

Submission
No 139

INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

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Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

30 July 2019

NSW Legislative Council's Portfolio Committee No. 7 – Planning and Environment
Parliament House
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Sydney NSW 2000
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Blue Mountains Conservation Society submission to *Inquiry into koala populations and habitat in New South Wales*

Blue Mountains Conservation Society

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society is a community based organisation with over 800 members. Its mission includes to help conserve the natural environment of the Greater Blue Mountains. The Society's geographic area of particular interest includes the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (which comprises Blue Mountains, Kanangra-Boyd, Gardens of Stone, Nattai, Thirlmere Lakes, Wollemi and Yengo National Parks and Jenolan Karst Conservation Reserve) and lands adjacent to the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (GBMWhA). The Greater Blue Mountains was awarded world heritage status in 2000 because of its outstanding natural values, including its biodiversity. The Society is keenly aware that a number of species have become extinct in the Greater Blue Mountains since European settlement and that an increasing number of local species are being listed as threatened species under state and national threatened species legislation. The Society urges the NSW Parliament to adopt a bipartisan approach to ensure the conservation of the Koala, and other species, both in the Greater Blue Mountains and across NSW.

The Society requests that its submission be published in full on the website including our name.

The Inquiry

The Committee undertaking the inquiry comprises Ms Cate Faehrmann MLC The Greens (Chair), Hon Mark Pearson MLC Animal Justice Party (Deputy Chair), Hon Mark Buttigieg MLC Australian Labor Party, Hon Catherine Cusack Liberal Party, Hon Ben

Franklin MLC The Nationals, Hon Shayne Mallard Liberal Party and Hon Penny Sharpe MLC Australian Labor Party.

The Inquiry Terms of Reference are:

1. That Portfolio Committee No. 7 – Planning and Environment inquire into and report on actions, policies and funding by government to ensure healthy, sustainable koala populations and habitat in New South Wales, and in particular:

(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,

(b) the impacts on koalas and koala habitat from:

(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

(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,

(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, and

(f) any other related matter.

2. That the committee report by 15 June 2020.

Koala in the Greater Blue Mountains

Within the GBMWHA, the Koala is an uncommon resident with a widespread but patchy distribution in sclerophyll forests and grassy woodland. Core population areas are associated with relatively small areas of more fertile soils within the GBMWHA. Many recent Koala records come from the perimeter of the GBMWHA adjacent to more fertile agricultural lands. Important centres for Koalas in the GBMWHA include southern Nattai NP, between High Range and Mt Jellore, southern Yengo NP extending into eastern Wollemi NP and Black Range Road (Kanangra-Boyd NP) to Jenolan KCR. Non-breeding male Koalas roam widely and probably account for many of the sporadic and widespread records of single animals outside the main population centres. It is also possible that animals move more frequently if the habitat in their home territory is compromised. Sightings since 2000 have been made near the junction of Gingra Creek and Kowmung River (Blue Mountains NP); Birds Rock Trail No. 2 (Gardens of Stone NP); Jenolan

Caves Cottages (Jenolan KCR); Kanangra Walls Road and Black Range Road (Kanangra-Boyd NP); Angorawa Creek, Bob Turners Track, Culoul Range, Grassy Hill Track, Hungerford Creek, Long Wheeny Creek, Mellong Creek, Mountain Lagoon, Putty Road and Wheeny Creek (Wollemi NP); and Yengo Track and Bucketty to Bala Range (Yengo NP). There are sporadic sightings of single Koalas in areas adjacent to the GBMWhA, including urban areas.

The mammal fauna of the GBMWhA, in keeping with the wider Australian mammal fauna, has experienced a history of decline and extinction since European settlement. In the GBMWhA, almost half of the mammals (28 species) that have been recorded in the area since European settlement are listed under NSW and Commonwealth legislation as threatened species. Nine of these threatened mammal species (White-footed Rabbit-rat, Eastern Quoll, Southern Brown Bandicoot, at least one bettong species, Long-nosed Potoroo, Broad-toothed Rat, Plains Mouse, Smoky Mouse and Hastings River Mouse) now appear to be extinct in the GBMWhA.

Comprehensive data in regard to longterm trends in numbers and distribution of Koalas in our geographic area of interest is not available. Anecdotal evidence indicates that numbers and ranges of Koalas in the Greater Blue Mountains have declined since European settlement. Koalas were hunted in the Blue Mountains in the early days of European settlement. One local hunting guide, Sid Bellingham, wrote in 1899 ‘The fur of the Native Bear [Koala] is close and warm, and makes a good rug’. One can only imagine that quite a few Koalas contributed to each such rug. Examples of local Koala decline include a colony present at Blaxland in the lower Blue Mountains (in the vicinity of Koala Road), which appears to have perished in the 1968 bushfires. This area has not since been re-colonised. In the late 1800s Koalas were described as ‘extremely abundant’ about the junction of the Colo [Koala] and Hawkesbury Rivers, just east of the Blue Mountains. This is no longer the case.

Concerns in regard to Koalas in the Greater Blue Mountains

1. Rapid Climate Change

The Koala is known to suffer high mortality during heatwaves and drought. It has been identified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as one of the ten most vulnerable species globally to climate change. Heatwaves appear to lower koala fertility. Higher temperatures also mean higher evaporation rates and lower soil moisture levels and are likely to have an indirect effect on the quality of eucalypt leaves and thus Koala food.

On average, temperatures at Katoomba have been 1°C warmer in the last 20 years than in the previous 20 years. This is a much higher increase than for Australia in general, for which the corresponding mean difference is 0.3°C warmer (Bureau of Meteorology ACORN-SAT dataset).

While we do not have good local data on the Koala, it is known that the Greater Glider, another arboreal marsupial foliovore, has declined locally over the last 20 years, especially at lower elevations. The decline appears to be related to increasing temperatures. It is not always appreciated that extensive natural habitats, such as the

uncleared tablelands forests of the World Heritage Area, are experiencing the impacts of rapid climate change.

The NSW Koala Strategy ignores the impacts of climate change on koalas. To ignore the impacts of climate change appears negligent. Blue Mountains Conservation Society asks that this deficiency be rectified promptly and that urgent action be implemented to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

2. Loss of Habitat

Many of the local Koala records come from the perimeter of the GBMWHHA adjacent to more fertile agricultural lands. While clearing of habitat is unlikely to be an issue within the GBMWHHA, clearing of Koala habitat in adjacent fertile lands for both agriculture and mining projects, is continuing.

Blue Mountains Conservation Society asks that clearing of known and potential Koala habitat in lands adjacent to the GBMWHHA be no longer allowed. We ask that current “offset” policies be repealed. In order to ensure that genetic diversity is maintained and give Koalas their best chance of survival in a rapidly changing climate, remaining Koala populations and habitat should be conserved in situ. It is highly likely that many Koalas in the GBMWHHA also use and are in part dependent on adjacent unreserved habitat.

3. Fragmentation of Habitat

Our geographic area of interest is fragmented by two major transport corridors, the Great Western Highway/Railway and Bells Line of Road. Both corridors are becoming increasingly busy and are barriers to the movement of local Koalas. Blue Mountains Conservation Society is greatly concerned that recent upgrades of these corridors have failed to provide adequate, and in many areas any, overpasses and underpasses for koalas and other fauna. We ask that this matter be rectified.

4. Degradation of habitat

At present, increasing numbers of trees within the Greater Blue Mountains, especially at lower elevation, are dying, possibly as a consequence of the current drought coupled with abnormally high temperatures.

Blue Mountains Conservation Society asks that the impacts of tree death and dieback in all areas of Koala habitat be investigated and acted upon.

5. Lack of resources for management and monitoring of Koalas

Blue Mountains Conservation Society is greatly concerned by recent severe cutbacks to the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, particularly rangers and other on-ground workers, who are responsible for the day-to-day management of the GBMWHHA.

We are further concerned that grants provided by the government through the Koala Research Plan are confined to disease, translocation and the medicalization of koalas. These are “bandaid” issues.

We ask that adequate financial support be provided urgently to adequately resource on-ground management and to address the primary issues of climate change, conservation and habitat degradation and loss.

6. Legal protection for Koalas

Given the current parlous state of Koala populations in NSW, it is obvious that current legal protection for Koalas in NSW is inadequate.

Since Koalas have already declined greatly, the distinction between 'core' and 'potential' habitat may no longer stand. Core habitat may now be unoccupied by Koalas but should be protected in perpetuity to enable potential future recolonization by Koalas. It is unclear how the revised SEPP 44 will address the distinction between 'core' and 'potential' habitat.

Legislation needs to include provisions to protect all Koala habitat. It should provide for opportunities for legal challenges in the public interest. Protection for Koalas should apply to all developments. The approval process must not allow important koala habitat to be offset, or cleared in exchange for money.

We ask that proper legal protection for Koalas and their habitat be devised, enacted and continually reviewed to ensure its effectiveness.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide input.

Yours sincerely

Lachlan Garland
President
Blue Mountains Conservation Society