

Submission
No 225

INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Lismore City Council

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Your ref:

Contact: Leonie Walsh,
Environmental Strategies

1 August 2019

The Director
Portfolio Committee No 7 – Planning and Environment
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission regarding the New South Wales Upper House inquiry into Koala populations and habitat in New South Wales

Lismore City Council (LCC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the New South Wales Upper House inquiry into the actions, policies and funding by government to ensure healthy, sustainable Koala populations and habitat in New South Wales

LCC has a Comprehensive Plan of Management for south-east Lismore (CKPoM), approved in 2013 under SEPP44. The CKPoM aims to protect the Koala population found in the southeast of the LGA, which is considered one of the most significant on the NSW North Coast. A copy of the CKPoM can be found on our website:

https://www.lismore.nsw.gov.au/cp_themes/default/page.asp?p=DOC-GVH-41-35-06

Over the last 3 years LCC has allocated over \$100 000 of funding from the Biodiversity Management Strategy Special Rate Variation to management actions identified in the CKPoM. These focus on improving outcomes for Koalas by undertaking habitat restoration in various locations across the LGA and mitigating threats like vehicle incidents. LCC has a strong commitment to Koala recovery and continues to work with landholder, community, industry groups and other stakeholders to increase Lismore's Koala population and their habitat.

In September 2017, LCC undertook an assessment of Koala habitat and population in the CKPoM area. The report from this study is also available on the above website. LCC has recently been working with the University of Queensland, Friends of the Koala and neighbouring Councils of Tweed, Byron and Ballina on an Australian Research Council project that is helping to identify areas of significant Koala habitat. LCC has also provided assistance to a NSW Save Our Species project looking at Koala dispersal pathways in the area. It is recommended the Inquiry refer to these studies for detailed information related to the Terms of Reference, particularly 1 (a).

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Lismore City Council acknowledges the people of the Bundjalung Nation, traditional custodians of the land on which we work.

In Lismore the main threats to Koala populations include habitat loss, disease, car strikes and dog attack. Friends of the Koala (FoK) provide Koala rescue and rehabilitation services in Lismore LGA and keep stats on Koala in their care. In 2017-2018 FOK admitted 348 Koalas into care, of which there were 246 mortalities, 101 released and 1 kept in care. The cause of mortalities was attributed to disease (170), car strike (94), dogs (32), geriatric (5), orphaned/abandoned (12) other (35). Mortalities within the Lismore LGA were also significantly higher compared with neighbouring LGA's, however this may be attributed in part to the high level community awareness to FoK in the Lismore LGA. Disease is obviously the most significant threat to Koalas, however this is not considered to be isolated, instead is evidence of a population in stress as a result of historic and ongoing threats.

In many areas on the North Coast, historical clearing of vegetated areas dominated by primary Koala food tree species has forced Koalas to occupy areas of less suitable and even marginal habitat. Koalas occupy areas where there are few (if any) primary Koala food trees and where secondary Koala food tree species and tree species which are not Koala food trees predominate. These areas provide essential habitat for Lismore's Koalas however they are frequently not accounted for in mapping and not consistently protected by the current legislative framework. Additionally, vegetation that may receive a low Vegetation Integrity Score in the Biodiversity Development Assessment Report (BDAR) methodology may still constitute highly important habitat for local populations. Given the uncertainty around climate change impacts, all Koala habitat – including poorer quality habitat and isolated food trees – needs to be protected to support the ongoing viability of local populations.

State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP) 44 is the main policy used by Councils to regulate development impacts on Koala habitat, however it has not been effective in preventing the ongoing decline of Koala populations. In its December 2016 submission to the proposed review of SEPP 44, LCC recommended consideration be given to removal of the minimum lot size of 1 ha, particularly for green-field subdivisions. Lots less than 1 ha can contain important habitat for Koalas, and the application of SEPP 44 development controls to such areas would enhance the achievement of its aims and objectives. It also recommended that Comprehensive Koala Plans of Management such as those developed by Lismore, Byron and Tweed Councils be used to guide the planning provisions contained in any guidelines/ standards.

To a significant extent, Councils are reliant on the information provided by developers and their consultants to assess the impact of a development on Koala habitat. The resources available for ground-truthing such information are very limited. In addition, it appears that the resources available within State agencies to investigate and prosecute potential breaches of biodiversity legislation are also extremely limited, with a consequent lack of accountability for compliance. Monitoring of retained and replacement habitat over the longer term is also not possible within available resources, potentially undermining the effectiveness of these measures further.

Strengthened state policy is required to support Councils in protecting Koala habitat in priority areas subject to development. To allow for occupancy changes over time, this must include consideration of habitat connectivity across the landscape, and encompass both occupied and unoccupied habitat areas. Additionally, standards are required for assessing Koala populations

to determine meaningful population and occupancy estimates that are comparable across the state. The current process for updating the Biodiversity Values Map is slow and imposes considerable burden on Councils. A more agile framework is required to respond to improved mapping and to ensure that replacement habitat is protected.

Finalisation of the review of SEPP 44 is an essential step in addressing some of the issues around Koala conservation.

Koala conservation status varies across local government areas as do threats, priority actions, and resourcing. Nevertheless, LCC and surrounding Councils have collaboratively very effectively with each other and with and community groups on Koala conservation. Regulatory and funding frameworks should capitalise on the role of local government to ensure development is consistent with Koala conservation, and to fund large scale long term projects which protect and enhance Koala habitat.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Sharon Harwood
Director, Partnerships, Planning and Engagement

