

**Submission  
No 78**

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

**Organisation:** The University of Sydney

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26 July 2019

Dear Portfolio Committee No. 7 – Planning and Environment

RE: Inquiry into koala populations and habitat in New South Wales

We are a group of koala ecologists (Associate Professor Mathew Crowther, Associate Professor Clare McArthur and Dr Valentina Mella) and koala veterinary pathologists (Professor Mark Krockenberger and Associate Professor Damien Higgins) from the University of Sydney.

Presented below is our submission in response to the terms of reference in the 'Inquiry into koala populations and habitat in New South Wales':

- (a) We encourage the funding of research on the status of koala populations and koala habitat throughout New South Wales, including research on trends, key threats, resource availability and adequacy of protections. This research is critical for providing adequate demographic data (age and sex) and accurate population numbers, fundamental for assessing the future trajectories of populations. Disease is currently a major threat to many koala populations. We therefore also recognise the need for further disease research on koala populations throughout NSW; in particular, the impacts and drivers of chlamydiosis, cryptococcosis and koala retrovirus across diverse habitats. Similarly, we need research to identify habitat requirements of koalas that considers not only vegetation cover, but also the shelter, nutritional and water requirements of koalas, as to ascertain the threats to koalas in each area and the habitat requirements for long-term koala population survival. Finally, it is imperative to consider, not only present conditions, but also future conditions as predicted by climate change models, when considering areas for protection of koala habitat, and areas of pending commercial, agricultural or mining development.

- (b) We believe research is required on how koala habitat will be modified as a result of:
- (i) the Coastal Integrated Forestry Operations Approvals and Regional Forest Agreements,
  - (ii) the Private Native Forestry Code of Practice,
  - (iii) the old growth forest remapping and rezoning program,
  - (iv) the 2016 land management reforms, including the Local Land Services Amendment Act 2016 and associated regulations and codes

Specifically, research is required on the impacts on individual koalas (stress, health), on koala populations (numbers, trends) and koala habitat (adequacy of trees for resting and feeding, buffers from other impacts), caused by new forestry approvals, agreements and codes of practice to ensure protection of koala populations. We also argue that the 2016 land management reforms are not conducive to the protection of koalas, as it allows for greater land-clearance, particularly through land-holder self-assessments, even though loss of habitat is one of the largest threats facing koalas today.

- (c) The State Environmental Planning Policy 44 - Koala Habitat Protection needs reform for it to provide adequate protection for koalas. As koala populations have declined in many areas of NSW, SEPP44 clearly is not adequate in itself for the protection of koalas. We argue it needs to be expanded not just to include council-approved developments, but to also include:
- (i) rural land-clearing approved under the Local Land Services Act 2016,
  - (ii) major projects such as State Significant Development or Infrastructure,
  - (iii) Part 5 developments such as local infrastructure and mining exploration and
  - (iv) developments which comply with SEPP44 but continue to expand in area and scope.

The SEPP must include a monitoring, auditing and reporting program, or the protections granted to koalas may be ineffectual, or at least unknown. We also find the distinctions between potential and core habitat problematic, as potential koala habitat may be valuable koala habitat into the future, for example as a result of climate change.

We support the \$45 million committed NSW Koala Strategy and its targeted funding for research. We support the expansion of the research component of the

scheme assuming it is directed, transparently, towards addressing critical components identified for effective koala conservation, and, therefore, any funding into health, population dynamics and habitat of koalas.

Like the Local Land Services Amendment Act 2016, we consider the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 to be much weaker, in the protection of koalas, than both the former Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995 and Native Vegetation Conservation Act 2003. These newer acts allow for greater land clearance through land-owner self-assessment. History demonstrates clearly that self-regulation, in any sphere, is typically inadequate and ineffective. We are also concerned that the new biodiversity offsetting rules in the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 do not apply the precautionary principle. Ignoring this principle means there is no safety net for avoiding serious or irreversible damage to ecosystems and allows local extinctions and irreversible impacts. We do, however, support greater funding for private land conservation, because so much koala habitat currently lies on private land.

- (d) We support the 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. This area identification will require, not only ground-truthed koala habitat maps, but identification of key threats in each area, and identification of areas likely to act as koala refugia under climate change.
- (e) We support research into the environmental, social and economic impacts of establishing new protected areas to conserve koala habitat, including national parks. Understanding these impacts is essential for developing strategies to manage them appropriately. We however recognise that much of koala habitat is on private land used for productive agriculture. We therefore support research into the use of incentives for landowners and managers for the protection of koalas on private land.

Kind Regards,

Associate Professor Mathew Crowther

Associate Professor Clare McArthur

Dr Valentina Mella

Associate Professor Damien Higgins

Professor Mark Krockenberger