

**Submission  
No 277**

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

**Organisation:** Nambucca Valley Conservation Association Inc

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29 July 2019

Dear Committee

**Submission to the Inquiry into koala populations and habitat in New South Wales**

The Nambucca Valley Conservation Association Inc. (NVCA) is a voluntary community group which has operated on the NSW mid north coast for over 30 years. We maintain a long-standing and strong interest in forest management, in particular in public native forests in the north east region of NSW. For over 25 years, this Association has worked hard to protect koalas and raise awareness of koala habitat destruction.

NVCA launched the Dunggirr Conservation Proposal in 1994 which proposed the conversion of parts of Mistake State Forest into a new national park to protect a significant local koala population. We submitted the proposal to the NSW government and it was instrumental in the establishment of Dunggirr National Park in the Nambucca Valley hinterland, which was gazetted in 1997. Dunggirr is the Gumbaynggirr word for koala.

In 2009, this Association ran a successful Class 4 action against Nambucca Shire Council in the Land and Environment Court. We challenged Council's failure to adhere to required planning processes in the determination of a controversial rural residential subdivision on East West Road at Valla in core koala habitat, whilst in caretaker mode before an election. We managed to have Council's approval of the development declared invalid, but it was subsequently re-approved and the development went ahead. SEPP44 did not protect this important coastal koala population, which has suffered death by a thousand cuts due to residential and horticultural land clearing. In an area that was once well known for its koalas, local residents now report that they do not hear as many koalas, and see even fewer.

In 2017 NVCA undertook extensive pre logging koala searches in Buckra Bendinni State Forest Compartments 384 and 385, in an effort to reduce logging impacts to the known koala population there. These compartments have over 110 historical records of koalas. Back in 1998 local community members joined NVCA in trying to stop logging in particular in compartment 384 based on the unusually high number of koalas known to exist there. Neighbours adjoining 384 regularly spotted koalas in trees and heard them calling in the breeding season. A section of the compartment was set aside from logging in the 1998 operation in recognition of the koalas and again in the 2017 operation, but despite this our 2017 survey efforts found very little evidence of koalas and locals report rarely hearing or seeing them anymore.

The residual koalas in these compartments are now effectively 'islanded' by pasture to the east and north with young degraded forest lacking suitable feed trees, thickly under-storied by lantana, and containing areas affected by Bell Minor Associated Die Back (BMAD). If there are any juvenile koalas attempting to disperse to new territory to establish a home range, they will be met with unsuitable and often impenetrable landscapes, with the subsequent increased risk of predation and stress related disease. The north facing compartments are now also much more fire prone, having a reduced canopy, with a 'sea' of Lantana under which there are, drier soils, minimal humus and dry leaf litter. Koalas are particularly susceptible to injury and death due to fire.

Despite existing National Parks (many of which were heavily logged before being gazetted), Nature Reserves, Forest Management Zones, SEPP 44 and Koala Logging Prescriptions, koala numbers continue to decline. Current land management practices and laws are clearly failing to protect koala habitat, and hence koalas, and urgent action is needed to remedy this. We cannot, and must not sit by while this unique species disappears for under our very noses!

The Nambucca / Bellingen area is renowned for its highly erodible soils<sup>1</sup>. Logging on steep slopes usually results in loss of soils and subsequent poor regrowth. Poorer soils, and the post logging burning regime of Forestry Corporation usually favours Blackbutt rather than healthy mixed species, which include koala primary feed species such as (in this area) Tallowwood and Grey Gums. In other words, Forestry Corporation's forest management regimes are destroying forest diversity and significantly disadvantaging koalas in state forests.

We are also well aware that logging directly injures and kills koalas which are haplessly stuck up a tree when it is felled.

Our volunteers are acutely aware of the impending collapse of mid north coast NSW koala populations which have suffered a decline of 50% over the past 20 years, and that scientists predict the species could be extinct in NSW by 2050 if urgent action is not taken. For years we have undertaken pre-logging koala surveys in local and regional public native forests in an attempt to minimise the impacts of logging on resident koalas. We recognise that this species is utterly dependant on healthy mature forests for its survival and we are constantly disappointed and distressed by the ongoing obliteration of koala habitat by Forestry Corporation, in its insatiable drive to intensively log and clear fell public native forests across NSW.

In an effort to raise awareness about the plight of our public native forests and the threatened species dependent upon them, including the koala, two NVCA members worked closely with the North East Forest Alliance to produce a 17 minute documentary called 'Your Forests'<sup>2</sup>. This short video provides context for the community's genuine concern about public native forest management and the survival of the koala. It was produced in 2017 for the lead up to the 2019 state elections, but it is still highly relevant.

Habitat loss is the recognised primary threat to koalas and indeed any threatened species. Disease, dog attack and road kills, while often being more in the public eye, generally only occur due to koalas being stressed and/or forced to spend more time on the ground in exposed environs due to habitat loss.

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<sup>1</sup> Land and Soil Hazards on the Nambucca Beds, Northeast NS, Michael Eddie, March 2018

<sup>2</sup> [Your Forests video](#)

Public and private native forest logging and land clearing for mining, urban and agricultural development are all having a devastating and cumulative impact on the koala's survival. This Government to date has failed dismally to take sincere and enforceable steps to turn this situation around, despite strong scientific evidence from its own and independent experts, and community concerns expressed about escalating habitat loss. The huge number of public submissions to the Regional Forest Agreement and Integrated Forestry Operations Approvals processes leave no doubt that Forestry Corporation does not have a social licence to continue its rampage through our public asset, at the expense of our forest's and koala's future.

The RFAs should never have been extended and the new logging rules are an utter disgrace - weakening protections for the koala and legalising the intensive and clearfell logging of 140,000ha of coastal forests between Grafton and Taree including in identified koala hubs. The government is clearly choosing logging over the survival of koalas.

The planned remapping of thousands of hectares of previously protected old growth forest on public land is another unacceptable blow to the koala and all the other threatened and hollow dependant species that rely upon them.

This situation is abhorrent to NVCA members and is stimulating a growing anger amongst forest conservationists and koala lovers. Also of significant concern, is the Government's continued failure to ensure Forestry Corporation's compliance with pre logging survey requirements and logging rules during logging operations, despite repeated reports of non-compliance by community groups and individuals.

An NVCA post-harvest audit of logging in a known koala area in Oakes SF in 2016 revealed 16 breaches of the logging rules, including removal of 20 or so magnificent giant trees, many of which were Tallowwoods hundreds of years old and which were koala primary food trees. No action was taken to penalise Forestry Corp for these breaches.

Whilst we acknowledge that logging of public native forests is not the only threat to the survival of koalas, we strongly believe that significant changes in the management of our public native forests can address the impending loss of this iconic animal and is both achievable and ultimately a more economically viable use of our public asset. Tourists love koalas and bushwalkers love healthy forest. Healthy forests store and sequester carbon and as they mature their ability to do so increases. Forests can play a significant role in climate protection if left to grow and mature.

Koalas need healthy mature forests and current forestry practices ignore this fact. Koala 'protections' in public native forest also ignore the territorial home ranging behaviour of koalas. Koalas and logging within a koala home range, cannot co-exist without negative impacts on the resident koala, it is as simple as that. Now, under the new logging rules, Forestry Corporation do not even have to search for evidence of koalas before the heavy industrial logging machinery moves in. It does not even take a scientist to see where this is going!

There is a solution – stop logging in public native forests and transition the timber industry into a 100% plantation-based industry. Instead manage these forests to protect, restore and maintain the many values they contain and services they provide. We recognise that regulating logging and vegetation clearing on private land is complex and meets with strong oppositions; however it is a different story for public land. The public, through a number of independent polls and submissions, has made it clear they value forests over the 600 direct jobs in the NSW

native forestry sector. It is time for the government to do the right thing and stop logging public native forests.

Our key messages:

- 1 End public native forest logging in NSW and complete the transition of industry to a 100% plantation-based industry. Already 87% of NSW' timber needs are supplied from the thriving plantation timber sector unlike the native forestry sector which makes an annual loss every year (whilst destroying our forests' future) and relies on NSW taxpayer subsidies to survive.
- 2 We strongly support the establishment of the Great Koala National Park on the mid north coast and have been actively working on local projects to promote and raise awareness about this important proposal. We know that if created, the GKNP would give our local koala populations a fighting chance of recovering and surviving into the future while generating many jobs and benefits for local communities.
- 3 NVCA also supports other reserve proposals put forward by the NSW National Parks Association and the North East Forest Alliance, which will protect koala habitat.
- 4 Ensure that Private Native Forestry is genuinely low-impact and selective and does not impact on koala habitat.
- 5 Protect already identified koala hubs as a matter of urgency.
- 6 Strengthen SEPP 44 to ensure the policy actually protects koala habitat in situ in perpetuity, is unambiguous, enforceable and importantly is ENFORCED.
- 7 Require local governments to complete the mapping of koala habitat on private and public land (other than state forests) and prepare Koala Plans of Management for holistic protection.
- 8 Koala populations require independent monitoring. This Association has no confidence in Forestry Corporation or the Natural Resources Commission to objectively assess and monitor koalas or the impacts of logging on koala populations.
- 9 While this 'koala disaster' is being sorted out, we ask that a moratorium be placed on any current or planned logging and/or clearing of koala habitat across all land tenures.

Thank you for the opportunity to put our concerns to the committee. We would be happy to provide further information and/or meet with the committee if necessary, to assist the Inquiry in any way.

Yours sincerely

Carol Margolis

Secretary