

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

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Further information in response to questions posed by the Committee for the NSW Upper House Inquiry into Koala populations and habitat in New South Wales

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Ethical Ecology

Why has there been little apparent action in relation to Koala conservation west of the divide?

The answer to this question principally lies in the dominant political culture in western NSW and a corresponding lack of political will from government to act. Both at state and federal levels, political representation has been dominated by the National Party. Generally strong advocates of farmer and property rights, this has tended to play out as a strong advocacy to reduce the role of government agencies in farm management, compliance and planning. According to this narrative, nature conservation, instead of being something that could be compatible with farming, or indeed beneficial, has been framed as being anti-farmer, especially matters relating to wildlife. This is even though wildlife is protected by state jurisdiction. Instead governments have just wanted to 'lock-up' people's land we were told.

This paradigm is reflected also in local government, who in the north-west, have tended to represent wealthier farming and business interests and more recently, have acted as advocates for mining (such as Gunnedah and Narrabri Councils). In my view, over a long time, the National Party, NSW Farmers and the National Farmers Federation have used property rights as a political tool to wage a culture war against 'greenies' and 'people from the city' in order to bring into disrepute any concerns for the environment that local people and the wider community may have. In many ways this view does not reflect the sentiments of people living in these communities who have genuine concerns for wildlife and the environment more generally but whose voice remains unheard in Macquarie Street.

The state electorates of Barwon, Tamworth and New England have tended to be dominated by National Party members of parliament. Notable property rights advocates from Barwon have included Ian Slack-Smith and his successor Kevin Humphries. The latter having a strong ally in Barnaby Joyce at the federal level. The Guardian and ABC investigations have showed how Mr Humphries encouraged illegal land-clearing, giving a 'green light' at farmer meetings and strongly lobbying for a decrease in vegetation regulation. He and others have acted as a sort of guarantor for producers against legal repercussions, real or imagined. The current *Native Vegetation Act* and associated regulations has shown the lobbying efforts by the property rights champions has borne fruit, with its focus on self-assessment and less restrictions, along with the *Biodiversity Conservation Act* which now allows the unrestricted removal of threatened ecological communities and Koala habitat.

An example the extent of the anti-environment culture war west of the divide comes from one wildlife carer from the Croppa Creek area who was subject to intimidation and death threats by some landowners, just for advocating for Koala welfare. One of these landowners was later found guilty of illegal land-clearing, but not before he had murdered an OEH compliance officer. Such is the level of intimidation that comes from individuals influenced by the property

rights lobby. To this day, virtually no planning for Koala conservation has occurred on the Moree Plains.

The other mechanism by which Koala habitat could be protected is SEPP44. This requires local governments working with state government to implement Comprehensive Koala Management Plans which have an objective of minimising loss of koala habitat (but never completely protecting all potential koala habitat). The lack of will among local government to implement this statutory planning policy is a testament to the success of the property rights lobby. Moree, Warialda, Inverell, Warrumbungle and Narrabri in particular, who all have (or had) documented, significant Koala populations, have never seen any attempt by government to implement SEPP44 CKPoMs in these LGAs. The revised SEPP44 set to be implemented on March 1st, has actually less statutory protection for Koala habitat than the previous version, and no longer has any requirement for a site-specific Plan of Management⁶.

The exception is Gunnedah Council, being the self-proclaimed 'Koala Capital', who have toyed with the concept of a CKPoM for over 10 years, though in the end preferring to implement a non-statutory Koala Strategy which allows the removal of core Koala habitat using an offset mechanism. This is also despite funding received by Council from BHP to conduct LGA-wide Koala surveys and two grants under the Save Our Species Program to set up a CKPoM.

Another factor which is likely to have assisted Gunnedah Council's decision to defer implementation of a CKPoM was the perception that Koalas were common in the LGA. Council, using the firm 'BioLoaning Greenstudies' and in conjunction with Dr Steve Philips, conducted surveys in key Koala areas who provided an estimated population size of over 12,000 animals for the LGA in 2015¹. However, issues with the methodology and how this estimate was derived has brought this into question. The view that Koalas are common and therefore not a significant conservation issue, has little scientific credibility today.

Previous studies have shown that Gunnedah populations were under decline by 2009². This has been further verified by more recent estimates which describe a population decline of approximately 80% from pre-decline levels with estimates of current population size in the LGA at perhaps less than 2,000, based on published and unpublished surveys along with current local knowledge³.

The documented decline of the Pilliga Koalas should be viewed in context with the Gunnedah population. The Pilliga decline has occurred within intact, extensive forest and is primarily attributed to ongoing drought⁴, possibly due to the early signs of climate-associated warming⁵, a factor identified in the Gunnedah area². Pilliga Koala densities first decreased notably during the millennial drought and through the 2000s. 2013/14 surveys suggest that there may not have been more than 100 Pilliga animals at this time, compared to a pre-decline population of somewhere between 5-10,000 animals. The estimate of 12,000 animals in the Gunnedah LGA probably better reflects the pre-decline population size.

But the situation for Koalas in the north west has become worse in recent years. Severe drought over the last 3 years has seen the Pilliga Koalas virtually disappear and increased rates of mortality and disease in the remaining Gunnedah/Liverpool Plains populations have been observed (based on work by North-west Local Land Service).

On the Liverpool and Moree Plains, the last twenty years has seen significant land-clearing on top of the warming climate and so, Koalas have been subject to significant pressure on habitat

availability and quality over this time. Gunnedah populations are also subject to relatively high levels of vehicle collision and dog attack, much more so than the Pilliga animals had been.

What efforts have been undertaken?

Over the last 20 years there has been little active Koala habitat conservation work in the north west, restricted to a small number of landowners where tree plantings and conservation agreements have occurred. Today, much of the effort to conserve Koala habitat in the north west has been undertaken by the Local Land Service with some funding now available for private land conservation from the NSW Biodiversity Trust. The latter is in the early days and take-up has been limited, restricted by minimum area rules and limited funding.

Besides working with supportive landowners, the North-west LLS has a Koala Corridor Plan which is aimed to prioritise Koala conservation efforts in the Gunnedah LGA. It has been conducting 'baseline surveys', as the Gunnedah population has always suffered from a lack of understanding of the distribution and number of animals in the shire though recent surveys better reflect current post decline numbers, rather than a 'baseline'. The total area of Koala habitat trees planted out by landowners in the Gunnedah area amounts to some 30-50 hectares in total, however recent work is starting to increase this.

New England LLS has conducted surveys throughout the New England area from Ashford to Walcha, with plans to strategically increase koala habitat. OEH has also conducted surveys for the Koala throughout the north west region to inform the Koala mapping and implementation of the new vegetation management regime. However, it should be remembered that most of these surveys are the first systematic surveys for the Koala in the region, outside limited areas of the Gunnedah LGA and Pilliga forests.

Measures to help Koala conservation are encouraging but still lags well behind levels of habitat loss from land-clearing throughout the north west over the last twenty years, particularly on the Liverpool Plains and the Moree (Northern) Floodplains, where thousands of hectares of Koala habitat have been cleared. The removal of over 1,000 ha of Koala habitat by mining companies in the Leard State Forest and the proposed level of clearing associated with the Watermark Mine further highlight the deficit that future plantings and habitat enhancement need to address.

In conclusion, regional conservation targets remain largely meaningless given the past loss and future anticipated loss of Koala habitat under current private land vegetation management, offset and SEPP44 policies and regulations. Unless there is a profound shift pervading conservation politics in NSW and better protections put in place, wild populations of Koalas in the north west of NSW may soon be a thing of the past.

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