

**Submission
No 146**

INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition Inc

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SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NSW

The Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition (CVCC) is a community group based in Grafton in the Clarence Valley in the NSW Northern Rivers. Formed in 1988, the CVCC has been involved with environmental issues – both locally and further afield – since that time.

As this organization has for years been concerned about the decline in koala numbers both in our immediate area and further afield, it has raised its concerns with all levels of government. We welcome this inquiry and hope that it will lead to effective action stop the current slide of koalas towards extinction.

1. General Comments

Governments have a responsibility to protect the natural environment for current as well as future generations of human and other life forms. The natural environment, which provides important ecological services, is under extreme threat from overdevelopment, human greed and indifference and climate change. Although the threat extends beyond NSW and Australia, we have in this country a very poor record in caring for our natural world. The crisis facing our koalas is symptomatic of the crisis facing the natural world in general. We urgently need effective, properly-resourced action in order to turn things around for our koalas and other life forms.

2. Land Management reforms and Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016

a) Legislation relating to biodiversity protection and native vegetation management obviously will have impacts on native species including koalas and their habitat.

b) The Native Vegetation Act (2005) : While this legislation was far from perfect, it did bring about a reduction in clearing and reduced the mortality of native animals through habitat loss. It was feared that the replacement legislation would lead to an increase in clearing native vegetation. This has indeed happened and started even before the new legislation came into force.¹

c) Primacy of agriculture over environment: The current legislation reduces the power of the Minister for the Environment while giving increased power to the Minister for Agriculture. Obviously this will lead to environmental outcomes being subservient to agricultural ones. This is certainly not in the

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jun/03/land-clearing-up-more-than-50-in-nsw-even-before-new-laws-introduced>

long-term interests of biodiversity conservation or the maintenance of a healthy natural environment. Nor is it in the long-term interests of agricultural production as a healthy natural environment is essential for a healthy agricultural sector. (Clean air, clean and plentiful water, healthy soil, sufficient shade trees, beneficial insects etc.)

d) Offsets: The CVCC also has serious concerns about offsets. The concept of providing an area of similar biodiversity value (if one can be found) as replacement for an area that is to be destroyed sounds very well in theory but it means net biodiversity loss. It's obvious from the current extent of biodiversity loss (considering, for example, the current 1000 species on the threatened species list) that this is unconscionable. We are at a point in NSW when we should not be countenancing this very dubious practice.

e) Monitoring and Compliance: One of the major issues the CVCC has with many development laws – including these ones – is the weakness of the monitoring and compliance systems. It is all very well to have conditions and checks but those conditions and checks need to be monitored and appropriate penalties need to be imposed where conditions are breached. This means that the relevant authorities need to have appropriate resources **as well as the will to ensure that the law is being upheld.**

f) Cumulative impacts: The ad hoc nature of the land clearing legislation means that the cumulative impacts of the vegetation loss will be even more difficult to assess than they were under the former legislation. If we are serious about protecting biodiversity, we need to be concerned about short term and long term cumulative impacts. “Death by a thousand cuts” obviously has an impact on biodiversity loss.

g) Government responsibility: Biodiversity and vegetation legislation is important for all citizens of our state – those living now and those of the future. It should have been framed to protect the natural world on which we all rely for the services it provides. Unfortunately the NSW Government has ignored its responsibility here and has missed an opportunity to improve on the former legislation. Instead it has developed laws which cater to a minority which is either ignorant of or indifferent to the state's long-term environmental health.

h) Amnesty for farmers breaching former vegetation laws: And today we have learnt that the NSW Government has now decided to drop charges against farmers who breached the old vegetation laws.² This is a dangerous precedent and another indication that compliance with laws relating to protection of the environment appears to be optional under the current NSW Government.

3. The NSW Koala Strategy

a) The CVCC is concerned that NSW Government's 2018 Strategy ignored the existence of koala populations in the area of the Clarence Valley. The reserves that form a major plank of the Koala Strategy were unveiled on 6 May. None are located on the North Coast between the Bellingen Catchment and the Queensland border. The Clarence Catchment has been missed in its entirety.

b) The Clarence Valley includes some significant areas of high-quality koala habitat. Many of these, located in the Nymboida subcatchment of the Clarence, are the northern band of the Great Koala National Park which was proposed by the National Parks Association of NSW in 2014.³ And yet none of these high-quality areas are being afforded increased protection in the Koala Strategy.

² <https://www.smh.com.au/environment/sustainability/disgusted-nsw-government-drops-land-clearing-action-against-farmers-20190801-p52cxq.html>

³ The Great Koala National Park proposal is discussed in **x** below.

c) Instead, there are 24,500 hectares of new reserve across the state which contain only 554 hectares (2%) of high-quality koala habitat. The protection of these areas as reserves does not contribute to koala protection.

d) Koala populations on the North Coast have collapsed by 50% in the past 20 years and the NSW Government's strategy will do little to redress that decline. In a letter to the Premier the CVCC requested that the government review the status of state forests in the Nymboida subcatchment with a view to adding some areas to the proposed koala reserves. We have not had a response to this request.

e) A joint report⁴ by the World Wildlife Federation Australia (WWF), the National Parks Association of NSW and the North East Forest Alliance is very critical of the Strategy. It points out that the \$45 million plan will not prevent the extinction of koalas in NSW – extinction which may happen by 2050. Only two of the 11 recommendations made by the Chief Scientist were fully addressed.

f) According to WWF's Dr Stuart Blanch, "The primary failing of the NSW Koala Strategy is that it ignores changes to legislation in 2017 that made it legal to clear 99% of the state's koala habitat."⁵

g) "Improving legislation to protect mature forests and woodlands is the cheapest and most effective way to immediately halt the unprecedented decline of koalas," he said.

4. Forestry Activities

a) Changes to forestry regulations which have eased the conditions about avoiding known koala trees and reducing drastically the number of conditions relating to threatened species will have serious impacts on koalas and other vulnerable species in State Forests. Other changes including allowing logging of old growth trees and easing of restrictions on logging on steep slopes and close to water courses will also have an impact.

b) In addition there have, over years, been deliberate breaches of the logging rules identified by the North East Forest Alliance (NEFA). In many cases it has been difficult to persuade the regulator to take action and, even then, the fine very often is trivial. Yet again another case of following rules for environmental protection being seen as optional.

c) According to a report in the Echo Net Daily of 15th March 2019: *It appears that the Forestry Corporation has targeted high use koala habitats for logging over the last four years including areas that have been identified as 'highest priority for protection' by the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH).*

*A North East Forest Alliance (NEFA) study has identified that the Forestry Corporation has logged 2,500 hectares of 'highest priority' koala habitat, that is 636ha a year over the last four years.*⁶

d) NEFA has a considerable amount of detail on the impact of forestry activity on koalas on its website at <https://www.nefa.org.au/koalas>

5. Climate Change Impacts

Given that we are already seeing the effects of climate change and its impacts are expected to become more frequent and more severe in the future, it is astounding that there is no mention of this major

⁴ <https://www.wwf.org.au/.../199/pub-koala-strategy-update-17Dec18.pdf.aspx?...Y>

⁵ <https://www.wwf.org.au/news/news/2018/nsw-koala-strategy-ineffective-inadequate-and-expensive#gs.t1jfmr>

⁶ <https://www.echo.net.au/2019/03/forestry-logging-highest-priority-koala-habitat/>

influence in recent legislation. A major failing of legislation dealing with vegetation is that there is no consideration of the impact that land clearing will have on carbon emissions in NSW.

Climate change is set to have an enormous impact on the natural environment and on agricultural activities as well as many other aspects of our existence. Excluding the consideration of climate change impacts from legislation guarantees that the legislation will be redundant within a short period of time.

6. Establishment of New Protected Areas for Koalas

a) Support for New Protected Areas: The CVCC supports the expansion of protected areas for koalas across the state as we believe that effective protection of koala habitat is essential in saving this species from extinction. And it will, of course, benefit a range of other species, many of which are in the list of almost 1000 species under threat in NSW.

b) Great Koala National Park: In our area the CVCC strongly supports the establishment of the Great Koala National Park (GKNP) which was proposed by the National Parks Association of NSW (NPA). The addition of 175,000 ha of publicly owned state forests to existing protected areas would result in an important 315,000 ha reserve across the local government areas of the Clarence Valley, Coffs Harbour, Bellingen, Nambucca and Kempsey.

According to the NPA the proposed GKNP “is defined by the estimated boundaries of two koala metapopulations that exchange individuals on a periodic basis, and we know that metapopulation dynamics are important in maintaining local koala populations.”⁷

We consider this proposal, along with similar protected areas elsewhere in the state, would be of much greater benefit to koalas and other native fauna and flora than the NSW Government’s NSW Koala Strategy which is discussed in 3 above.

In addition to its crucial biodiversity protection function, this new reserve has the potential to provide an important economic stimulus to the area through employment and tourism.

c) Importance of Proper Resourcing: The GKNP would of course need to be properly resourced so that it could be managed properly. Just how likely the current Government would be to ensure that is in considerable doubt because of government actions in recent years – specifically its retrograde restructuring of the National Parks and Wildlife Service in 2017 as well as its on-going budget cuts to that body. Both of these measures are having long-term impacts on the management of the existing National Parks estate.

d) Economic cost-benefit analysis: In April Coffs Harbour and Bellingen Councils agreed to fund an economic cost-benefit analysis of the proposed GKNP.⁸

e) Opposition to proposal: The CVCC acknowledges that there is opposition to the GKNP proposal from timber interests.

According to North East Forests’ spokesperson Dailan Pugh: ‘It is outrageous that Timber NSW is using grossly inflated employment and economic impacts as part of their scare campaign to stop koalas getting the protection they urgently need.’

⁷ <https://koalapark.org.au/about/>

⁸ <https://www.bellingencourier.com.au/story/6075909/council-allocates-money-to-great-koala-national-park-feasibility-study/>

‘The Department of Primary Industry’s (DPI)own employment data indicate that the logging of the Great Koala National Park only supports some 300 direct and indirect jobs, far less than Timber NSW’s claims of almost 2,000 jobs.

‘The DPI (2018) North Coast NSW Private Native Forest Primary Processors Survey Report identified that the native timber primary processing sector on the NSW north coast (from Gosford to the Queensland border) employs some 1,284 people, with 288 of these jobs due to private property resources.

‘As proposed by the National Parks Association (NPA) the Great Koala National Park encompasses 175,000 ha (19%) of north-east NSW’s 921,200ha of state forests, on a pro-rata basis this suggests that it accounts for some 190 of the native timber primary processing jobs.’⁹

f) Difficult decisions now needed: If koalas and other threatened species are to be saved from extinction, difficult decisions will have to be taken by governments. Business as usual is not the answer, nor are tokenistic strategies and throwing a few million dollars at the problem. The difficult decisions have not been taken in the past because of politicians’ desire to appease sectional economic interests at the expense of the natural environment. That is why we are in the mess we are in now.

7. Clarence Valley Koalas

a) Koala Areas: Koala populations in the Clarence Valley are in decline in urban and rural residential areas in particular. Clarence Valley Council adopted a Koala Plan of Management in October 2015. This Plan deals with the koala populations in the lower river areas of Woombah, Iluka, and Ashby. Those west of Grafton – including in the rural residential area of Waterview Heights - are not covered by the Plan.

b) Clarence Council’s Koala Page: Clarence Valley Council maintains a webpage on koalas in the Clarence on its website.¹⁰ This page provides information on the general status of the species, the threats, how residents can help preserve the species, information of a few food trees and a link to the Koala Plan of Management. It also provides information on how residents can register koala sightings in the Clarence Valley and a WIRES contact number.

c) Media on Local Koalas: The CVCC writes a “Voices for the Earth” column which is published in the local paper The Daily Examiner on its Environment Page each Monday. Attached are two items on koalas. Stan Mussared, a resident of Waterview Heights, west of Grafton, writes about his pleasure in seeing koalas regularly on his revegetated rural residential block. John Edwards, Secretary of the Clarence Environment Centre writes about concerns with developments in coastal Iluka.

d) Developments at Iluka: Two developments, one a large residential subdivision close to the World Heritage area at Iluka and another at a caravan park have been of concern because of their impact on koalas and other species. A submission from Pat Edwards (*Koala researcher; CV records coordinator; rescuer and carer - 2005 – 2017*) is attached . Also attached is information from a 1990 survey report on Iluka koalas which Pat included with her submission to Clarence Valley Council. (This may have to be attached separately to the submission)

Leonie Blain
Hon Secretary

⁹ Quoted in <https://www.echo.net.au/2019/03/more-logging-more-water-more-scare-campaigns/>

¹⁰ https://www.clarence.nsw.gov.au/cp_themes/metro/page.asp?p=DOC-JMQ-82-76-57

VOICES FOR THE EARTH

Koalas at our Place

It is now almost eleven years since we first observed koalas in one of the trees on our 1.6 ha block at Waterview Heights.

When we first came to live out there in 1973 there were only three trees on the block. Our extensive planting of native trees and shrubs over the years is now being rewarded by a highly consistent presence of koalas.

The first thing that my wife Magda does every morning is to do what she calls “my koala walk”. Round the block she goes, observing, as best she can, the presence or otherwise of what she calls “our little furry friend”.

Magda makes a record of her observations and gives a written monthly report to the Environment Centre. In June this year she observed the presence of a koala on 26 days out of 30.

There have been many highlights.

On one morning while we were having breakfast Magda took some plates to the sink. She looked out the adjacent window and there was a mother koala with her joey on her back walking slowly past. The koalas continued their journey to a nearby tree which was climbed and used as home for the remaining daylight hours.

Sometimes Magda’s observations will be blessed by the presence of two koalas in the one morning. Usually there is quite a distance between them, but on one occasion while photographing one, I was fortunate to observe a second in a distant location but in a tree that formed a backdrop to the first. It has been the only occasion when I have been able to capture two of the iconic creatures in the one picture.

And recently, early in the morning when the sun was still low in the sky, we found a koala in such a position that when you observed him/her from one particular position, a golden glow formed a beautiful edge right round our sleepy furry friend.

One evening as the light was dimming, I decided to try a flashlight. The resulting picture showed the koala highlighted by two bright sparkling eyes. On this occasion the koala was certainly not curled up deep in sleep.

And there have been a number of people who, never having observed a koala in the wild, have visited our little forest and had their lives enriched by these iconic creatures.

At night we have never observed the koala movement but their daytime locations indicate how extensive these wanderings have been. Our hope is that these night time movements will continue safely into the future bringing a blessing to the natural environment.

- Stan Mussared

Little future for Iluka's koalas

13th May 2019 2:00 PM

IN THE late 1980s, the then Department of Environment recognised the threat to koalas from development-driven habitat loss along the North Coast and undertook a comprehensive review of those threats.

That resulted in the formulation of management plans for the various remnant populations that had survived to that point in time, including the Clarence Valley's Iluka population.

The subsequent management plan, which was eventually published in 1992, linked eight recently reported koala road-kills at Iluka to pressures from human population increases, and made a number of recommendations designed to help reverse the declining numbers.

One of those recommendations was to rehabilitate previously sand-mined crown land west of Iluka Rd and south of the golf course, which was by that time already recovering forest. Also, supplementary planting of koala feed trees was suggested for the reserve and privately owned, forested land adjoining the crown land to the west and north.

However, in the late 1990s, the then Maclean Shire Council approved the subdivision, and subsequent bulldozing of much of the privately owned forest. That staged development, known as the Sovereign Street subdivision, saw construction continuing until quite recently.

Few if any tree planting programs were ever undertaken and just 10 years later another comprehensive survey concluded that the Iluka koala population was now functionally extinct.

In about 2005, the newly formed Clarence Valley Council rezoned the crown land as residential and is in the process of approving a 140-lot subdivision, which will see a further 14ha of forest bulldozed.

An 80km/h speed limit was imposed for a while, but our local state member bowed to pressure and the speed limit was removed.

For a short while after 2010 there were hopes of a revival of the koala population, with several sightings around the village, including a female with a joey.

Sadly, in the face of this ongoing council approved onslaught, there appears to be little future for Iluka's koalas.

- John Edwards, Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition

<https://www.dailyexaminer.com.au/news/little-future-for-ilukas-koalas/3725658/>

Patricia Edwards (Individual)
Land for Wildlife Coordinator
Clarence Environment Centre
Skinner Street
South Grafton

7th May 2019

Councillors
Clarence Valley Council
Prince Street
Grafton NSW 2460

Dear Councillors,

**Development Application 2019/0195 – Site extension of Anchorage Caravan Park, Lot 43
DP 1048768, 42 Marandowie Drive, Iluka, NSW 2466, & Hickey Street subdivision,
proposed**

In regard to the above applications for development within the coastal village of Iluka, while I recognise the Hickey Street subdivision has passed the approval process, and the Anchorage Caravan proposal is well underway, I would like to ask Clarence Valley councillors to please consider the attached before reaching a decision on these, and any other Iluka development proposals in the future.

The 2027 Clarence Community Strategic Plan (CSP) highlights the importance of tourism and economic development services, and acknowledges that Clarence Valley landscapes, seascapes, waterways and wildlife as intrinsic to the Valley's character and culture and form the basis for much of its economic and recreational activity. The CSP also states that the quality of the region's air, water, flora, fauna and soils are inextricably linked to the health and well-being of residents, and promotes protection of wetlands, our natural environment, and our wildlife as key opportunities for attention. One of the five themes for the CSP is for council and the community to value, respect and actively participate in the care and management of the Clarence's natural environment for current and future generations.

Bearing this commendable declaration in mind, I feel a need to point out the current state of the Clarence Valley's once abundant koala population, which despite numerous Federal, State and local surveys, reports, policies and plans of management continue to decline, to the point where today it can hardly be hoped to recover.

In 1986 a NSW survey of koalas populations across NSW (Reed & Lunney) found that koalas were common only in a few scattered locations around the State, with the North Coast being their main stronghold. This was significant for the Clarence Valley, since survival of koalas across NSW were deemed to be dependent on the survival and success of these important NC foundation populations.

However it was also found that even these populations were at risk, and in decline. At that stage koalas were listed as a species of special concern on the NPWS Endangered Species list (Schedule 12).

The Reed & Lunney report highlighted that koalas were most vulnerable to habitat loss, through extensive clearing for agriculture and human development. The resultant report warned the NSW government: ***"if nothing is done at the regional level (ie within the stronghold populations) then other present remnant koala populations will disappear one after another."***

In 1990 a dedicated Iluka survey (Moon & Lunney) found that although badly impacted by sandmining and development the koalas around Iluka could still recover provided management plans were adopted and adhered to.

A draft management strategy was devised to ensure this could happen. However this strategy appeared never to have been implemented. Further development was allowed to happen with little to no sympathetic plans to maintain or improve the koala population, and Lunney et al in 2002 declared the population to be fundamentally extinct.

However WIRES Threatened Species Reporting Officer began to record a number of koalas, both coming into care from Iluka and sightings by the local residents, to the extent that in 2012 koala experts Biolink Ecological Consultants were commissioned to carry out a further survey as part of Council's preparation for the Comprehensive Koala Plan of Management for the Ashby, Woombah and Iluka localities.

The report following that study confirmed that Iluka contained "habitat critical to the survival of the koala", and by records and scat counts found that the area contained an estimated 5-10 highly dispersed individuals. CV Council was warned to take very special care when approving any development for Iluka (*per com* Steve Phillips 2015).

Since that time there have been ample enough records from local residents, together with many photographs and further WIRES entries on the BioNet database to show that the decline of the Iluka koala population might indeed be in the process of reversal, including by two separate records of breeding animals, one a female and joey within the proposed Hickey Street development site, and one recorded night-time mating across the road from a Conrad Close residence.

I would like to urge Council, therefore, to consider alternatives to any further developments around Iluka, in that the township is already limited in its potential for development by water and permanently conserved forests, and also that any greater influx of people will undoubtedly lead to demands for further services – doctors; medical clinics; car parking spaces; a larger, closer school to save prolonged travel times for the children; public transport facilities including taxi services and transport depots, and so it will go on. While meanwhile there is very little to no consideration as to whether having a koala population within the towns boundaries is worthwhile as a viable local tourist drawcard, and a total exclusion of any thought of the Iluka koalas' importance to adjacent koala populations, most of which are only just managing to hang on by a thread. I only ask again that you can each find some spare time, from somewhere in your busy days, to read the attached document, and give some thought to the fact that the Clarence Valley as a whole, as well as Iluka, could considerably benefit by adding some sound authoritative local protection for these, our most iconic animals that the large majority of CV residents do not want to lose.

I sincerely thank you in advance for this attention

Yours faithfully
Patricia Edwards

(Koala researcher; CV records coordinator; rescuer and carer - 2005 – 2017)

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