Senate Committees : Environment and Communications Committee: Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's Koala population.

I would like to present a submission to the Senate Inquiry on behalf of our Community organisation Friends of Gippsland Bush, based in the Strzelecki Ranges Gippsland Victoria.
I hold the position of Secretary and Public Office Bearer and I have been given permission by the committee of Friends of Gippsland Bush to make this presentation on their behalf.

Please find:

- **Friends of Gippsland Bush's submission February 2011**

- **Attachment 1 Native Vegetation in the Hancock Victorian Plantation Estate. The Company harvests plantation and native forests**

- **Attachment 2 Map Harvest Schedule of the key biodiversity areas identified in the Strzelecki Ranges Biodiversity Study Biosis Research 2001, as the Cores and Links .**

Victorian 2009 February Fires A Report on Driving Influences and Land Tenures Affected Chris Taylor shows the extent of the devastation which includes thousands of hectares of prime Koala habitat.

File containing pictorial documentation of harvest in sites known to house secure Koala communities.

- **Attachment 3 Extracts from published Journals related to the DNA profiling of the Strzelecki Koala Gippsland Victoria**

Map 2010, provided courtesy of PHD Candidate Tristan Lee (manuscript under review). Mr. Lee's work extends the research of Houlden and Seymour and demonstrates that the Strzelecki Koalas are not from translocated stock, have unique genetic markers which are not found elsewhere in Victoria or in the Island populations. To manage this Koala on a sustainable basis they need to be considered as a separate management unit.

Executive Summary

FOGB would like to present a case for the listing of the Strzelecki Koala to be recognised as threatened across the Strzelecki Biogeographical region.

There has been much debate over the decades about the success or otherwise of the long standing translocation programs and the number of Koala populations across Victoria.

In our experience working for decades with, local communities, koala ecologists and veterinary scientists we have observed that overall this program has not been successful. The program has caused great stress to the animals and many 100's of painful deaths.

Whilst a minority of communities have flourished, generally there are problems with over browsing and inbreeding. In many localities the translocations have failed which has led to local populations becoming extinct.

The Strzelecki Koala is the only endemic koala population in Victoria with unique genetic diversity not found in other populations, which have all been part of a long standing translocation program , across Victoria .

The koala an international Australian iconic species is a key indicator of catchment health.

Our association wants to nominate the Strzelecki Koala for listing under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. Listing of the Strzelecki Koala under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act (FFG) would be a unique project in that no population of a particular species has been listed in the FFG due to their uncompromised genetics and rare alleles. Listing the Koala would have large impacts especially on Private Land in the Hancock Estate, which includes approximately 80% of the prime Koala habitat in the Strzelecki Biogeographical region and to a lesser extent in areas of State Forest that come under management of the Crown Land where the habitat is severely impacted by - fence post and firewood collection and pre-scribed burns.

Although Victoria's Koala Management Strategy DSE 2004 recognises the significance of the Strzelecki Koala population, there is no strategic management plan to protect the remnant fragmented habitat in South Gippsland nor any initiatives to suspend threatening processes in the upper catchments of the Strzeleckis, which contain the most critical habitat needed to ensure the long term viability of this unique population.

The Victorian State Government currently lists koalas in Victoria as “not threatened.” Koalas are currently not listed under the Australian Government’s endangered species legislation as either endangered or vulnerable.

The most recent research on the DNA profiling of the Strzelecki Koala undertaken by PH candidate Tristan Lee 2010 (manuscript currently under review) extends the pioneering work of geneticist Dr. Bronwyn Houlden.

Mr. Lee (pers. comm.) states that they (the Strzelecki Koala) are indeed unique koalas possibly the only remnant of the original Victorian koala gene pool. They are not from translocated stock and should be considered as a separate management unit

“The level of genetic diversity found in the South Gippsland population is the highest reported in Victoria and is comparable with the highest levels of genetic diversity in any koala population reported so far in Australia.”

Mr. Lees findings have implications for Koala management in Victoria and nationally.

Recommendations

Our association has been attempting to access funding, for further **independent research** to assess the size and distribution of the Strzelecki / South Gippsland population. Independence removed from the Victorian Koala politics surrounding the success or otherwise of the 100 year translocation program, the population numbers debate and the Timber Industry's monopoly off land use in the most critical koala habitat in the upper catchment of the Strzelecki bioregion, is essential to gain any insight into the Victorian context.

Background

The Strzelecki Ranges stretch from Rosedale in the NE, Traralgon in the N, Warragul in NW section to San Remo in the SW to Waratah Bay in the South.

The history of clearing in the Strzeleckis has led to a landscape of severely fragmented pockets of native forest, including areas classed as “old-growth”, within a mosaic of regenerated forest, reforestation, hardwood and exotic plantations managed for timber and pulp production. The native forest itself has a chequered history, with some areas having either never been cleared or subject to various degrees of harvesting and other areas supporting re-grown forest on abandoned farmland and failed plantations.

Inadequacies in legislative controls

In Victoria, timber production operations in native forest, or plantations (and native vegetation regrowth) on both private and public land are subject to the provisions of the “Code of Forest Practices for Timber Production” ("Code”) and Native Vegetation Retention Legislation.

In the Strzelecki Ranges, on public land leased to private timber companies, compliance with timber production operations have been deemed, by the Government to be subject to the “private land section” of the “Code."

The timber growing and harvesting operations of private forestry are not subject to the same scrutiny or protection as the operations of public forestry. This has meant that in private forestry, protection of biological values in particular has been left largely to the discretion of the landowner or forest manager.

Despite Industry's claims harvesting is not limited to plantations but includes extensive areas of old growth, regenerating mixed forest and reforestation much of which is prime Koala feed and habitat.

Refer to attachment 1 Extracts from : the Review of The Victorian Plantation Corporation Act by the Land Conservation Council 1993.
Report to Latrobe City Jackson's Track Biosis Research 2001
Documents received during VCAT Case above Hancock Victorian Plantations Forest Stewardship Health and Safety Management Systems Native Vegetation Management Policy 2006
5.2.2- 5.2.5 Native vegetation within plantations management options.

Failure to protect the Biodiversity values of the Strzelecki Ranges

Government policy and legislation has failed to protect the ecological assets of this region. Strzelecki public forests have been treated differently to all other public forests in the state.

The Victorian Plantation Corporation (VPC) acquired State Forest areas, prior to government commitment to the Gippsland Regional Forest Agreement. This means that the Strzelecki Ranges were excluded from protection under the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System (CAR). Presently, only 2% of the Strzelecki Ranges are protected within reserves or parks.

The minimum area for public forests is 15% representation of the original vegetation cover.

Hancock Victorian Plantations (HVP/ GRP in Gippsland) acquired the perpetual lease of the VPC Estate in 1998 and the Australian Paper Estate in 2001. This acquisition included the Strzelecki Bioregion.

HVP/GRP make all sorts of claims through their public relations media. Whilst on the surface this paints a pretty picture of HVP's relationship with the community and emphasises their endeavours to set aside habitat for the koala nothing could be further from the truth.

HVP have a track record of not honouring commitments made to statutory authorities and the community over many years. They are currently harvesting sites identified , in the Strzelecki Ranges Biodiversity Study Biosis Research 2001, as having the highest biological significance.

These areas are referred to as the Cores and Links all sites of National and State conservation significance which were largely protected under a Heads of Agreement (HOA) signed in 2006 with the State Government , the Trust for Nature, Community groups represented by the Strzelecki Forest Community Group which comprised - Friends of Gippsland Bush, the South Gippsland Conservation Society, the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority and 3 Shires, Hancock Victorian Plantations and Australian Paper.

The Cores and Links were created to link the existing parks and reserves with a contiguous fauna corridor from Tarra Bulga National Park to the Gunyah Gunyah Rainforest Reserve.

The HOA sought to correct the imbalance of ecological and social asset protection in this bioregion.

Unfortunately HVP and the newly appointed Premier in the State Government refused to commit to this agreement and signed a “secret” contract in 2008, excluding all major stakeholders (outside the Industry) who had spent 10 years negotiating the HOA.

Large tracts of koala habitat within and outside the Cores and Links are being harvested, creating further fragmentation and destruction for kilometers.

Claims that the reserved areas in the Strzeleckis have been increased by thousands of hectares are misleading. The so called “one off” harvest in the Cores and Links, the key biodiversity areas are being totally compromised by this new arrangement. A further 12,000 hectares includes isolates of varying size and quality with no contiguous link to fauna corridors, weed infested gullies, drainage lines of little conservation value in exotic pine and shining gum plantations.

We estimate that on the north face of the Grand Ridge Road approximately 70% of koala habitat was destroyed in the January/February 2009 fires. The south face contains the areas known as the Cores and Links which was not burnt in these fires but it is being heavily clearfelled.

Our organisation has been monitoring the Industry's activities in the Strzelecki for 16 years.
In that time we have witnessed the mass conversion of the Strzelecki Forests to exotic mono cultures. Whilst this represents large sections of the planted estate it also induces thousands of hectares of native forests home to the only remnant Victorian endemic Koala population.

Refer to attachment 2 Map of Cores and Links harvesting schedule. Pictorial documentation of non planted native vegetation prime koala habitat, fauna corridors and old growth being destroyed during the “one off” harvest in the Cores and Links.

Victorian 2009 February Fires Report by Chris Taylor A Report on Driving Influences and Land

Tenures. Displays excellent maps and text related to the devastation of these fires.

The Strzelecki Koala

Very little is known about the Strzelecki Koala population. What is known however, is that it is one of the few (if not the only) truly endemic Victorian koala populations, with its gene pool currently uncompromised by the long-standing translocation program of the Victorian government. Because of this, the population is of considerable conservation importance, not just because of its uniqueness, but also because of its potential to assist longer term conservation and management efforts of Victorian koalas generally. In order to ensure the management of the Strzelecki Koalas is placed on a sustainable footing, research is needed into the following issues:

1. Assessing Koala population numbers including the location of breeding population(s) - a methodology has recently been developed (Phillips pers.comm.) that allows the boundaries of areas being utilised by breeding koala populations (as opposed to areas being utilised by transient koalas) to be accurately modelled and delineated for conservation and management purposes. Breeding patterns of Koalas are generally well understood and documented in the literature.
2. It has already been established that the Strzelecki Koala has rare alleles not found elsewhere in Victoria. Thus there is an urgent need to better understand the genetics of the Strzelecki Koalas and the geographical boundaries of the associated genome, in addition to quantifying levels of out (or in) breeding and movement patterns within the area using microsatellite DNA. **Refer to attachment 3** Extracts from - Houlden, Seymour and the latest extended research by Lee 2010 (manuscript under review).
3. Assessing the impact of the fragmented nature of remaining habitat in the Strzelecki Ranges on the areas' Koala population is a long term project (10-20 years), as are the impacts of forest management practices. We have documented evidence covering a period of over 20 years using the extensive knowledge of - local communities, field naturalists, ecologists, comparisons of aerial photographs taken over various time frames, field observations etc. which clearly indicates a decline in the original native forest extant and a decrease in Koala numbers
4. Listing of the Strzelecki Koala under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act.

Arguments related to population size

Failure of past attempts to have koalas (in general) protected under national listing

"One possible reason that applications for national listing have been unsuccessful is that a number of koala populations in Victoria and South Australia have increased recently, and some scientists believe that declines elsewhere do not yet threaten the species overall . . . In terms of requirements for a robust decision-making process (Stratford et al.), this lack of attention to detail represents a serious lapse of standards which, when combined with uncertainty about contemporary population trends, must be addressed in future conservation assessments, legislation, and policies regarding koalas." (Phillips 2000 Population Trends and the Koala Conservation Debate AKF 2000).

"By applying standards to information and using caution in addressing disagreement and uncertainty about population trends a conservative conclusion that the category of highest risk applicable to the koala throughout most of its remaining range is that of vulnerable (in accordance with IUCN criteria) must be considered. Given the rate of habitat loss and fragmentation in eastern Australia and the time periods of contemporary population declines, a pessimistic forecaster might suggest that there is a real risk of koalas becoming endangered in the next 10-15 years. The next and most important steps are (1) to acknowledge the legitimacy of different opinions while critically assessing the assumptions and data on which they are based and (2) to accept and work with the uncertainty in a precautionary way as recommended by the IUCN"

(Phillips 2000 Population Trends and the Koala Conservation Debate AKF 2000).

Changing weather patterns

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) , Koalas are highly vulnerable to climate change and face starvation as CO2 levels increase, the nutritional quality of leaves declines.
The Koala has been included on the global list of 10 well-known species threatened by climate change.

Climate change may increase the incidence catastrophic events including droughts and wildfires which pose major threats to the Koala which is already struggling with habitat and corridor loss and an increase in disease incidents.

There is an urgent need to

- Conduct an independent field audit of post-bushfire Koala habitat and koala populations in the forested upper catchments of the Strzelecki Bioregion on both public and private land.

- We are not convinced that mapping work undertaken by the AKF accurately reflects the extant of Koala habitat in the upper reaches, which we have been actively documenting in the field for the last 20 years.

- We also believe that research funded by HVP will not enhance our knowledge relating to the genetic evolution of the Strzelecki Koala as this has already been established by Houlden Seymour and more recently Lee **refer to attachment 3**

- We also maintain that a rigorous scientifically validated method of estimating Koala numbers and breeding associations, has already been established by Steve Phillips 2008 and has been used in the field for over a decade by recognised koala ecologists who claim it displays consistent reliable results.