



Coastwatchers

Eurobodalla's environment group

3 March 2017

Koala Strategy Submissions,
NSW Office of Environment and Heritage,
PO Box A290
South Sydney NSW 1232

Dear Sir/Madam,

NSW Koala Strategy

Attached is a submission from the Coastwatchers Association Inc regarding the proposed NSW Koala Strategy.

Yours faithfully

Richard Roberts
Secretary

The Coastwatchers Association Inc
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SUBMISSION FROM
THE COASTWATCHERS ASSOCIATION INC
REGARDING THE
PROPOSED NSW KOALA STRATEGY

3 March 2017

1. COASTWATCHERS ASSOCIATION

The Coastwatchers Association is a community environmental organisation that has served the Eurobodalla region of the South Coast of NSW for over 30 years. The Association is the leading independent environmental watchdog for the region, acting in close co-operation with the wider community, the environment movement, the Eurobodalla Shire Council and the NSW State Government.

The Association aims to help protect the environmental health, integrity and beauty of this special coastal region. The Association aims to raise awareness in the community of environmental, climate change and sea level rise issues.

2. BACKGROUND

The NSW Government has sought public comment by 3 March 2017, regarding the preparation of a “**NSW Koala Strategy**” The Government has estimated that Koala numbers in NSW have declined by 26% over the past 15-21 years. It is clear that if that rate of decline continues without significant intervention, by 2050, Koalas will be near extinct in NSW.

The Government commissioned a review of the decline in Koala numbers in NSW and engaged the NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer to carry out this review. That process occurred between March-December 2016. There were 7 public information sessions, five in the north of the State, one in Sydney and one in the south at Bega.

The Chief Scientist’s final report recommended:

“...that the objective of a NSW koala strategy should be to stabilise and then start to increase koala numbers.

This will require actions to protect, rehabilitate and connect koala habitat, as well as a range of actions to manage and mitigate threats to koalas. Some threats to koalas are widespread and others vary in intensity between bioregions. Therefore, some threats will require state- wide action, for example, through appropriate policy settings and investment in data collection, while others need to be addressed on the ground regionally or locally.

An important finding of this review is that it may not be possible to ensure all koala populations continue to persist in all locations. There are some populations where government and community action can help secure ongoing viability but there are also areas where the historical land use decisions, current competing land uses, as well as risks from road strike, dog attack and, in some

areas, drought and bush fire events mean that it will be much more difficult to secure those populations. Government will need to make clear choices and invest resources where it is most likely to make a difference.

Critical to this are data. We need more and better quality data and more information to prioritise investment, to get the most out of the various regulatory and management tools we have available and to know if we are making progress towards the overall goal. New sensor and data analytics technology can make data gathering more efficient and cost effective. ..."

The recommendations in the Report included the need for:

- *improved data and mapping;*
- *improved outcomes for koalas through changes to the planning system and native vegetation regulation;*
- *investigation of models for guiding and encouraging best practice;*
- *prioritise areas of land for conservation management; and*
- *develop a series of actions to improve collaboration and information exchange amongst government, researchers, land managers and the community.*

The NSW Government already has in place a 5y \$100m fund for **'Saving our Species'** for conserving threatened species. In 2016-17 \$800K was earmarked for koala projects. The Government has already announced that \$10 million from the **'NSW Environment Trust'** will be used to purchase and permanently conserve land that contains priority koala habitat.

3. KOALAS IN THE EUROBODALLA SHIRE AREA

The detailed history of Koalas in the Shire of Eurobodalla Shire is extremely deficient. There was clearly a resident Koala population in the Shire when Europeans settled the South Coast of NSW in the 1800's. It has been reported that there was a growth in the koala population in the Shire until around the mid-1850s, attributed to the European impact on aboriginal activities and dingo numbers.

With European settlement increasing in the second half of the 19th Century, Koala numbers declined rapidly Shire-wide, leaving remnant populations in various locations until about 1900. The decline in numbers, was mainly attributed to the clearing of agricultural land by European settlers. Unfortunately, much of that land was prime Koala habitat, which was characterised by high nutrition vegetation (and low toxin levels), mostly along the fertile river valleys. There were also other issues such as a chlamydia epidemic, hunting for food by Europeans in the 1890s and 1930s depressions. It is also understood that koala-skin tanning factories existed in Ulladulla and other parts of SE NSW, many years ago.

Drought, increasing rural and urban development, road transport and more mechanised forestry techniques, have all contributed to the loss of Koala habitat in this area and the consequent population decline, during the 20th Century. By 2000 the Koala population in the

Eurobodalla Shire by any measure, nearly extinct. There are records of the odd Koala in search of a breeding group. However, the ongoing loss of habitat, especially in the State Forests has been considered the greatest contributor to the 20th century decline in Koala numbers. The last confirmed sighting of a Koala was at Nerrigundah in 2013. There is no data of the current number of Koalas in the Eurobodalla Shire, whether in private land, NSW Forestry Land or the National Parks.

In the adjacent Bega Valley Shire, a known Koala population exists in the Bermagui – Murrah, Mumbulla and Tanja regions. The population has been well documented, with the number of known koalas being less than 60. Three State Forests, the Murrah, Mumbulla and Tanja, together with the southern half of Bermagui State Forest were reclassified by the NSW Government in early 2016, as the **Murrah Flora Reserves**.

The four reserves are managed by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, and have been given the same protection as NSW National Parks, which will protect the Koala Habitat and the Koalas from NSW Forestry Commission timber harvesting activities. To compensate the local timber industry, a \$2.5m Environmental Trust Grant was made to "protect local jobs and the local timber industry by sourcing timber supply further up the coast".

There is also believed to be a small Koala population in the Kooraban National Park near Dignams Creek, (15 km from Narooma), which is also within the Bega Valley Shire, and adjacent to the boundary of the Eurobodalla Shire.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Coastwatchers Commissioned Reports

The Coastwatchers Association has been involved with developing Koala Recovery Strategies in the Eurobodalla Shire for a number of years. The Association commissioned and funded research through its independently administered '**Coastwatchers Environment Fund**'. The project was led by Dr Keith Joliffe, a retired Canberra scientific researcher.

During his studies he produced three reports, available online at the Coastwatchers Association website (in the Archive section at coastwatchers.org.au), and these reports were provided directly to all stakeholder agencies in this region and the State Government.

The first was the "**Eurobodalla Koala Discussion Paper**" prepared in March 2011. This report concluded that koala presence and koala habitat issues in the Eurobodalla were clouded by lack of data, mythology, prejudice and vested interest, so a full independent study was warranted.

This Discussion Paper was followed by:

"Habitat Assessment and Koala Revival Prospects in the Eurobodalla, NSW – A Pilot Study" January 2013.

The final report, in 2013 was the:

"Eurobodalla Koala Recovery Strategy – 2014 to 2026"

The latter two reports are attached to this Submission.

The pilot study investigated in detail the history, science and issues around Koala presence and habitat in the Eurobodalla. It established a theoretical base and tested a research model for estimating the quality of extant Koala habitat, using a comprehensive reference base, local knowledge interviews, targeted plot surveys and GIS modelling.

The peer-reviewed report concluded that:

1. The pilot study's research model was valid and its habitat estimation approach worth following through.
2. The occasional appearance of Koalas in the Eurobodalla Shire warranted a full scientific study, especially to determine their status as resident groups or transient animals following breeding corridors from adjacent Local Government Areas.
3. That a **Eurobodalla Koala Recovery Strategy** should be designed for the general Eurobodalla community and relevant land management agencies, to decide whether to give it priority or not.

Dr Joliffe and his associates, then prepared the **Eurobodalla Koala Recovery Strategy**, with input from the NSW Forestry Corporation, the NSW Department of Primary Industries, and the Office of Environment and Heritage. Unfortunately, Roads & Maritime (NSW), the Environment Protection Agency and the Eurobodalla Shire Council did not respond to the invitation to comment and have input into the Report.

In developing the NSW Koala Strategy, the Coastwatchers considers that these reports need to be considered as part of the development of the NSW Koala Strategy. The Association considers the findings and approach of the reports prepared by Dr Joliffe et al for the Eurobodalla Region, would be of great assistance to the NSW Government, as it embarks on the preparation its own NSW Koala Strategy.

4.2 2008 "Recovery Plan for the Koala

When preparing the **NSW Koala Strategy** it is crucial the NSW Government understands why the previous NSW Government prepared **Koala Recovery Strategy** of 2008 failed. Clearly the NSW Government has turned its back on introducing programs which will "Recover" previous populations of Koalas such as those that were in the Eurobodalla Shire. It appears it is only interested in maintaining existing known populations. It is a very sad fact that the NSW Government, to date, has **FAILED** to develop programs to maintain Koala population in NSW, let alone commence recovery programs. Coastwatchers hopes this attempt succeeds.

The **NSW Government's "Recovery Plan for the Koalas"** prepared by the OEH in November 2008, was never adequately implemented, and fell from the Government's radar as a priority. There were turf wars between the various NSW Government agencies. The lack of will by some of those agencies to take cooperative action, to implement the proposed Koala Recovery Strategy, is why the present predicament exists, with the NSW Koala populations continuing to decline. If the 2008 agency rivalry continues into this 2017 Koala Strategy, then that decline in Koala numbers will continue the trend to near extinction across the State, as has occurred in the Eurobodalla region.

4.3 South Coast Flora Reserves

The attitude of the NSW Government to the establishment of the **Murrah Flora Reserves** is quite concerning. They have two balls in the air at once. One is presumably to stop the Koalas becoming extinct and to increase their numbers, while the other is to permit harvest of the state forests. The reality is that if Koalas are found in a NSW logging areas, then the Government increases the logging pressure in another state forest area at an unsustainable rate, as they are doing in the forests around Batemans Bay.

There have been comments made that ultimately the **Murrah Flora Reserves** will be harvested for their timber, because they will simple run out of suitable timber in other areas. That is why they were made a Flora Reserve and not part of a National Park. History from early settlement is simply repeating itself. Regeneration of the Koalas is totally dependent on the retention and maintenance of habitat, so numbers can slowly recover.

It appears to this Association that the Koalas are just collateral damage and of little priority to the State Government. They prefer to operate their forests for timber, at a financial loss. If there is no mind shift by government, then history will simply continue to repeat itself, and the numbers of Koalas fall. Some future Minister will respond to a child's plea to save the Koala, and the Minister will order another inquiry in a decades time, then another and another. There will be no will to change forestry practices, and one day there will be no Koalas left to recover. Extinction.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Coastwatchers Association:

- (1) Supports the establishment of a "**NSW Koala Strategy**" as it did the NSW Government's "**Recovery Plan for the Koalas**" prepared in 2008.
- (2) The "**NSW Koala Strategy**" must also aim at Recovering lost Koala populations as well as maintaining existing populations.
- (3) Supports the Findings of the NSW Chief Scientist, especially that the objective of the strategy should be to **stabilise and then start to increase koala numbers** throughout the State of NSW
- (4) Place on public exhibition the completed "**NSW Koala Strategy**" prior to its implementation.
- (5) Note the fact that long-term koala survival requires an inter Local Government area landscape-scale connected mosaic of suitable home ranges and breeding corridors. There must be a collaborative effort between all land managers, public and private agencies to protect and rehabilitate these areas.

It must also be noted that irrespective of the status of its own sparse koala population, the Eurobodalla Shire is an important component in these linkages especially when the survival of the known Bega Shire, Cooma and Shoalhaven populations is taken into account.

- (6) Request the NSW Government to review the "business model" of NSW Forestry, and face up to the reality that hardwood logging is highly unprofitable. Instead of operating at a financial loss in most years, the State needs to profit from the forests by **NOT LOGGING**. Simply accept

carbon credit payments under the Emissions Reduction Fund scheme, and turn a financial drain into a major financial benefit for all people in NSW, the environment and in particular the Koala.