

**Submission
No 202**

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

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Submission to the Inquiry into Koala populations and habitat in NSW

This is my submission to the Inquiry into Koala Populations and habitat in NSW. I agree to the committee making this submission and my name public.

Koala populations are in crisis and heading towards extinction and without urgent action future generations will not be able to enjoy these iconic and wondrous species in the wild. This is totally unacceptable to allow these precious and unique individuals who are revered all over the world to disappear from our planet under our watch. Ensuring the survival of koalas, as well as the over 1000 other species threatened with extinction in NSW, is an issue which must be embraced by all parties. It requires visionary leadership and lasting change. I encourage the committee to work together to develop a cross-party consensus on genuine solutions to protect the future of our koalas.

My personal experience with Private Native Forestry

I became involved with koala advocacy due to my personal experience with the complete and utter failure of Government Agencies to protect koala habitat and a local koala population as well as other endangered species with a Private Native Forestry operation on a property adjoining mine. The property owner was given a Private Native Forestry Agreement (PNFA) for a large property which has exceptional biodiversity values that include the property's large size and location within mapped Key Habitat; its proximity to world heritage listed Wollumbin National Park: it being a major part of a mapped wildlife corridor connecting Wollumbin National Park to Limpinwood Nature Reserve (classified as wilderness area); with many threatened species; an Endangered Ecological Community; old growth forest; and it lies within a regional wildlife corridor identified by the Department of Environment and Climate Change for a 'northern escarpment assemblage' of fauna species. However despite this property having significant environmental value, good koala habitat and a known koala presence the Private Native Forestry Agreement was handed out with as much care as handing over a lolly to a child. Not one pre logging visit was required, no development application, no environmental survey or assessment of any kind was required. The local council was not even informed of the actual whereabouts of the proposed logging on the property despite there being Ecological Zones on the property which the council had regulatory action over and significant problems with access to the property.

Since the property was purchased there were numerous and repeated unauthorised works. These include unauthorized earthworks, unauthorized extraction of water from the creek, unauthorized removal of native vegetation, the building of not one but 2 unauthorized roads on Crown Land, the pollution of not one but 2 water catchments, the destruction of platypus habitat and significant damage to at least 5 other neighbouring private properties on different boundaries. Koala habitat and the habitat of other endangered species, particularly those using hollow bearing trees was also destroyed. The owner illegally logged in the Environmental Zones and took out all the hollow bearing trees and primary koala food trees. During the logging I had koalas fleeing the logging onto my property. Can you imagine my initial joy at seeing a koala but then my heart sinking as I realised the trauma he/she was going through. The property was criss-crossed with poorly built roads leading to constant water pollution events which continue to this day. Despite numerous complaints to the EPA and also to the then Minister for the Environment by myself and other neighbours and local community members, numerous local environmental groups and the local council, absolutely nothing was done other than a few correction orders, most of which were ignored. A Clean Up Notice was even ignored for 1 year and then closed

without any action. There was no disciplinary action whatsoever for any of these repeated unlawful actions, sending a clear message to others in the community that they could also do the same environmental damage and destruction.

Despite audits being done on the property and finding that high use koala trees had been destroyed and that there had been unauthorised logging undertaken in the Environmental Zones as well as unauthorised roads, and despite various logging codes being broken there was no regulatory action taken against the landowner by the EPA or other state agencies involved. The landowner was even able to profit by selling all the koala food tree logs he had logged without authorisation. There was a complete failure of action by the State Government agencies to protect koala habitat, preserve environmental values and stop environmental degradation. There was a complete failure by the Environmental Protection Agency to protect the environment or that of koalas. The local council made representation to the Minister to revoke the logging license but this was ignored. The local council has been left with having to spend significant public funds taking the owner to the Land and Environment Court, and this is still ongoing. Many of these issues are unresolved and have not been remediated. As reported by neighbours, the forest where you once heard and saw koalas is now silent and their habitat trees damaged or gone; the old growth trees with their hollows and inhabitants are also gone; so are the platypus and marine life in the once crystal clear creek now full of sediment, and the state Government who issued the PNFA is responsible for allowing this loss and environmental degradation.

The PNFA Code which this landowner and logger should abide by requires that a koala tree is protected if 20 or more koala scats are found under a tree. However as the EPA informed me the onus is completely on the landowner and the logger to do the right thing by looking for koala scats. But this landowner has a history of not doing the right thing - by his neighbours, local residents, past employees, Crown Lands, the local council, the local waterways, both land and marine wildlife. Both the landowner and the contracted logger did unauthorised logging in an Environmental Zone and did not adhere to the logging codes, do you really think they are going to walk around a 324 ha property looking for koala scats? The rules or lack thereof in Private Native Forestry are an absolute joke. I don't agree at all with logging in koala habitat or in native forests but proper ecological surveys should be done by experts and any landclearing should not be left for property owners to self-regulate. Current logging practices offer no genuine protection to koalas and their habitat nor to the environment, particularly water catchments, nor to the local community who are also impacted.

The local council not only approached the Environment Minister to revoke the logging license but to also hand over the compliance authority to the council and for environmental and cultural heritage surveys to be carried out. All of these requests were ignored. Even though this property has extremely high conservation value, koala habitat, old growth forest, an endangered ecological community, and endangered species, still to this day there has not been an independent environmental survey done of the property. This substantial property forms a significant piece of an important wildlife corridor to World Heritage Listed areas and environmental surveys need to be carried out to protect its values and the refuge it supplies to koalas and other local wildlife. The koalas and other wildlife are left unprotected just like 99% of koala habitat that is found on private property is also not protected and up for logging and destruction.

I am also familiar with Forestry Corporation logging activities in state forests on the North Coast, where they have been logging koala habitat and not abiding by the logging codes. Gibberagee State Forest is one such example. And just today I saw media on important koala habitat in the Braemar State Forest having an exceptional koala population and about to be logged by Forestry Corporation. What chance do koalas have of surviving if their habitat is not protected on both private and public land? I do not believe for one minute that logging in koala habitat is possible without causing either loss of their primary, secondary or habitat trees or without causing them undue stress which can lead to disease such as chlamydia which is severely impacting their numbers. Just today there was a report of a koala killed when she fell out of a tree being logged and her young joey survived but has a broken arm. This is heartbreaking and so very wrong. Koalas need to be left alone in their forest homes if they are to survive the many other threats they are faced with.

Other recommendations

Recently, the NSW Government recognised that Koala populations are in steep decline and developed a strategy to begin to address this. But the strategy and current government policy fails to address the number one threat to koala populations, and that is habitat loss and fragmentation. Since European settlement an estimated 70- 90 % of koala habitat has been cleared in NSW. This must end now.

Retention, protection and restoration of the Koalas remaining habitat is essential if they are to survive into the future. The exact opposite is occurring in NSW right now. Areas of core koala habitat called 'koala hubs' have been mapped by the Office of Environment and Heritage but are still being cleared for logging, agriculture and infrastructure and the pace of the destruction is increasing. We also have historically low levels of additions to our National Parks network under the current Liberal National government.

I therefore call on the committee to prioritise solutions which prevent ongoing habitat destruction and easily and safely allow koalas to access their forest homes. This includes:

- Immediately and permanently protect all 'koala hubs' (areas identified by the Office of Environment and Heritage as particularly important for koalas) from clearing for agriculture, logging or development on all public and private land.

- The Biodiversity Conservation Act and Local Land Amendment Act need to include provisions to protect habitat, end self assessment, and provide for opportunities for legal challenges in the public interest

- Critical habitat should be prioritised and declared as Areas of Outstanding Biodiversity

- The status of koalas needs to be upgraded from vulnerable to endangered in the Biodiversity Conservation Act

- Regional Forest Agreements need to be repealed and native forests protected from logging, burning for electricity and woodchipping.

- Core koala habitat needs to be permanently protected. The National Parks network needs to be expanded, including creating the Great Koala National Park on the NSW mid-north coast and implementing other National Parks Association reserve proposals presented to the committee to protect koalas in north-east NSW. This

region will become important to the survival of koalas with extreme weather events affecting their survival in western areas of NSW

- Develop an urgent transition plan to end the logging of native forests on both public and private land and budget accordingly (this is destroying koala habitat)

- Reject the Government's proposal to open up thousands of hectares of old growth forests to logging on the NSW North Coast

- End private native forestry which is self- regulated, not monitored and destroying koala habitat and water catchments

- Koala habitat and connectivity in the Sydney Basin needs to be urgently protected from development, particularly the large-scale development in the Campbelltown area which threatens one of the states only disease free koala populations.

- Create a new National Park in South-West Sydney. Rapid development must not come at the expense of koalas and their habitat.

-Urgently identify and protect koala climate refugia, and incorporate climate change into all planning decisions

-The offset policy should be repealed

- Urgently require local Governments to complete mapping of koala habitat to enable it's protection. Provide funding to local Government to enable this.

- Protect known koala habitat from land clearing (including that yet to be mapped) by identifying it as Category 2 - sensitive land or Areas of Outstanding Biodiversity Value

- Strengthen SEPP 44 (koala habitat protection) which is completely inadequate to ensure koala habitat is not destroyed by urban development

-Wildlife corridors need to be identified and restored to allow koalas and other animals to move freely about the landscape and to prevent conflict with humans and their cars, development etc.

-Provide overpasses or underpasses for koalas as a priority when building new roads/highways and on existing roads, particularly at known hot-spots such as Appin Road, in western Sydney where just last week a mother and joey were killed and wildlife carers are regularly scraping up dead koalas off the road. The NSW Koala Strategy has funding to address 10 koala hotspots in the state but every hotspot in the state needs addressing and now. And we can't have koalas trapped behind exclusion fences,

-Provide funding to local Government to fight unlawful clearing of koala habitat and other native species habitat

-Increase funding to the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust and Saving Our Species Program for the restoration of koala habitat on private land

-Grants provided by the Government via the Koala Research Plan are confined to disease, translocation and medical needs of koalas, which completely fails to address the main issue which is conservation and habitat loss. Grants are needed for this.

-Provide funding for wildlife carers and organisations such as Friends of the Koala in Lismore to enable them to continue their important and often soul-destroying work. Also provide funding to Currumbin Wildlife Hospital in Queensland who look after many of the injured and sick koalas from the NSW far north coast region.

There are many wonderful people in the city and regional areas volunteering their time to plant koala food and habitat trees, enhancing koala habitat and protecting koala habitat on their own private properties. The Government should be doing everything in their power to encourage, financially support, train and give incentives for these actions to become more abundant. Helping private landowners to put a covenant on their land where there is koala habitat is one very important step. I have done this with my property and have incurred considerable expense doing so. But at the age of 60 it is not easy for me to continue the rehabilitation, weeding and bush regeneration that is needed to keep the koala habitat from degrading. Right now there are many weeds such as lantana, camphor laurel and vines that need to be controlled that are impacting on koala habitat on my property that I cannot physically keep up. Funds and the services of Professional Bush Regenerators are urgently needed and after spending hours putting together applications for funding applications, these are often denied. Koala habitat, its enhancement and maintenance should be given priority and appropriate funding with ease of application and approval for these funds.

The incredible and completely soul destroying work being done by many dedicated and passionate wildlife carers and organisations on a voluntary basis such as Friends of the Koala, and the Currumbin Wildlife Hospital, who sadly more often than not see koalas having to be euthanased need to be recognised, supported and financed. Amazing volunteers who give so much of their time (often throughout the night), energy, funds, fuel, expertise, love and care and suffer huge personal loss at the same time as so many koalas that are rescued do not make it and they often have to deal with tragic scenes and overwhelming loss.

The upgrade of the Pacific Highway at Ballina went ahead despite a 10 year campaign of local koala interest groups and the community trying to stop it, in favour of the most direct course which would have saved many koala lives. This upgrade of the Pacific Highway has caused a significant number of koala deaths, with sad images of koalas suffering from starvation and having to be euthanased. There was also a fire which burnt approx. 354 hectares of native vegetation and where the exclusion fencing caused animals to be trapped and die. Friends of the Koala (FOK) worked collaboratively with the RMS and rescued a koala who was named "Azam" who was found in the burnt vegetation and malnourished. FOK gave "Azam" the food and rehabilitation that he needed before releasing him close to his home range. However due to a limitation of the RMS approval conditions radio-tracking of koalas is not allowed, so any monitoring of "Azam" since his release has not been possible. Why is there a complete lack of transparency by RMS? Is it because they don't want the public to see the death and devastation they are causing to koalas. Complete transparency is needed and not only should radio-tracking collars be used but the Government should be providing them to FOK for use wherever they require them. Another victim of the Ballina upgrade was "Yahzi" who FOK found was blind from Chlamydia, but she couldn't be trapped for 5 long months, struggling to survive, whilst she listened to her forest home being destroyed around her. Sadly once she was captured and assessed by a vet she had to be euthanased. How many other koalas suffered from Chlamydia and or death by starvation due to the stress and impacts of this project.

The Australian people and the majority of the worlds population revere our precious koalas. Their contribution to our identity as Australia, as a national icon and to tourism is immense. Please don't let the past and ongoing complete failure and lack of action to protect koalas continue. Laws designed to silence people that care about animals and the environment will not work. We will not be silenced when it comes to our iconic koala and the forests they call home. This is a crisis needing immediate and urgent action to identify, protect and restore all koala habitat and connecting wildlife corridors, this is vital to their existence. The NSW Parliament cannot continue on their existing path and oversee the rapid decline and likely extinction of one of our most iconic Australian mammals. I urge you to work together to do everything in your power to protect koalas and their forest homes, and prevent them from going down the same path as the Thylacine. We simply cannot let that happen. You cannot let that happen.



This koala is in a tree I planted, all they need from us is safety in their forest homes.

(I would like to be a witness at a hearing and would also request that a hearing be held on the far north coast to include participation in regional areas.)

Susie Header

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