

**Submission
No 240**

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

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Date Received: 2 August 2019

Submission to the NSW Legislative Council – Inquiry into koala populations and habitat in New South Wales

TERMS OF REFERENCE

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.

Submission:

Status of koala populations and koala habitat in New South Wales, including trends

There are many, often conflicting views relating to the status of koala populations and koala habitat in New South Wales, including trends. Few recognise and acknowledge the historical fact that, at the time of European colonisation and settlement, koala populations were sparse and that the natural state, prior to that time was well distributed, but not populous. Koalas have responded to changes in the landscape since that time, notably in response to the cessation of regular burning (as was practiced extensively by the Indigenous community across the landscape) and the subsequent emergence of the more dense forests that we have today. The original landscape was more frequently characterised by forests and woodlands with large, well-spaced trees. Our forests today are now characterised by many more stems per hectare. The emergence of the new forests provided the koala population with an opportunity to grow rapidly, even explosively (irrupt). The koalas then, did just as they do today - respond quickly to a new diet and rapidly increase in number. This is evident in places like the Green Triangle and Kangaroo Island where bluegum plantations have provided a new bounty. The export industry that emerged in the late 19th Century shortly after the cessation of regular mild burning (and the subsequent change in the landscape following the effective removal of Indigenous communities) is testament to the capacity of koalas to rapidly exploit new habitat when the opportunity presents.

This is well-documented by many others, notably Vic Jurskis who has provided a separate and far more detailed account in his submission to this enquiry.

Key threats, resource availability, adequacy of protections and areas for further research

The key threats are associated with failed State Government policies in relation to fragmentation of native vegetation and land clearing. Forest management for timber production should not be considered 'land clearing' despite the ugliness of harvesting operations. In all native forests in public ownership, all harvesting is followed by regenerative processes which aim to regenerate the forest. Likewise, the private native forest estate is regulated to provide for regeneration and maintenance of species diversity. Forestry is an easy

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target, but the damage to the woodlands in western NSW where permanent land clearing has recently been sanctioned by our current State Government.

Koalas are mobile in the landscape and their population will respond to changes in resource availability, so our policy focus should be on determining what is the optimum population at a landscape level, rather than focusing on koala hotspots. Invariably, it seems, any hotspot is a prelude to a population collapse. More koalas is not necessarily the answer. The key threats to koala populations are things that impact on the koalas' mobility across the landscape, most notably roads and infrastructure, and predation/attack by wild dogs. Mobility at a landscape level also requires connectedness of suitable feed trees.

The construction of the Pacific Motorway in northern NSW is a prime example of a major arterial significantly disrupting koala mobility.

Old-growth forest remapping and rezoning

The old-growth mapping will hopefully correct the serious errors that arose from the original mapping. Koala populations in old-growth areas will be usually stable and low. The mapping will give greater confidence to managers.

Identification of key areas of koala habitat on private and public land

Perhaps we need to take a whole-of-landscape approach here. Prior to colonisation there were no National Parks, State Forests or private land. Protection needs to be afforded at a landscape level, not focusing on protections at a local level such as establishing a new National Park. National Parks have not been able to demonstrate any success in the 'protection' of koala populations, and likewise, regenerating forests demonstrate a high level of koala occupancy. My question would be, 'Protected from what?' In answer, the greatest threat would be destruction of woodland communities in the north west of the state by so-called farmers wanting to expand their unsustainable grain, cotton or grazing enterprises.

The environmental, social and economic impacts of establishing new protected areas to conserve koala habitat, including national parks

Establishing new 'protected areas' will make some people feel good, but it won't do much for koalas. The key to their long-term prevalence in the landscape will be through development of measures to ensure effective connectivity and mobility.

Recommendation

I strongly recommend the Committee pay full attention to the detailed paper submitted by Vic Jurskis. This is a most comprehensive assessment of the historical journey of koalas in Australia over the past 250 years and the most rigorous appraisal of all the research undertaken to date. Vic's advocacy for a complete re-think in relation to the nature of our forests and woodlands, particularly with respect to fire management is the clearest way to helping koalas at a landscape scale.

In the absence of radically changed fire regimes, we will surely see more of the same: frequent, catastrophic wildfires that will pay no heed to protected areas, wildlife or human settlement.

Afterthought

Curiously, the closest cousin of the koala, the wombat gains no attention. Its population is in serious decline in many areas with some instances of localised extinctions due to mange.

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