it as the most important area of public land in the state for koala conservation.



**Figure 1** Map of the GKNP proposal indicating state forests (pale green) and existing national parks (dark green). The park stretches from Woolgoolga in the north to South West Rocks in the south

### 3 The environmental, social and economic impacts of establishing new protected areas to conserve koala habitat, including national parks.

The Steering Committee has a view that the implementation of the GKNP, if properly supported, would provide considerable social, economic and environmental benefits to the local and regional communities. It can potentially provide a major ecotourism attraction for local, regional, state, national and international tourists and the Steering Committee is working towards a project to quantify these claims.

In a study of Victoria's proposed Great Forest National Park (GFNP) commissioned by environment groups, Nous Group specialists reveal that the GFNP could draw almost 380,000 extra visitors a year to the Central Highlands, add \$71 million annually to the local economy and generate 750 jobs with a little private investment.

The Full Report can be found here [NOUS GFNP report](#)

The GKNP steering committee has proposed a study along a similar approach for the proposed GKNP. The approach involves identifying different management scenarios and building blocks consistent with the GKNP proposals.

For the GFNP proposal, the analysis considered the potential economic impact under three distinct development scenarios, which represent different options for implementing the GFNP proposal, as follows;

- **Scenario 1** – *Change in tenure: involves only a change in tenure with no other changes made to the status quo.*
- **Scenario 2** – *Publicly funded attraction: considers the scenario where the park is established with funding from the government for infrastructure and more extensive park management.*
- **Scenario 3** – *Private investment: assumes private investment is attracted to the region, contributing to the establishment of the GFNP as a significant tourism destination and enabling the GFNP to realise more of its tourism potential.*

Further, case studies of analogous changes and attractions were used as proxies to gauge likely expenditure and visitation effects. Conceptually, each individual change and attraction constitutes a 'building block' for the model. The blocks included were based on initial plans or ecotourism infrastructure proposed for the GFNP including:

- *greater signage and interpretation sites in and around or adjacent to the GFNP;*
- *greater accessibility in the mountains for 'grey nomads';*
- *greater accessibility for people with a disability;*
- *increased day picnic sites;*
- *more signed and listed campsites;*
- *a zipline tour in Toolangi (adjacent to park, but featured in marketing and communications);*
- *a multi-day walk running from Healesville to Marysville to Eildon (with smaller walks within); "*

The equivalent scenarios and building blocks for analysis for the GKNP are still being formulated and are currently at an indicative stage. A description of development to date of scenarios and building blocks is provided below. The blocks have been packaged together in three different ways in this report to create three distinct development scenarios.

**Scenario 1 – Change in tenure and basic conservation management and repair:**

Involves only a change in tenure, new signposting and basic conservation management and koala conservation in and adjacent to the GKNP with no other changes made. A scenario without any changes to visitor management or infrastructure is unlikely to occur. This scenario is included for illustrative purposes only and highlights the



importance of adequate investment to realise the potential of the park.

Scenario 1 seeks to outline the basic requirements for management and repair of the areas as conservation reserves, recognising their status as containing two koala meta-populations of national significance, four regional populations and fourteen local populations, the conservation of which requires an approach across all land tenures and involving substantial areas of rehabilitation.

**Scenario 2 – Publicly and privately funded ecotourism attraction:**

Considers the scenario where the park is established with funding from the Government for infrastructure and more extensive park management. Scenario 2 includes core park infrastructure, such as visitor centres, a multiday walking track, local short walking tracks, interpretation signs, picnic sites and campsites.

Scenario 2. focuses on the GKNP and immediately surrounding areas where they can contribute to providing recreation opportunities and facilities such as long-distance walking tracks. The scenario focuses on the area of the two koala meta-populations identifying mostly local opportunities for appropriate ecotourism and using existing facilities and infrastructure, such as the NSW Government’s coastal cycleway and the existing forest road network, as key infrastructure for GKNP focused development and visitor use. A key component is the proposed GKNP multipurpose visitor centre at Pine Creek where it will be accessible from the Pacific Highway, Solitary Islands and Giinagay Way, the coastal cycleway and coastal walking tracks.

**Scenario 3 – The GKNP in a regional ecotourism model:**

Identifies the GKNP in a regional ecotourism model with existing and proposed new visitor centres and a shuttle bus linking transport network, contributing to the establishment of the GKNP as a significant tourism destination and enabling the GKNP to realise more of its tourism potential. The assessment of this scenario will be more limited than Scenario 1 and 2, due to its conceptual and less developed state, but it is expected to indicate the potential achievements of a strong commitment to regional ecotourism development. This option is timely in response to the proposed completion of a Coffs Harbour bypass by 2025 and warrants more detailed consideration than can be provided in this economic analysis.

Scenario 3 transforms the essentially park-based tourism features from Scenario 2 into ambitious regional ecotourism model providing a linked shuttle bus network between

**Table 1. Proposed GKNP Indicative “Building blocks” and “scenarios”**

<b><u>Building Blocks</u></b>	<b><u>Scenario 1</u></b>	<b><u>Scenario 2</u></b>	<b><u>Scenario 3</u></b>
Park establishment	U	U	U
Park management	U	U	U
Koala habitat restoration	U	U	U
Koala centre of excellence	U	U	U
Private property support	U	U	U
World heritage Assessment	U	U	U
GKNP Visitor Centre Pine Creek		U	U
GKNP Visitor Centre Bowraville		U	U
Multi-day bushwalk		U	U
GKNP Mountain bike network		U	U
GKNP Coast walk		U	U
GKNP Self-guided car tours		U	U
GKNP Coastal cycleway		U	U

GKNP Horse riding trails	U	U
GKNP Four-wheel driving tours	U	U
GKNP Local bushwalk network	U	U
Ecotourism support program	U	U
Identify nature-based tourism	U	U
Dorrigo Visitor Centre upgrade		U
Sealy's Lookout Eucalypt Theme Visitor Centre		U
Solitary islands Marine Park Visitor Centre		U
Coffs Harbour Aboriginal cultural heritage centre		U
Nambucca Heads Visitor Centre		U
Shuttle bus networks		U

The project will assess the economic impacts of the proposed GKNP within each LGA in terms of:

1. Potential jobs, including categories of jobs.
2. Additional visitor nights, spend and occupancy rates generated in the LGA.
3. Multipliers per sector.

The Project will provide a written report outlining the objectives, methodology and analysis of the economic impacts dissected for each LGA.

Community representatives have undertaken a considerable amount of work identifying and describing a development model for the proposed GKNP that will feed into the analysis of economic benefits of the park proposal, see following sections.

The NSW government estimates that koalas support 9,000 jobs throughout Australia and generate approximately \$2.5 billion per year. The GKNP will be the first national park dedicated to koala conservation and will therefore be a major asset to Coffs Harbour and surrounding areas.

The development model includes requirements for park establishment and management including environmental monitoring, restoration and repair of forests and assisting neighbouring private landholders. The model also includes ecotourism infrastructure including a multipurpose visitor centre, wildlife hospital, new and upgraded access for bushwalkers, mountain bike hubs, horse riding trails and vehicle tours.

The commencement and completion date of the proposed economic analysis is uncertain but the results will be submitted to the Koala Inquiry when available.

## 4 Proposed GKNP Visitor Centre at Pine Creek

The GKNP proposal includes the development of place of arrival - multipurpose centre for the GKNP at the Mailman's Track intersection on the Pacific Highway south of Coffs Harbour.

The GKNP proposal straddles the Pacific Highway over much of its length and the vast majority of potential visitors will arrive by car or bus. The proposal therefore includes the concept of a "place of arrival" at the GKNP at a suitable site adjacent to the roundabout on the eastern side of the Highway at the Mailman's Track overpass. We understand that this

location was at one stage identified by the RMS for a proposed rest area serving the upgraded Pacific Highway. The land included in the proposal is part of a flooded gum plantation in Pine Creek State Forest.

The concept of a “place of arrival” for the GKNP comes from a widely used approach for major national parks in Australia and around the World, designed to create a sense or place of arrival for visitors to major conservation reserves.

The place of arrival for the GKNP at Mailman’s track overpass would, subject to the agreement of relevant authorities and the securing of funding, be a multipurpose centre providing environmental interpretation and education services, wildlife observation and bushwalking and exercise opportunities as well as basic rest stop food and dining services.

The site would also provide the starting point of the proposed world class multiday coast to escarpment GKNP Long Distance Walking track. It is envisaged that the proposed facility also would be connected by cycleways and walking tracks linking to adjacent bushland areas and the coastal population centres to the north and south.

The Steering Committee is aware that the major investment in the upgrade of the Pacific Highway will scale down in coming years. With increased travellers attracted to the north coast we are interested to see that the Highway upgrade investment is followed by an investment in appropriate tourism infrastructure. Both major political parties in NSW have identified major funding allocations towards boosting ecotourism in national parks; the Labor Party in the lead up to the 2015 election and the NSW Government in its program for allocation of funds to be received from the sale of electricity assets.

The proposal for a “place of arrival” for the GKNP at the Mailman’s Track location would combine with the nearby and successful Rainforest Visitor Centre in Dorrigo National Park and contribute, with other proposals being considered locally, to the development of a node of ecotourism infrastructure on the Dorrigo - Bellingen - Coffs Harbour section of the mid north coast.

We have included the preliminary illustration and concept plan for the proposed “place of arrival” prepared by award winning local architect Mr Steve Gorrell, who has designed a number of award-winning national park visitor centres on the north coast.

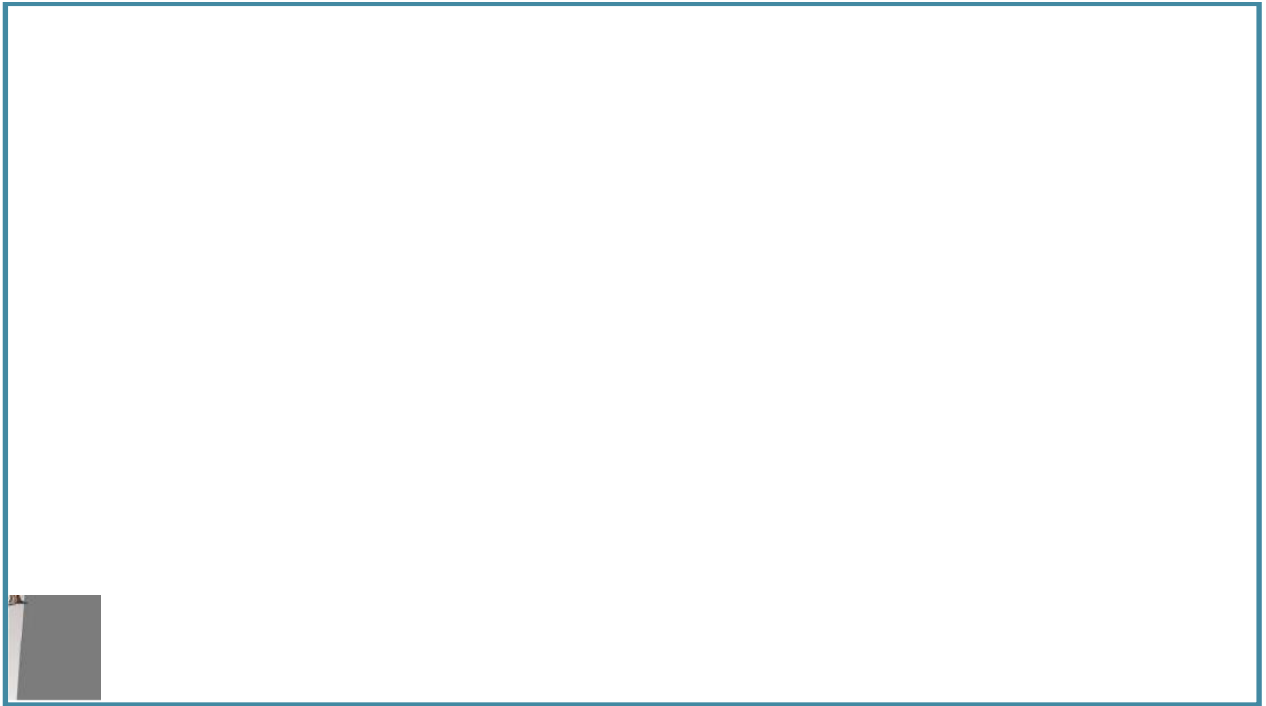
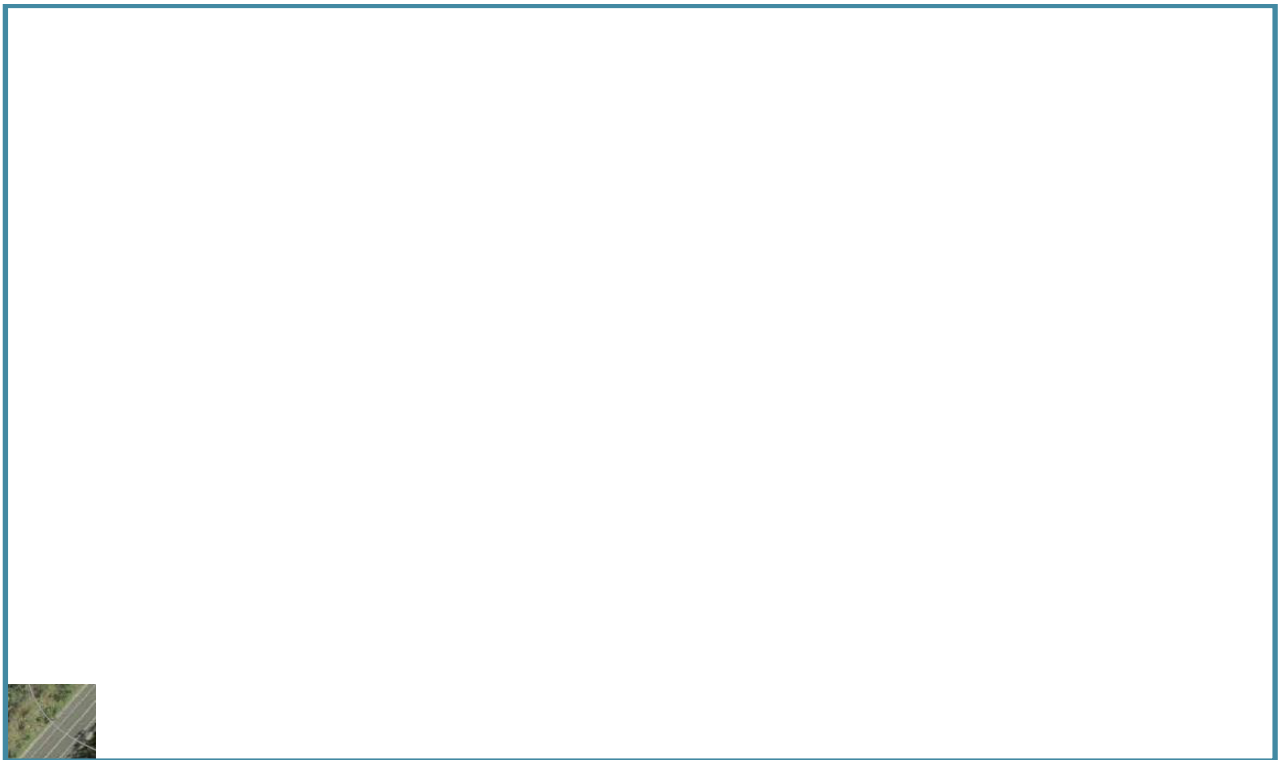


Illustration of the proposed GKNP Visitor Centre at Pine Creek



Concept plan of the proposed GKNP Visitor Centre at Pine Creek

## 5 The GKNP proposed Long Distance Walking Track

The proposed GKNP Long Distance Walking Track offers a spectacular 217 kilometre world class multiday walk from the Coffs Coast up to the Dorrigo Escarpment and back down to the heritage town of Bowraville, on the NSW mid north coast. The Track passes through areas rich in Gumbaynggirr Aboriginal cultural heritage and offers the observant walker a good chance of seeing a koala in the wild.

The track climbs approximately 1,400m to its highest point, is estimated to take 25 days to complete and provides the serious bushwalker with a range of experiences and challenges. It is likely that those undertaking the entire track will require food and possibly water drops at prearranged locations in some sections due the tracks remoteness.

A number of the track sections also offer smaller eg one-hour loop tracks to local features. Sections can be walked separately and walkers not choosing to undertake the entire end-to-end walk can select a section based on their fitness, skills and desired experience.

The GKNP Long Distance Track presents a significant international tourist attraction and as such will provide many direct and indirect benefits for regional economies, in particular the tourism sector. Many business opportunities will be generated for tour operators and guides, bushwalking support providers, transport operators, camping suppliers, food and beverage outlets, restaurants, cafes and accommodation providers.

See full details of the GKNP Long Distance Walking Track [here](#).

## 6 Cycleways

Cycling tourism is growing in demand, with mountain biking a particularly prominent part of this growth. Mountain bike tourists are a subset of nature-based visitors who are known to stay longer and spend more money than typical visitors. Nature-based tourism is currently worth \$19.6 billion annually to NSW and is a growing industry. National parks are an important driver of the industry because, as the name implies, nature-based tourism is entirely reliant on the beauty and inspiration of the natural world in which the visitors are immersed, and national parks are the best means to provide and protect this. Several state forests in the proposed GKNP already host mountain bike infrastructure with varying levels of formality, but their economic potential cannot be maximised as logging is incompatible with high value nature-based tourism.

The GKNP therefore offers an outstanding opportunity to ensure that koalas are protected while delivering a serious economic injection to the Coffs Coast and hinterland.

Our proposed network of hubs would support over 100km of trails catering for riders of differing abilities and would include areas for cross-country, all-mountain, touring, downhill and free riding. Cycling hubs are proposed from Woolgoolga in the north to South West Rocks in the south, at Nambucca Heads, Urunga, Coffs Harbour, Sawtell, Bellingen Shire and potentially Dorrigo. Cycling hubs would be linked to each other, where possible via existing forest tracks, and to the existing NSW Coastal Cycle Trail between Woolgoolga and South West Rocks. Linking hubs to each other and to settlements on the coast and in hinterland valleys will maximise opportunities for visitors to drop off and will help increase stay length.

See full details of the GKNP Cycleway proposal [here](#)

## 7 4WD Tours

The development of four-wheel drive (4WD) tours of the region, supported by a range of information provided through digital apps and links, is one element of the recreation proposals for the new GKNP. There is a network of existing roads and tracks in the region that can be better utilised to provide high quality offerings. The Steering Committee has focused on two routes to date.

**Route 1: The Horseshoe track, Bellingen to Bowraville.** The Horse shoe is a 70km road that follows the ride lines around the top of the Kalang and Nambucca Valleys. It rises to near 900m in places and passes through a number of nature reserves and national parks which include Gondwana Rainforest and spectacular views of the New England Wilderness. The Horseshoe is an exciting 4WD destination combining rugged terrain and easy access to lookouts and short walks.

**Route 2: The Coffs Harbour Hinterland to Woolgoolga four Wheel Drive route.**

The Coffs Hinterland is an excellent destination for 4WD with a number of established routes and some great camp sites along the Nymboida River. The Hinterland can also be experienced in a day trip and the following route shows off some of the attractions and worthwhile stop-offs.

See more details of the 4WD Tours proposal [here](#)

## 8 Horseriding Trails

Horse riding on existing roads within the proposed GKNP offers visitors the opportunity to travel though the park making minimal noise and being observe surrounding trees for koalas while the horse does the walking. Riders can enjoy the spectacular scenery and surrounds of the park at a leisurely pace while having the chance to see a koala in the wild in the knowledge that its' habitat is safe. Multiple existing roads and tracks within the proposed GKNP lend themselves to horse riding, in fact many are already used for trail riding mainly by informal individuals and groups of riders. The Steering Committee has so far developed only one concept plan for a trail.

The proposed Horseshoe Trail is a 65 km horse riding trail over existing roads within the proposed GKNP, in the upper catchment of the Nambucca Valley on the NSW mid north coast. The three-day trail follows ridgelines between the North Arm catchment (headwaters of the Nambucca River) and the Missabotti catchment. Both the southern and northern start/finish points are located at rural local community halls.

See full details of the Horseshoe Horse Riding Trail proposal [here](#)