

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

**Organisation:** Clarence Environment Centre

**Date Received:** 1 August 2019

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**Date: 1st August 2019**

### **Submission to NSW Upper House Koala Inquiry**

Australia's iconic Koala is in trouble. The very fact that the above inquiry has been initiated is evidence enough that the species is sliding rapidly towards extinction. However, to those ecologists, conservationists and environmentalists who have been working on the ground, this has been obvious for years.

Not only have the authorities charged with the protection of biodiversity failed dismally in their duty of care, Governments at all levels have actually been complicit in driving Koalas, and many other species to the very brink of extinction.

To illustrate that fact we tender the following case study, demonstrating how government policies and actions have impacted on just one small Koala population at Iluka, on the NSW north coast.

#### **How governments are approving the extinction of Koalas**

All the indications are that the declining numbers of koalas point to one depressing fact, they are fast approaching extinction in NSW and Queensland. That situation was already attracting attention of the NSW Department of Environment in the late 1980s, a mere 30 years ago, identifying a looming crisis, particularly along the NSW coastline, a region under increasing threat from the worst invasive species ever, mankind!

They identified the main causes of these declines as habitat loss and fragmentation through urban expansion and infrastructure provision; land-clearing for agriculture; road kills, dog attack and disease. However, if you analyse these causes, they all revert back to habitat loss; less food to eat,



fragmentation of habitat forcing koalas to move from one area of habitat to another on the ground, where they are easy prey for dogs, and being hit by motor vehicles. Many of the diseases that plague koalas are also believed to be stress induced following habitat loss.

As stated above the then Department of Environment identified the threat to koalas along the north coast, and in the late 1980s ordered a comprehensive review of those threats as they related to the few remaining viable remnant populations, one of which was at Iluka, and connected to other small populations at Woombah, just a short distance north of Iluka, and through the Mororo - Mangrove Creek area to Ashby in the west.

***This is what is happening as the Iluka habitat rapidly diminishes***

The Government did commission studies and reports and prepared management plans, in an attempt to convince the wider community that they were doing something. Then, having completed an exhaustive study of the history, size, distribution, food-tree preferences and problems for the Iluka koala population, the resultant strategy was finally released in 1990. The recommended management actions were:

- **Areas containing stands of forest red gum should be protected** either through habitat zoning in the Maclean Shire LEP, or instruments available to the NSW government.
- Maclean Council be asked to **impose a Tree Preservation Order on forest red gums**, prohibiting their removal without consent.
- **Areas identified as essential corridors between feeding habitats be protected**, and:
- Seed from Forest Red Gums, the preferred koala feed tree species, to be collected and propagated by local residents, and planted in identified areas in consultation with authorities and residents' groups.

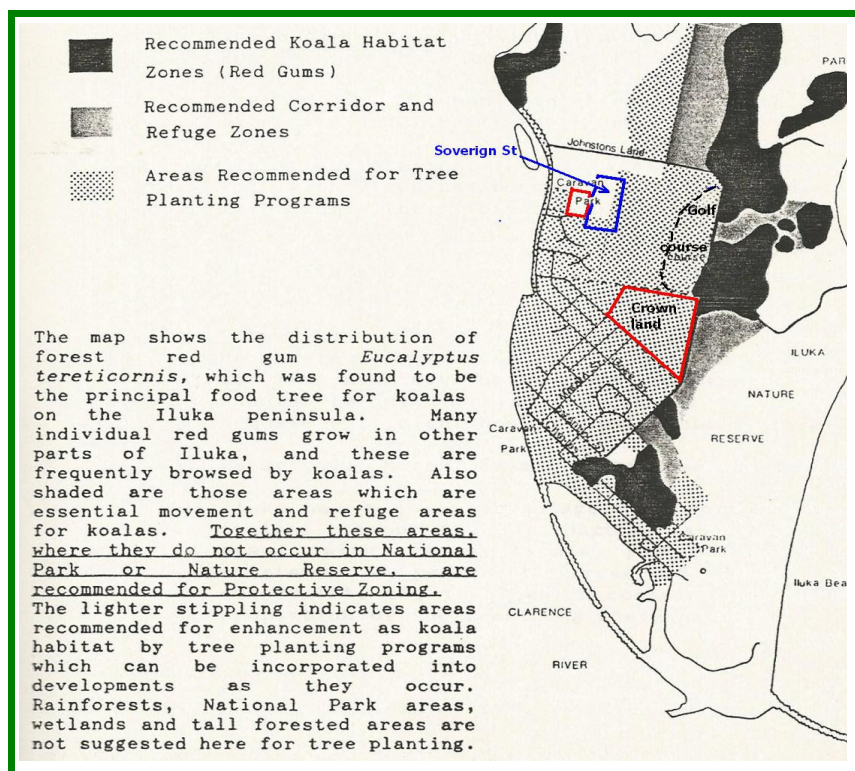
So how have our regulators responded to the potential loss of this Aussie icon? The story isn't pretty

### A) Local Government leads the way

One positive at that time was the fact that there was a significant portion of crown land available where tree-planting programs were recommended and could have effectively connected known areas of habitat. Much of that land was already in recovery having been preciously sand mined. In fact the dotted area on the map from that early strategy (see below) shows the area recommended for Koala feed tree planting. The strategy also recommended (see underlined text) that: **“Together these areas where they do not occur in National Park or Nature Reserve, are recommended for protective zoning”**. So all seemed set for the revival. **Note: The point needs to be made that while there is a significant area of land on the Iluka peninsular under conservation, most of that forest is rainforest with little or no Koala habitat, so enhancing Koala habitat was essential to the species survival.**

However, shortly after the management plan's release, one crown land block (diamond shaped area outlined in red on map at right) became the subject of a land claim, so it seems supplementary tree-planting was then restricted to a small corner of the Iluka Nature Reserve (see grey shaded area east of crown land).

Then, in the mid 1990s, the former Maclean Shire Council facilitated the clearing of some 5 hectares of crown land forest to add 9 holes to the golf course, and closely followed that decision with the approval of the Sovereign Street housing estate. That allowed another 6 or 7 hectares of privately owned forest to be immediately bulldozed for a staged development that has only just been completed.





Not surprisingly, and with little if any action taken to enhance the koala habitat, when a follow-up survey was undertaken just 10 years after the strategy was released, the Iluka koala population was declared “functionally extinct”.

In about 2005, the newly formed Clarence Valley Council combined the Local Environment Plans of the amalgamated councils, and quietly rezoned the remaining crown land, that had been recommended for “*protective zoning*”, from rural to residential.

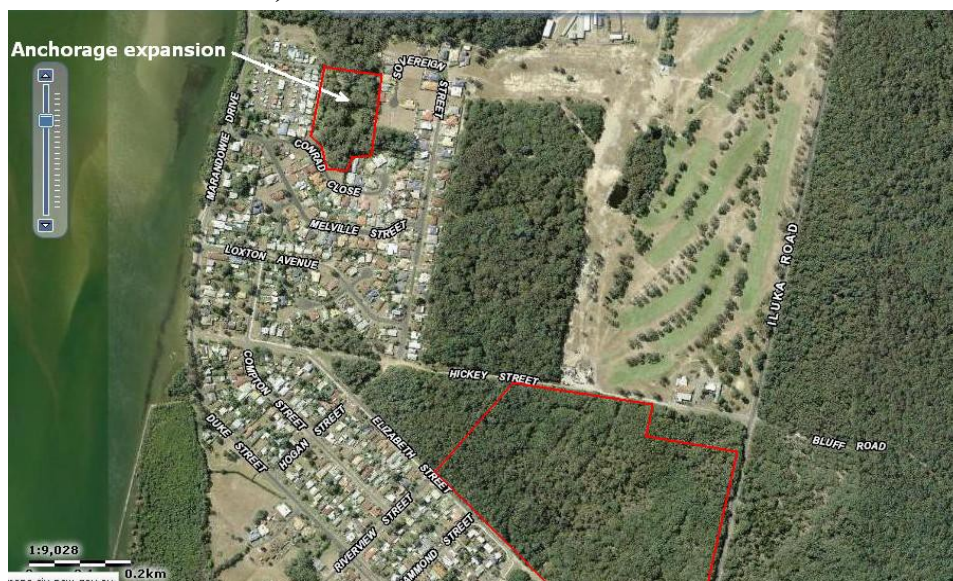
For a short while after 2010, and with healthy natural regeneration occurring across the crown land, there were hopes of a revival, with occasional koala sightings reported, including one of a mother and joey. This prompted Council to order another survey which, while confirming koala numbers were still low, did express an opinion that a recovery may be on the way.

An 80kph speed limit was imposed through the national park, but that didn't last long, with our local state member bowing to pressure from impatient motorists, and the speed limit was removed.

Not to be out-done, Council is currently in the process of approving a 140 lot subdivision on the land it had rezoned, which will see the bulldozing of a further 14ha of forest. This is the land that was identified for regeneration and planting to provide koala habitat, and enhance one of the identified “*essential corridors between feeding habitats*” that was supposed to be protected.

**Incredibly, that development appears set for approval following the Federal Government's acceptance of the developer's offer of an “offset”, which is to plant feed trees along the streets in the new subdivision (not for Koalas – Eucalypts are notorious for dropping branches so are deemed too dangerous for use as street trees).**

If that wasn't enough, another proposed development is now on Council's books which calls for more habitat to be destroyed nearby, to expand a caravan park. That will not only see the removal of old-growth trees, including favoured feed trees where koalas have been recorded browsing in the past, but will fill what had once been a wetland area.



***Iluka has changed significantly since 1990, and with the areas outlined in red likely to be bulldozed in the near future, the Council approved extinction of Koalas appears inevitable.***

The scattered population that had once occurred around Woombah, has long since disappeared, thanks to a series of extreme fire events, so sadly, in the face of this ongoing council approved onslaught, there appears to be little future for Iluka's koalas.

Thanks to the media reports, we all know of the broad-scale land-clearing that has occurred across NSW since the current State Government decided to do away with the Native Vegetation Act, but changes to the Integrated Forests Operations Approval the the State Government introduced earlier this year, are going to have an even greater impact.

## The State Government initiative to allow logging of Koala habitat

Koala habitat on crown land is under even greater threat as the NSW government last year changed the Integrated Forests Operations Approval to allow clear-felling in state forests on the NSW north coast. Forestry Corporation has responded to the Clarence Environment Centre's concerns over what they call "intensive single tree selection" in Koala habitat areas, pointing out the amount of land set aside as reserves in State forests.

Of course that argument is nonsense, as the forests set aside as reserves are generally rainforest and old-growth containing little koala if any habitat, while the areas of dry sclerophyll forest, which contains most of the animal's preferred habitat, is where the heavy logging (clear-felling) will occur.

It has recently announced a study, seemingly to justify their clear-felling plans, involving the capture of healthy koalas, fitting them with tracking devices, and placing them in a regenerating forest. This, it is claimed, will provide better information on what tree species and sizes offer important browse for this threatened animal.

We believe what they are really trying to prove is that Koalas can survive in a landscape of saplings after their forest has been clear-felled.



*Forest Corps vision for NSW's state forests.*

The question which has to be asked is, why bother? This is research that has been undertaken time and again, and Scientists already know what koalas prefer to eat with considerable certainty. What the study may also discover, but unlikely to report, is that there are significant risks associated with attempting to relocate koalas outside of their home territory.

Existing research has also determined that, while koalas will browse on preferred food trees of many sizes and ages, they show a distinct preference for large trees both for food and protection. Whether that fact will emerge from this new research remains to be seen.

Another nonsensical claim by Forestry Corporation is that if Koalas are recorded in an area of suitable habitat, feed trees will be protected. What isn't admitted unless pressured, is that only a small number of trees, 5 per hectare we understand, need to be protected.

A thorough survey of a 3 hectare area was undertaken at Braemar State Forest only last weekend. In all 40 trees were found to have Koala scats within 1m of their base, showing that over time the local Koalas utilise almost all the available feed trees in an area.

All the loggers have to do is protect 10 feed trees per hectare if the area is deemed to be high use and 5 trees per hectare if it is deemed to be a moderate use area. However, despite our search area being a high use area, there was no sign that any formal scat search had been conducted by Forestry Corporation staff, and it is doubtful if even 5 trees per hectare had been marked up (I only recall seeing 4 or 5 marked trees in all). Even by protecting 10 trees per hectare, this still means there will be an immediate net loss of known to be used feed trees, totalling in excess of 25%.

Under the changes to the forests Agreements, some 142,000 hectares of state forest along the north coast between Bulahdelah and Grafton have been identified for clear fell over the coming years, much of it koala habitat.

Forest Corporation's record is not good. Since 2005, environment groups, led by the North Coast Forest Alliance, have identified hundreds of regulatory breaches by their contractors, but little regulatory action has been taken. In recent months Forestry Corporation has attempted to defend logging of koala habitat in Gibberagee State Forest, by claiming that, while koala scats had been found beneath some trees, there were not enough to qualify the area as "high use" so don't warrant protection.

So here we have a situation where koala numbers are in decline as a direct result of habitat loss, while Forest Corporation increases habitat destruction, justifying that by claiming there are not enough koalas left in the area to justify their protection.

**The Federal Government's role in this extinction process** is simple. It handed over its responsibility under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act to the State Governments, with no oversight provided. They simply washed their hands of the problem.

### **Suggested soluitions**

1. Stop broad-scale land-clearing, and impose rehabilitation orders on any landowner found to have cleared illegally. This would prevent fines being treated as a cost of doing business which, most likely, is then considered to be a tax write-off.
2. Extensive flora and fauna surveys were undertaken across all state forests in the mid 1990s in the lead-up to the signing of the Forests Agreements, so there is no need to reinvent the wheel here. Use that mapping data to identify all forest compartments containing Koala habitat , and immediately place those compartments under protection from logging. This would cost nothing. In fact, given the native forest logging in State Forests has regularly los millions of dollars annually, shutting down those compartments would actually save money!
3. Use existiong Koala records to identify Koala habitat on private land, and pay those landowners to manage that habitat, possibly through some form of carbon trading scheme.
4. Rewrite fire management plans in national parks and elsewhere, taking Koalas into consideration. Too many Koalas are being senselessl killed in so-called hazard reduction fires or agricultural burning.
5. Dramatically increase the penalties for allowing fire to escape one's property.

We thank the Committee for this opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely

John Edwards  
Honorary Secretary