

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

**Organisation:** Maules Creek Branch of the Country Womens' Association of  
NSW

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# Country Women's Association of NSW

ABN 82 318 909 926

*Incorporated in 1931 by an Act of NSW Parliament*

*All Communication to be addressed to the Secretary of Maules Creek Branch  
maulescreekcwa@gmail.com*

Ms Cate Faehrmann

Chair, Koala Population and Habitat in NSW Inquiry

via: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-details.aspx?pk=2536#tab-submissions>

30 July 2019

Dear Ms Faehrmann,

## **Re: Koala Population & Habitat in NSW - Inquiry Submission**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Koala Population & Habitat in NSW – Inquiry.

Our Branch was initially formed in 1923. We are local women with a wide network. We are concerned about the present and future health and well-being of our community and environment. Ours is now a community at risk from unsustainable developments. This is difficult for us because as country women we are primarily concerned with preserving and fostering the sustainability of rural communities.

At the 2019 CWA Annual Conference, our Maules Creek Branch, Namoi Group - put a resolution forward which was carried successfully. *"That the policy of the CWA of NSW be to advocate for travelling stock routes and crown lands to remain in public ownership and be managed to ensure the ongoing valuable ecological and life-fulfilling roles that they play for city and country people now and in the future".*

Advocating for these important parcels of public land is important to our local community. At the very least we wish to protect the remaining flora communities and the health of these parcels of land, to help sustain the little remaining fragmented habitat that is accessible to the Koala communities and the general public as well as utilizing them in times of drought for 'travelling' stock as they were originally intended. Many of these TSR's also have significant Cultural heritage for the indigenous communities and should be cared for and respected as part of their 'Song lines'.

Attached is our submission. We have provided our lived experience submission responding to

1. (a) the status of koala populations and koala habitat in New South Wales, including trends, key threats, resource availability, adequacy of protections and areas for further research,
2. (b) the impacts on koalas and koala habitat from:
  - (i) Regional Forest Agreements,
  - (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

3. (c) the effectiveness of State Environmental Planning Policy 44 - Koala Habitat Protection, the NSW

Koala Strategy and the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016, including the threatened species provisions and associated regulations, in protecting koala habitat and responding to key threats,

4. (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,
5. (e) the environmental, social and economic impacts of establishing new protected areas to conserve koala habitat, including national parks, and

(f) any other related matter: specifically impacts of Surface Water Harvesting - Climate Change and mining in State Forests.

The advent of coal mining in the Boggabri/Maules Creek regions has caused the loss of 74 plus farms to mine ownership, replacing active community members and farmers with mine employees and others tenants who have not assumed permanent community commitments such as volunteer fire fighting. This has also dramatically reduced the agricultural productivity in the area. Further, key habitat has been destroyed and the offsets to replace these are unsatisfactory.

We acknowledge that our koalas and their habitat are in deep crisis – from historical clearing but now completely destabilized by habitat decimation and associated impacts for coal mining and coal-seam gas projects. We cannot live without our environment and the health of our environment is key to survival.

**1. Clearing on private land** – Biodiversity Conservation Act has failed to protect vital habitat on private property, for the Koala and other native fauna.

**2. Lack of Koala corridors** – even with appropriate licenses to clear, landowners are not considering corridors for access to the little remaining habitat on their land. Islands of isolated minimum trees are being left in the middle of paddocks. Edge effect and the likely hood that in coming years these Islands will also be cleared, will leave very little habitat on private property.

**3. Clearing 30 to 40m on either side of new Exclusion fencing** – reduces important habitat, and the fencing excludes Koalas from accessing previous habitat areas on private land, while also reducing fragmented and narrow habitat trees on adjoining TSR's and Shire Roads.

**4. Weed infestation on Travelling Stock Routes and Private property** – Boxthorn and Tiger pear at the base of Koala Food Trees restricts the habitat that Koala's can access on Crown Land, while also threatening the health of the Koala that may be injured by the Tiger pear.

**5. Surface Water Harvesting - Climate Change** – too much surface water is being harvested by large landholders and coal mining companies, restricting water that would otherwise sustain the local environment.

**6. Logging and Mining in State Forests** – these industries are greatly reducing 'Old Growth' forests which form a large percentage of Koala habitat.

**7. Conservation Agreements to protect Koala Habitat on private property** – conservation agreements for private land holders are not offering enough incentive (financially) for many of the landholders to conserve and protect these areas on their properties.

**8. Lack of confidence in Government agencies** – There is lack of trust and confidence that the agencies will protect native vegetation and Koala habitat, and enforce land clearing laws.

The Koala may be a slow and sleepy little guy, but if the Government is slow to act, our iconic Koala population will not survive and future generations will not get to see and share the wonder of this furry little mammal!

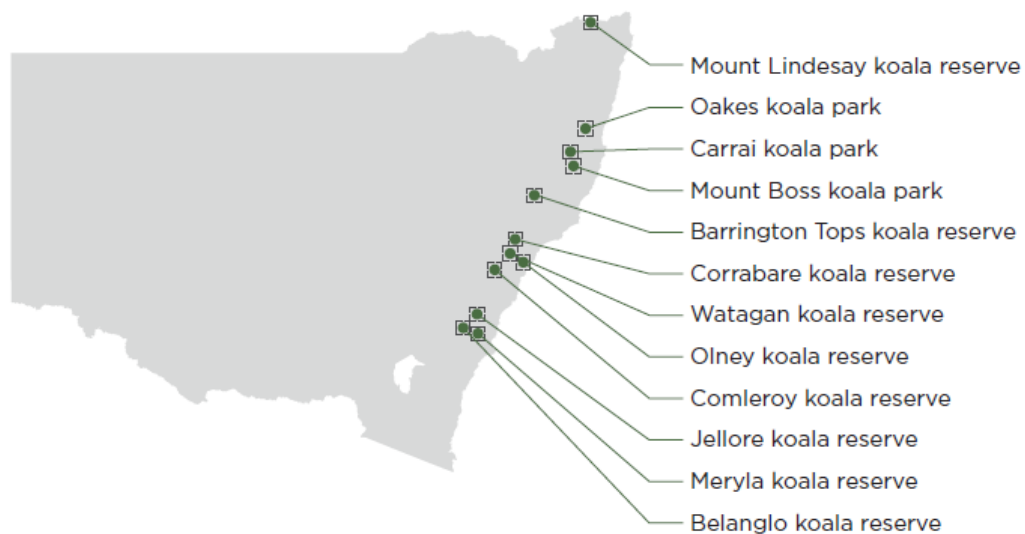


Photos - R. Druce ©

*Two healthy Koalas, one 'Sleepy' male resides near 'Curlewis' and the other healthy little lady lives near Moree.*

(c) the effectiveness of State Environmental Planning Policy 44 - Koala Habitat Protection, the NSW Koala Strategy and the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016, including the threatened species provisions and associated regulations, in protecting koala habitat and responding to key threats.

**This map is from the NSW Koala Strategy – 18250**



**Location of koala reserves and parks**

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Animals-and-plants/Threatened-species/nsw-koala-strategy-18250.pdf>

If there are already Koala populations in these designated areas then protecting them and their habitat is a viable option to help the Population grow. We must protect local Koala habitat and the local populations, not simply relocate them to designated Koala Reserves.

While the idea of having Koala reserves and parks may sound like a good solution for a government that wants to open up other areas for logging, wood-chipping and mining, these areas already have their own inhabitants that are using these forested areas. Relocation to these areas is rarely a successful exercise when it comes to these very territorial mammals. Koalas are choosy when it comes to their diet and while moving them to areas that have the same species of Eucalypts may seem simple, ultimately the Koalas will simply not thrive if they cannot find food trees that 'they' prefer. Along with relocation comes stress experienced by the individuals and this may exacerbate latent chlamydia symptoms in these individuals.

We need to be looking at where these Koala population are living now and protecting and improving these areas where they are most healthy and happy within their local habitat. Not just designating areas that suites the human population.

Unfortunately, not all the NSW Koalas live in these areas indicated on the map above, many live West of the Great Dividing Range!

While Save Our Species programs have enabled many landholders in the western districts to plant Koala tree corridors, not all landholders are keen to do the work to create access corridors where they are needed. The last two dry seasons have not been ideal for maintaining newly planted tree corridors, and these will take decades before they are fully utilized by the Koalas.

(iv) the 2016 land management reforms, including the Local Land Services Amendment

### **1. Clearing on private land**



*A line of mature trees being cleared.*

Clearing and logging on private property is out of control since the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 was introduced in August 2017 and came into force. It was rushed and conservation was watered down so clearing for wide acre farming was easy and uncomplicated. Compliance will always be a nightmare, in the light of the murder of an OE&H compliance officer at Croppa Creek. Local Land Services (LLS) are now in a position to advise landholders of the Act, they are sitting in the middle, on one hand advising property owners of where and what they can clear, and on the other side of the coin they are supposed to be protecting the Environment and habitat, when Mapping is not even accurate. Most LLS staff live in the areas where they work and must feel compromised trying to do the right thing by the landholder and on the other hand protecting the Environment.

The dissolution of OE&H is also of concern, dissolving departments can only be counterproductive.

Compliance since this new Biodiversity Conservation Act was introduced has been sadly lacking, not due solely to the staff responsible, but the daunting task of actually confronting the landholders that have been suspected of illegal clearing. A back log of cases that will probably never even get to court and be charged, and still it will continue, loosing much of our mature habitat.

## 2. Lack of Koala corridors.

Most larger farms in the western districts of NSW are broadacre farms, that in itself means that there are few if any trees in these cropped paddocks. If you care to look at 'Google Earth' it soon becomes clear that some large holdings don't have any trees near their cropping paddocks and only minimum scattered tree lines around the edge of their properties. Some do have single paddock trees or a small 'clump' of trees that are like islands in the middle of hectares of cropping and fallow land, this must surely be daunting and dangerous for Koalas to try and access these food trees.

(a) the status of koala populations and koala habitat in New South Wales, including trends, key threats, resource availability, adequacy of protections and areas for further research,

## 3. Clearing 30 to 40m on either side of new Exclusion fencing



Photo R. Druce ©

*Emu unable to escape due to the exclusion fence along a public road.*

<https://www.southernwire.com.au/rural/case-studies/vermin-exclusion-fencing/>

We are not suggesting that this particular fence was the brand of 'Exclusion Fencing Material' as depicted in the link below this photograph, but this is of similar construction as those shown in the photos in the link. You can see by the height of the fence, the Emu has no way over, under or through this fence, so what possible chance would a Koala have of getting through this type of fencing? This fence also has about 30cm or more of the wire lying on the ground so nothing can dig under it.

This type of fencing is of course used by landholders to 'protect' their crops, but the harm that it will cause due to wildlife now being restricted to road verges and open Travelling Stock Routes (TSR) may mean that Koala deaths on roads will become the norm, as they will no longer be able to access some of their habitat that may have been located on private property, due to these exclusion fences. With very narrow road verges in many places, Koalas now have few or no mature food and shade trees due to these new exclusion fences and the 30 to 40m clearing either side of them, the Koalas may find themselves in the same vulnerable and threatened position as this poor Emu must have felt as traffic passed by.

Unfortunately this Emu has Sercombe to an injury, (when this photo was taken the photographer was a passenger in a moving car and didn't see the extensive wound on this Emu until closer examination of the photo later) We will never know how this injury was sustained, but the Emu seemed desperate to escape the road verge, but unfortunately because of the exclusion fence had nowhere to go.

Do we want to put our much-loved Koala population in this same situation of having to search for new habitat along road verges of small isolated patches of food and shelter trees, and also being excluded from the very little remaining Koala habitat that is on once accessible private property, creek and river edges?

This type of fencing may be necessary to preclude feral species that would endanger vulnerable threatened species in Nature Reserves, similar to the one in the Pilliga where threatened species such as the Bilby has been re-introduced. Unfortunately, out in the western and north/western districts of NSW, many of the larger farming companies appear to be using the newly introduced Biodiversity Conservation Act to not only clear both sides of their fences (30 or 40m) but they are replacing all their older conventional boundary fences with these exclusion fences, no doubt having this type of project written off as a tax deduction for their financial benefit at the expense of the native species that can no longer access 'their native habitat'.

It has been noted that many of these boundary fences are adjoining either Travelling Stock Routes or Shire Roads, and government agencies that are in charge of these crown and shire lands have been obliged to allow clearing on their side of these fences. Hence now 'Clearing' more of the Crown land and ultimately reducing precious habitat for the native fauna, particularly the Koala that could once access habitat on private land. These fences are doing exactly what they are meant to do, that is exclude every native animal, from the Echidna, Emu, Kangaroo to our precious Koala.

#### **4. Weed infestation on Travelling Stock Routes and Private property**



To remove the 'barbs' of Tiger pear, it usually requires pliers.

On many of the western and north-western TRS's as well as on private properties, it is noticeable that Boxthorn and Tiger pear are continuing to become more prevalent. Both these weeds are a hinderance and possible harmful injurious weed when it comes to a Koala trying to climb 'her' tree to feed and having to negotiate the segments of the Tiger pear.

(f) any other related matter: specifically impacts of Surface Water Harvesting - Climate Change

## **5. Surface Water Harvesting - Climate Change**

It's not just the dry seasons that are killing so many trees and allowing our rivers to run dry. The diversion of so much of the natural flood waters that once spilled from our river systems and did what they were meant to do...flood the Plains, are no longer serving their purpose as they are being intercepted by many 'contour/levee' banks and large irrigation dams.

The harvesting of surface water from the flood plains; and vast megaliters pumped from our underground aquifers to irrigate fields of cotton and cereal/fodder crops and wash coal, has disrupted the balance of nature. We are now seeing the results, dead and dying trees that have long been deprived of their share of surface water that previously sustained them over the past centuries. Wet-lands that are now Dry-lands! Mature trees are now Dead trees!

Climate change and hot dry years has now been the last straw that is breaking the camel's back as it were, and many of the giant River Red Gums and other beautiful species of Eucalypts and understory species that have endured many droughts in the past, can no longer survive the heat without their share of surface water run-off and river water for transpiration and photosynthesis. Forcing Koala populations to seek out more sustainable food and shelter trees.

The little rain that has fallen over the past couple of years is greedily harvested to be used by big broadacre corporations and Coal mining companies. Some mining companies even have 'High priority' water licenses, which allows them to extract water from our river systems when releases are meant for the environment.

Because of the geographical location broadacre commercial crops would never survive due to lack of water in most of the western regions of NSW, but it appears that since water licenses were 'freed from their original property location' and are now used as a commodity to be bought and sold for profit the whole system has come so badly undone.

We are now seeing rivers that have little to no water flowing for extended periods throughout the years; fish dying and rural towns suffering.

Irrigation on properties that were once used for grazing, being turned into expanses of tree-less hectares for irrigation. Dams so large that you can't see the horizon on the once flat food-plains, just mounds of dirt contours and large irrigation channels with mega pumps at the ends.

Our underground water is a finite source that needs to be respected and not plundered by a few for the benefit of economic riches. Water license allocations need to be closely examined.

Water is the life blood of all living things and the environment is suffering badly; many small towns and stock and domestic bores have gone dry. Preferred food trees for the Koalas have died, stress from lack of adequate habitat trees can and has exacerbated Chlamydia in many of the once healthy Koala populations.



*Without native vegetation the Koala population will suffer and decline even more.*



*'These are our living environmental lungs that are being destroyed by economic greed'.*

The photo of dead trees above demonstrates the need for a review of our 'Surface Water Capture'. This photograph was taken a short distance from a river on one side and a huge irrigation dam on the other side. You may even note that the Wedge-tail Eagle has lost the cover of his nest (in the center of the photo) just one of many such abandoned nests in dead trees, noted in the western districts of NSW, where surface water capture is taking its toll on the environment.



*Melaleuca trees dying, deprived of surface water flow due to 'surface water capture' by a coal company.*

Water is one of the essential elements that will in the future sustain the habitat needed for our Koala population. When the Eucalypt trees are struggling to survive due to lack of water, the Koala population also feels that effect as the leaves no longer have the moisture that they need. It is not just food trees that are dying, many species of shade trees are also deprived of water and dying.

Until the water sharing plan is equitable for everyone including the environment, we will see more habitat dying at the expense of our Koala population declining even further and being forced out of their natural habitat.

(iii) the old growth forest remapping and rezoning program,

## **6. Logging and Mining in State Forests**

There are very few old growth forests left where trees are mature with diameters up to 2 meters. Rehabilitation will be of little use until decades in the future. All remaining 'Old Growth Forests' need to be protected due to their high habitat status; the Government's proposal to open up thousands of hectares on the NSW North Coast for logging needs to be rejected and no existing old growth forest should be rezoned to allow; logging; wood-chipping or mining.

Our local district is seeing firsthand how Leard State Forest and its small Koala population has been impacted. This State Forest was rezoned in 2012, to allow mining. The three open cut coal mines will ultimately bulldoze more than half of the 8,000ha in Leard State Forest that was considered 'irreplaceable' Old Growth Forest with Critically Endangered Whitebox grassy woodlands and under a Tier One classification. In fact, it is not Known if the Leard Koala's are surviving the enormous impact of having three open cut coal mines in their local habitat.

(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,

### **7. Conservation Agreements to protect Koala Habitat on private property**

Oral feedback to members shows clearly that unless the rate of compensation through the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust is in line with productivity that could be made from the land in question, then these options will not be taken up by many property owners. In the past there have been property owners that have taken up the agreements to look after portions of their properties in perpetuity, but it appears that those that took up these agreements when they were first offered received reasonable compensation. As money from the Government runs low the offers to lock away sections of private property with good Koala habitat doesn't seem to be working, the real need for protection of habitat is located on many private properties that consider their bank balance before environmental or specifically Koala habitat needs.

(f) any other related matter

### **8. Lack of confidence in Government agencies**

We have also had private landholders and members of the general public, who know of isolated Koalas or small groups of Koalas telling us that they are unwilling to share these locations with government agencies. These people would rather take it into their own hands to keep these Koalas safe and well. This would only go to suggest that there is little or no confidence in the government to do anything that is beneficial for the Koalas before it is too late. The Koala along with the 1,000 species that are in the sights of extinction have little time left unless the government puts real legislation in place to protect their habitat, then and only then these caring citizens may come forward and share the locations of our Koalas, knowing that they will be looked after by the Australian government and that their habitat will remain in tack and protected in perpetuity.



Koala habitat needs legislation to protect it immediately before any more is bulldozed.

**Recommendations:**

- \* Public education is required for the community, business and government needs to protect, restore and sustain our environment.
- \* As a matter of urgency – government money must be spent on Environmental education – underpinned by the principles of Ecological Sustainable Development. This must occur across all ages and demographics. Any education must be independent of ‘businesses’ which benefit from environmental destruction and has many dollars to skew definitions and messages.
- \* The community must understand what is going on and the implications to the Koala and human existence; openness and transparency by all government agencies, and disclosure and access to surveys and important matters carried out using taxpayer money. This would go a long way to bridging the gap of distrust by local communities.
- \* Overall, Koala and Koala habitat protection must be transparent and it must demand public participation.
- \* Solutions to local conservation; Consequences for illegal clearing, with diligent compliance officers; Local sustainability challenges with transparent independent research; Consultation, Education & Partnerships with Government.
- \* Fair and equitable conservation agreements for willing landholders to conserve habitat on their properties in perpetuity.
- \* Mining and Coal Seam gas to be excluded from all State Forests.
- \* Self-regulation and reporting of environmental issues need to be effectively followed up and checked by the appropriate authority and not just taken at face value by the proponent’s reports – i.e. Improved and comprehensive assessment standards of coal and coal seam gas and other major projects, ground truthing by independent ecologists prior to development consent of the projects – State Significant Developments.

We all know that our iconic Koala is very territorial, simply relocating them to a designated forest is not the answer. So, where too from here? They are being ‘excluded’ by these new fences that are being erected, their habitat is dying due to water harvesting, the seasons are getting hotter and dryer due to Climate Change. We have to do something NOW; tomorrow may be too late!

We leave this in the hands of the committee members to do their utmost to address these and other matters that will be brought to their attention in this very important inquiry. We also stress the time constraints for the findings to be implemented if we are to protect both the Koala and their habitat.

Yours Sincerely

Libby Laird

President,

Maules Creek Branch of the Country Womens’ Association of NSW