Submission No 246

INQUIRY INTO KOALA POPULATIONS AND HABITAT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Dear Committee members

The NSW Government has developed a Koala Strategy and allocated significant funds to koala management and conservation. Disappointingly, the rate at which existing koala habitat is being cleared has increased in the last few years and the adverse effects of this clearing seems very likely to out-way the benefits of koala conservation activities.

Concurrently Koalas are also being adversely affected by climate change. Some parts of the northwest slopes and northern tablelands have extensive patches of dying trees as a result of extreme temperatures and associated moisture deficit during the drought - some of these were koala feed trees. Fortunately the koala feed trees around Armidale have generally not been dying from the present drought although some show signs of stress.

The northern tablelands have several areas with koala populations and there is limited evidence that koalas may have increased in some of these, at least prior to the present drought. Compared to the populations on the western slopes, like near Gunnedah, the tablelands cooler climate and higher rainfall may give koala populations more chance of surviving climate change here. Armidale is one such place. Comprehensive Koala Management Plans are needed for all such places, particularly those where urban and rural residential development is a threat to habitats. Planning is needed to identify ways to protect habitats and corridors. Local Councils do not have the funds needed to do adequate planning for koalas and other arboreal species (let alone species dependent on indigenous ground flora and ground-layer habitats).

The current NSW Koala Strategy is useful but not adequate. Koala conservation cannot be achieved for the long term without also stopping clearing and intensive logging of koala habitat, and without much stronger action to slow and halt global warming and associated climate changes in NSW

Laws should be changed to greatly reduce the situations in which clearing of native vegetation that either does or may in future support threatened or declining species.

Other species deserve effective conservation action, not just iconic species like koalas. Funds should be spent achieving the best conservation outcomes possible for the full range of species. Willingness of individuals in the community to put their own time, financial resources, knowledge and creativity into conservation action is essential to maximise conservation outcomes, so it is essential that the Government stop discouraging people's efforts by allowing existing habitats to be destroyed and by giving the impression that land holders should be payed to take conservation actions.

Having some funds available to assist with conservation is good but this should be distributed on the basis of maximum benefit for many species in or travelling between existing habitats and need for financial assistance. The recent BCT koala habitat funding grants were skewed to koala-only benefits, had no financial need criterion and may not have given sufficient weight to likely long-term commitment of the landholders. The notion that landowners would be payed in perpetuity was a nice incentive but completely out of keeping with government funding for other programs and risks making conservation unrealisticly expensive. This particular once-off scheme also lacks the transparency needed to find out whether money is well spent – how the money is to be spent is kept secret so it has no place in market economics, their being no market transparency. These comments are based on my experience applying for one of these grants – I don't mind that we missed out – it will take us a lot longer to improve our bit of habitat with our

own time and be much more dependent on our ongoing physical health as well as commitment than it would have if we had been successful.

Whole ecosystems need protection because the resilience of each species, in the face of changes including climate change, is far greater when it can benefit from living with the suit of other species that co-evolved together in ecosystems or ecological communities. Species need each other.

For example, eucalypts need the species of fungi with which they have mycorrhizal relationships to maximise their efficient absorption of water and nutrients. Planting a line or patch of koala food trees in a paddock where the soil and soil microbes have changed due to clearing followed by many decades of use for crops or pasture not only takes decades to produce koala food but the trees may lack their micorrhizal partners and have even more difficulty withstanding climate change than the same tree species that are already growing in natural forest or woodland ecosystems.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

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