

3/2/2011

Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications Committee Enquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's Koala Population.

I would like to provide the following information on Koalas on the NSW Far South Coast based on my experience;

As a concerned local landowner whos' property adjoins the threatened Murrah /Mumbulla /Bermagui Koala population.

As a long term Koala Survey Contractor to Dept Environment Climate Change & Water, NSW,

As a Professional Arborist dealing with trees in SE NSW.

Local Koala History and population estimates.

I have been a local landowner in the Bermagui area for 23 years, my property adjoins both National Park and State Forest. Both these areas are inhabited by a now very small and fragmented Koala Population. They are the northern most members of a low density population that extends to the South through the Biamanga National Park and Murrah and Mumbulla State Forests. DECCW NSW surveys have provided estimates of no more than 5 or 6 animals remaining in my local Bermagui area. Including the small breeding population located in the Mumbulla State Forest the total number of Koalas is estimated at less than 50 animals (1). This is the largest known Koala population on the Far South Coast. A logging operation was conducted on the borders of the breeding population last year inciting vehement protests from locals, the indigenous community and conservationists including noted scientists.

This population is declining and under threat. In the past 20 years observations and photographs of Koalas from areas around Wallaga Lake, Narira Creek and the Northern section of Bermagui State Forest have dwindled and a 2007-2009 DECCW Survey(1) has shown that there is now no evidence of Koalas in the locality.

I participated in survey work in the Tantawanglo/Yurammie area further South on the coastal escarpment, which once supported a Koala population and am aware that no Koala evidence was found, with the presumption that at best they are present in critically low numbers and facing local extinction.

Adequacy of current survey and counting methods.

I have been involved with Koala Surveys for 15 years, initially as a volunteer and more recently as a subcontractor for DECC NSW including surveys of National Parks, State Forests and neighbouring Crown and Private land in the Murrah/Mumbulla, Tantawanglo/Yurammie and Kooraban areas.

I have worked on programs using various survey techniques including those

currently used by State Forests NSW and strongly believe that the RGB SAT Method (Random Grid Based Spot Assessment Technique) currently used by survey teams for DECCW is by far the most sensitive for detecting the presence of Koalas particularly in low density and small remnant populations. It has been used successfully in Queensland and northern NSW as an aid to Urban Planning and Conservation Management decisions.

I believe RGB SAT Surveys at 350 Metre Grid plot intervals should be the standard for assessing the presence and number of Koalas in any proposed logging area.

RGB SAT provides:

*Statistically valid information which can be used to map Koala Distribution and make population estimates.

*A data base of preferred vegetation size and type which can inform future conservation or reestablishment decisions.

*A repeatable method that can be used to evaluate the increase or decline of populations over time.

*A method that can readily be taught to volunteers and landowners enabling them to contribute personally to Koala conservation and stimulate community ownership of local Koalas.

In 2010 a comparison trial was conducted in a compartment of Murrah State Forest where State Forest NSW Transect and Asterisk Surveys had detected no Koalas, the RGB SAT method detected the presence of at least 2 koalas and planned logging was deferred (but not abandoned).

Knowledge of Koala habitat.

DECCW Surveys have established that local Koalas require a range of browse species and that only a limited number of individuals within each species are palatable. Koalas in this area have disappeared from locations where suitable food trees still exist and there are many areas in local National Parks and State Forests that could best be described as 'Vacant Koala Habitat'.

Threats to Koala Habitat.

The major threatening process to Koalas at the Northern end of the Bermagui/Murrah/Mumbulla population seems to be a still continuing succession of human related impacts including fragmentation of home ranges and disruption of dispersal and breeding/migration corridors by subdivision for rural small holdings and the associated clearing for roads, fences, stock and powerlines. This area has also seen successive logging on private and state land and is subject to frequent hazard reduction burns on private property.

The single greatest threat to the breeding community near Wapengo in the Mumbulla SF is logging. The adequacy of SF NSW measures to protect Koalas from the impact of removing between 50% and 70% of the tree canopy within a logging coup is currently under discussion between DECCW and SF NSW. Given that at stake is the largest known Koala population on the far south coast I believe that the precautionary principle should be applied and that no logging should take place.

Listing of the Koala under the *Environment Protection and*

Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Due to the decline of Koalas on the NSW Far south Coast and in many areas around the country I feel strongly that Koalas should be given the benefit of the additional protection and recovery measures likely to be provided by listing under the Act.

Appropriate Future Regulation for the protection of Koala Habitat.

The question of what measures should be taken if the presence of Koalas is identified within a proposed logging coup in NSW is currently under discussion between SF NSW and DECW. The current measure is to leave a 'buffer zone' unlogged surrounding the identified 'Koala trees'. I believe this is totally insufficient for the conservation of the animals.

Future regulation for Koala protection in State Forests should prohibit logging in the vicinity of Koala populations entirely.

Failing this pre logging protective measures should require;

- *Use of the most effective survey methods to establish the presence extent and number of Koalas.

- *That sufficient habitat is retained to allow for seasonal use of different areas and tree species within the home range.

- * It should make allowance for dispersal of young Koalas from their mothers 'home range' into surrounding retained habitat.

- * There should be sufficient unlogged 'corridors' to allow safe movement of males to female home ranges in the breeding season (this frequently requires journeys of several km).

- *Sufficient habitat should be retained to allow for escape and survival if parts of the identified home range were destroyed by wildfire.

- * 'Hazard Reduction' and 'Asset Protection' burns particularly by government agencies should be assessed, managed and implemented so as not to have a damaging effect on Koalas.

As an Arborist of 32 years I have assessed the condition of literally thousands of trees, mostly species native to South Coast NSW. An issue not currently addressed by legislation is the widespread dieback and death of mature trees retained in logging coups for environmental reasons including koala habitat. Mechanical injury, damage to the structural and feeder root zones by heavy machinery, soil compaction and changes to soil level and drainage patterns can cause severe stress and eventual death of mature trees. Measures for protection of existing trees on sites subject to activities likely to cause significant impact, are listed in Australian Standard 4970 (2009) *Protection of Trees on Development Sites. (2)* These are enforced on urban and rural development sites under local council Tree Preservation Orders. I believe that the same standards should be in place for protection of environmentally significant mature trees to be retained within logging coups. Trees in State Forests are biologically no different to those on any other site where heavy machinery is used. Simply not chopping them down at the time of logging does not mean they will survive in the longer term.

Monitoring and Enforcement of Existing and Future Regulation.

Monitoring and enforcement of existing and future required protective measures and logging proscriptions is vital. I am informed that in the South East Region SF NSW is reducing the number of supervisors in the field in favour of contractor

education programs. This is despite 23 recent notified regulatory breaches.⁽³⁾ In my experience Government agencies are often unwilling to have open debate between themselves and with the public. This is detrimental to the survival of the Koala and conservation generally and may be improved by the listing of the animal under federal legislation. Fining each other for regulatory breaches is locking the gate after the horse has bolted (or the habitat has been destroyed). Ensuring adequate resourcing of supervision and onsite monitoring by the responsible State and Federal agencies will assist all threatened species.

I thank you for the opportunity to comment on the concerns I have for the future of our Koalas.

Robert Summers

References;

- 1 <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/threatenedspecies/10116koalabermum.pdf>
- 2 Australian Standard 4970(2009)*Protection of Trees on Development Sites.*
- 3 *Bega District News* 4/2/2011