

INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Coffs Harbour Greens

Date Received: 2 August 2019



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2nd August 2019

COFFS HARBOUR GREENS SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Dear Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important issue regarding koala populations and their habitat in NSW. My name is Jonathan Cassell and I am the Convener for the local branch of the NSW Greens. Before I start, if the inquiry comes to the Coffs Coast, I would welcome the opportunity to publically present to the inquiry if possible.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Gumbaynggirr people and their country in which the Coffs Harbour Greens are based. Out of respect for the Gumbaynggirr nation, I believe it is important that public knowledge about Gumbaynggirr ontology, language and spiritual *legend* is identified with and considered for this inquiry.

The name for the koala in Gumbaynggirr language is *Dunggiirr*. According to Gumbaynggirr Dreaming, *Dunggiirr* is an important character in a significant Dreaming story '*The women who made the sea*' – in which *Dunggiirr* intestines help creation spirit Yuludarla and his warriors to cross a sea bridge.

According to the text *Gumbaynggirr Yuludarla Jandaygam* – Gumbaynggirr Dreaming Story Collection – this story has been attributed to rising sea levels that occurred between 7000 – 13 000 years ago. *How the sea was made* is a profound illustration historically attributed to the koala from a time when what is now regarded as the Pacific Ocean was, in fact, dry land.

As a descendant from convict settlement in Australia, I find the cultural motifs in this living story notable and symbiotic to the values Gumbaynggirr people have with the koala. This story reinforces the worldview of being indebted to *Dunggiirr* who literally saved an ancestor and creation spirit. If NSW society took an indebted perspective to the koala, what would that look like? How do we forge a symbiotic relationship with the koala whereby koala conversation and management strategies are worth the paper they written on?

One idea that has the potential to broaden our social symbiosis with the koala is the Great Koala National Park proposal.

Great Koala National Park

The Great Koala National Park (GKNP) goes some way towards delivering a new perspective and social connection to the koala. Whilst it would be a National Park with high direct and indirect tourism values, the status and value of the koala would likely have a positive influence on residents of NSW from merely trivialising their relationship as a cute symbol of Australian culture to creating *legendary* status through economic and cultural benefits.

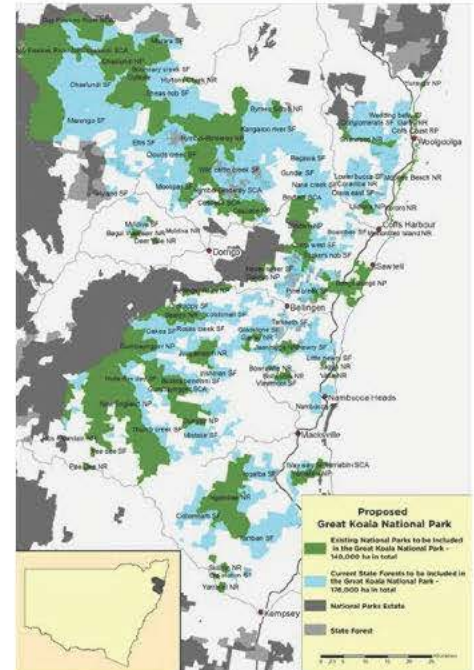
The National Parks Association of NSW has 'delimited the estimate boundaries of two metapopulations of national significance in the Coffs Harbour region'¹. This research is supported by the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage mapping Areas of Regional Koala Significance².

However, Forestry Corporation (FC) NSW has been given broader powers under the updated RFA and Coastal IFOA's that have been argued to undermine the long term values of healthy forests³ and is incompatible with sustainable forest management⁴.

Forestry Corporation has been criticised further by an Australia Institute report claiming that logging NSW's native forests costs the NSW taxpayer around \$11M per annum from which losses of \$79M were generated between 2009 2015⁵.

This analysis by the Australia Institute (AI) of Forestry Corporation's financial performance is understood to be losses primarily in their hardwood division, which is sourced from native forests. The softwood plantation division is the backbone of Forestry Corporation and makes an operational profit whereas its native forestry operations runs largely at a loss.

It is well known that koalas depend on habitat that is made up of diverse eucalypt forests in the coastal zone. These same forests are targeted by FC to supply hardwood timber, however, the economic and cultural values these forests provide to NSW



¹ Scotts, D. Conserving koala populations of the NSW upper mid-north coast: preliminary mapping of populations as a basis for further survey, research and planning (2013).

² https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ncec/pages/40/attachments/original/1538044116/Good_Koala_Advice_Ignored_by_Government.pdf?1538044116

³ https://www.edonsw.org.au/draft_coastal_ifoa

⁴ <https://ecosure.com.au/blog/nsw-forests-threat/>

⁵ <http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P209%20Money%20doesn%27t%20grow%20on%20trees%20-%20NSW%20Forestry%20Final%20Final.pdf>



is no longer sustainable and 'intensive harvesting practices are effectively clear felling diverse native forests to replace with even age native plantation in a deliberate manner under the new IFOA'⁶. The new logging rules will lead to greater losses in koala habitat made worse through logging old growth trees, rainforest, fragmenting habitat and increasing greenhouse gas emissions that drive climate change⁷.

The Australia Institute report found that native logging activities generate considerable greenhouse gas emissions... 'nationally generating 38 million tonnes of carbon dioxide'. The AI report found that the Australian Governments Emission Reduction Fund (ERF) excludes FC logging activities since avoiding deforestation is currently only recognised under the ERF if '...a clearing consent for the purpose of converting the native forest to cropland or grassland exists'.

We believe that the habitat values in our local forests are being irreversibly damaged from intensive harvesting. The Regional Forestry Agreement has failed to uphold protections for the many threatened species on the Threatened Species List such as Koalas, Quolls and Yellow Bellied Gliders leading to a large loss of NSW's precious flora and fauna⁸.

The benefits our mature forests provide through carbon sequestration, creating precipitation and maintaining biodiversity are well known. Instead of valuing our forests for providing these ecosystem services, the new IFOA gives more power to industrial forms of extraction^{9 10} and makes NSW a leading contributor for the worst extinction record of any developed country in the world¹¹.

As climate change adds to environmental dislocation of our forests, the social and environmental resilience through habitat refuges such as the GKNP will have many positive outcomes including empirical evidence that shows interacting with nature delivers measurable benefits to people¹².

Locally, the economic case for nature based tourism is central to the Coffs Coast Tourism and their 2020 Strategic Plan that sees Coffs Harbour as a leading regional destination for leisure and nature based tourism¹³. Local governments across the Coffs Coast recognise the direct and indirect economic benefits visitor economies provide.

⁶ IFOA Impacts on Coffs Harbour Electorate, North East Forest Alliance Draft Discussion Paper, 2019.

⁷ <https://www.wwf.org.au/knowledge-centre/resource-library/resources/the-koala-conservation-plan#gs.qer3uc>

⁸ <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/pm/federal-ministers-failed-to-protect-threatened-species/11044372>

⁹ <https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/forestry/north-coast-residues-project>

¹⁰ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-20/why-burning-trees-for-electricity-may-not-be-good-choice/10488230>

¹¹ <https://www.smh.com.au/education/a-noahs-ark-for-the-21st-century-20110829-1ji00.html>

¹² <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/10/3/913>

¹³ <https://www.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au/Business/Business-and-Industry/Pages/Destination-Coffs-Coast.aspx>

However, outside of the tourism values to NSW economy we must also give consideration to the social benefits of simply being with a forest ecosystem. The links between healthcare and time spent in nature are part of a growing body of epidemiological evidence that indicates that greater exposure to, or 'contact with', natural environments (such as parks, woodlands and beaches) is associated with better health and well being, at least among populations in high income, largely urbanised, societies.¹⁴

New Zealand's Living Standards Framework¹⁵ is a tool that NSW society could adopt to attempt to guide the development of our State's living standards. If the NSW government implemented a similar framework of measuring human well being, then proposals such as the Great Koala National Park would be considered not merely by its visitor economy merits but we would consider the proposal based on other forms of capital such as Natural, Social and Human.

A comprehensive 'Living Framework' assessment of the GKNP proposal would be a good thing to pursue outside of the politicisation of forests, climate change or employment. The benefit to our society that top down well being measurements provide would seem to aid and support local communities and help them thrive. On the contrary, koala conservation strategies¹⁶ and Koala Plans of Management (KPoM's) seem to be able to only go so far to protect vulnerable habitats that koalas require since environmental assessments are considered red tape by some in an economic growth model.¹⁷

The benefit that the Great Koala National Park could play in creating cultural value in the koala has enormous merit not only from an economic perspective. The cultural construction of a social value of indebtedness to the koala could create a thriving economy based on grateful tourists instead of making our forests practically useless under the Coastal IFOA.

As the UK economist Kate Raworth says in her book Doughnut Economics, ... 'communities can thrive regardless if there is growth or not'.¹⁸ This compelling economist and her economic model would elevate koala values in NSW to an equivalent project with the Panda in China who this year will have a new 10,000 sq. mile giant panda park¹⁹.

So, there is an invitation here for the Inquiry MP's to come and visit Coffs Harbour. Come and experience directly the environmental and social impacts associated with Forestry Corporations harvesting operations. Come and spend time with local mountain bike clubs and listen to how their tenure with FC is constantly insecure. Please come and meet with the Great Koala National Park Steering Committee and the Bellingen Environment Centre.

¹⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-44097-3>

¹⁵ <https://treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/nz-economy/living-standards/our-living-standards-framework>

¹⁶ National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009-2014, National Resource Ministerial Council.

¹⁷ <http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/d618558b-d259-4d49-b36f-75d6b57ca529/files/bio221-0412-koala-listing-faq.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>

¹⁹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2019/05/giant-pandas-national-park-china/>

Coffs Harbour City Council

The council developed the first Koala Plan of Management (KPoM) in NSW in 1999 alongside NPWS, yet it would appear historical trends in koala distribution are still in decline.²⁰ In the KPoM, land to the south of Coffs Harbour was identified as having the highest koala populations. The inclusion of Bongil Bongil National Park in the NPWS has helped stabilise this community according to a recent conversation with a ranger who oversees this area. But concerns with village development at Bonville including the suburban development adjacent to the Bonville Golf Course jeopardises the future integrity of these southern groups (especially considering FC threats to Pine Creek and Orara West State Forests).

Within the CBD of Coffs Harbour, a small koala population exists along Coffs Creek. Several threats to this population exist with urban development and in 2008 the council constructed an extension to Hogbin Drive dividing vegetation communities within the creek basin. More recently, the council demolished Pioneer Park that contained several large Blackbutt eucalypts that I witnessed used by koalas.

In 2018, Councillors rejected a Vegetation Corridor Mapping report to seek voluntary participation from landholders. This report would have been a constructive tool to allow bush regenerators, farmers and council to best identify and manage corridors.²¹ Instead the farming community feared the voluntary aspect of the report and its adoption was defeated by conservative numbers in the chamber. We need a greater level of civic participation in the preservation of koala habitat. It makes no sense to dismiss habitat mapping unless this social groups intention is to be less accountable for their industry practices.

Further, the Coffs Harbour Pacific Highway Bypass will degrade vegetation corridors along its expected footprint. Evidence of Koalas by locals at Newports Creek has already alerted residents concerned that the Bypass will impact local koala populations. A viaduct network of bridges and tunnels would best serve koala movements, reduce flood impacts and reduce noise disturbance²².

Finally, Council currently have a 2036 Regional Growth Strategy to attempt to best manage future human population growth projections. Land use conflict is a significant issue for the 70% of people who enjoy rural lifestyles but don't farm. Intensive plant agriculture, in particular, develops businesses according to policies such as the Right to Farm policy. Land use conflict has arisen due to *no requirements for development consent* which is leading to larger escalations of conflict. Council is best placed to manage this conflict and it would also benefit our KPoM because development consent on farms that wish to clear vegetation in our LGA can do so without identifying if its primary, secondary or tertiary koala habitat²³.

²⁰ Coffs Harbour City Koala Plan of Management, Part A, The Plan, November 1999

²¹ <https://www.coffiscoastadvocate.com.au/news/coffs-landscape-corridors-on-public-display/2405239/>

²² <https://www.coffsbypassactiongroup.com/p/resources.html>

²³ <https://haveyoursay.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au/coffs-harbour-rural-lands-chapter>



Conclusion

We believe this inquiry can add value to social debate by asking several questions about the Koala such as:

- What role does the *koala* play in contemporary social identity and can the creation of a *new* social identity connected to the koala aid in its protection through cultural institutions such as planning and education departments or local government?
- Has the Koalas iconic status in Australia been commodified for utilitarian ends that overshadow an environmental ethic that needs to be seriously reconsidered?
- What cost has come from excluding FC from the Emissions Reduction Fund?
- What happened to the SEPP No. 44 review process? Has it stalled?
- Can a new cultural perspective for NSW to the koala be forged that would strengthen SEPP No. 44 potentially giving this species inherit rights, refuges and respect in such areas as land zoning reforms and koala plans of management?
- Coffs Harbour's comprehensive KPOM was adopted in 1999. Is it time for a review whereby SEPP No. 44 is strengthened to ensure koala habitat is not destroyed by urban or agricultural development?
- Has Coffs Harbour's KPOM failed to preserve koalas in the LGA? If so, is there a willingness to acknowledge that SEPP No. 44 is insufficient in its powers, its application or/and its enforcement?
- Why does SEPP No.44 only apply to lands where Council is the consent authority and does not apply to State Forests which make up 30% of the LGA? Can the Forestry Act 1916 be amended to include local government KPOM's? Without this there is a dangerous contradiction between the two which directly impacts upon Koalas.
- Can the Forestry Act 1916 be amended to transition cultural values away from timber harvesting to economies based in carbon sequestration, social enterprises (including ecotourism) and forest restoration all of which have significant and positive impacts upon our areas extreme youth unemployment?
- Can Council KPOM's have greater powers in relation to State significant infrastructure projects and planning such as the Pacific Highway Bypass?
- Can the Great Koala National Park be implemented as a priority to help save the koala species in our LGA, provide climate resilience to local watersheds and settlements AND revive our local economy?
- What happens to Gumbaynggirr culture and Dreaming stories if the koala goes extinct and what is our responsibility in the era of post terra nullius reconciliation to this?
- Is it in our NSW societies interest to cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship based on reciprocity with the other than human world?
- Will this inquiry fail to arrest the decline in koala distribution without a comprehensive values change?

Kind regards
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