

KOALAS UNDER ATTACK AGAIN

Will destruction of their habitat ever end?

When will our forest managers begin to do the right thing, accept that their actions are driving the Koala to extinction, and take required protection measures seriously?

Only last week we posted a report of virtual clear-felling of identified high-use koala habitat at Clouds Creek State Forest south of Grafton in northern New South Wales (NSW)(see below).



The letter "K" on the single tree at left is the only tree marked for retention for Koalas

Then last weekend, 5th August, I joined a North East Forest Alliance (NEFA) team to audit a logging operation at Royal Camp State Forest south west of Casino. There we found that, not only were there koalas and high use areas present, but the foresters had apparently failed to even look for them, and are in the process of logging their habitat yet again.

The harvest plan for Royal Camp claims that ***“Evidence of Koalas was found in the compartments, but pre-logging surveys did not detect high use areas, Compartment mark-up 5.2.2 must be completed.*”**

Compartment Ca_15 is an intermediate use area. Ten primary browse trees must be retained per two hectares where available. These trees must be marked for retention, No AGS permitted in preferred forest types.”

Prescription 5.2.2 spells out the following procedure which has to be followed if a compartment contains preferred forest types, requiring that “marking-up” must be conducted at least 300 metres in advance of harvesting operations by an adequately trained person who must inspect trees at ten metres intervals.



These inspections must include thoroughly searching the ground for scats (faecal pellets) within at least one metre of the base of trees greater than 30 centimetres dbhob (diameter at breast height).

Further to that the relevant prescription spells out the triggers for a Koala Star Search, which then determines whether there are high use areas that require protection from logging.:

“A Koala Star search must be conducted when:

i. Three out of any ten consecutive trees inspected are found to have Koala scats beneath them; Or

ii. a sighting of Koala; OR

iv. a tree with more than 20 Koala scats beneath; OR

vi. any trees with Koala scats of two distinctly different sizes beneath.”

Within only a three hour survey, based on the methodology spelled out in Forests NSW's Threatened Species Licence, the audit team identified 3 high use areas, mostly in yet to be logged areas, but one within an area currently being logged. Scats in all cases were easily detected, but there had been no 'marking up' so it was clear the required prescription had not been carried out.

The failure to mark any browse trees for retention in the logged area indicates to us that no survey has taken place. At one point, we identified a high use tree (more than 20 scats collected) standing less than 5 metres from logged trees.

Because of the high degree of soil disturbance around the logged stumps, we made no attempt to count scats around them. However, we believe it is fair to assume that high use browse trees have been logged during the current operation.



In another area where logging had already occurred, we found that there had been a pre harvest burn which would have

conveniently destroyed all koala scats. Therefore we have asked the responsible Minister to mandate that no burning be undertaken within at least six months prior to logging.

In requesting the Environment Minister to step in and stop the logging, NEFA's media release made the point that:

"Forests NSW are prohibited from logging in Koala high use areas by their Threatened Species Licence.

Royal Camp is known to have a large Koala population, and Forests NSW are legally required to thoroughly search for Koala scats (faecal pellets) in advance of logging in order to identify and protect Koala high use areas.

We could see no evidence that Forests NSW had searched for scats. Given how easily we found them in the few areas we searched, we expect they have already logged some high use areas and that we have only identified a few of the areas they are about to log.

Unless stopped Forests NSW will continue logging this core Koala habitat today. The Ministers must act urgently".

For a species that is now listed nationally as threatened, these systemic failures are unacceptable.

We were recently asked by the Environmental Protection Agency, the body currently responsible for administering the IFOA, to provide input into the development of Koala protection measures for the Private Native Forestry Code of Practice.

The circulated Discussion Paper for the Code's review has highlighted the problems associated with definitions of Koala habitat.



Currently we have State planning laws describing “core” and “potential” habitat, while some management plans refer to “primary, secondary and tertiary” koala habitat. State Forests NSW on the other hand refer to high and intermediate use areas, all very confusing, and open to manipulation and misinterpretation by stakeholders wishing to exploit those forests.

Koala numbers across much of Australia are in free fall, loss of habitat being the major reason, with dog attack, vehicle strike, fire and disease also contributing. And yet it was only this year that the federal Environment Minister Tony Burke finally , in the face of fierce opposition from some quarters, listed the koala as a vulnerable species, but only across a part of the country.

Koalas are a massive tourist attraction, and as Deborah Tabart, president of the Australian Koala Foundation, explains *“they don’t eat anyone, don’t destroy any crops, and don’t do anything except sit in a tree and look magnificent”*.

So why is there so much opposition to their being protected? It's simply because, to protect the animals, their preferred feed trees have to be protected also, and those trees are also wanted by the timber industry, and grow on land that developers need to clear for construction projects.

The Paper makes the point that: ***“The Recovery plan for the koala identifies a range of current threats to koalas. The most critical of these are habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation. Other threats are dog attack, fire, logging, disease and being struck by cars.”***

We believe that identifying logging among “other threats”, gives an impression it is a relatively minor threat to Koalas, and the passage should, be rewritten to read:

“The most critical threat to koalas is logging. It destroys, fragments and degrades koala habitat, it removes forest canopy connectivity, forcing the animals to the ground in order to move from tree to tree, making them vulnerable to dog attack, attacks by cattle, and vehicle strike. Logging debris increases fuel loads that contribute to dangerous fires, another major threat to koalas, and it is well established that physical disturbance and habitat loss through logging causes stress that leads to deadly diseases such as chlamydia”.



Suffering from chlamydia, the result of stress caused by habitat disturbance, this sick and disorientated koala finds refuge on the veranda of a human residence,

We must recognise that koala habitat does not need to have high conservation values in terms of old-growth or hollow-bearing trees, or even high levels of biodiversity. In fact much of the remaining koala habitat occurs in highly degraded and modified landscapes. It also has to be recognised that many koala feed trees are targeted timber species.

Because of the dire circumstances in which koalas now find themselves, with numbers in serious decline, the mere existence of koalas in an area confirms that it is koala habitat. Whether it be good quality or poor, or simply a corridor of forested land that allows koalas to migrate safely across the landscape, it is all critical habitat for these threatened animals, and Koalas must be granted some degree of protection if they are to survive in the long term.



Koala suffering from chlamydia

Wherever Koalas occur the forest canopy connectivity must be retained and not broken or fragments. This would also provide greatly improved protection for other threatened species, not just Koalas, and have the additional benefits of reducing the ravages of Bell Miner Associated Dieback, will halt the rapid decline in carbon sequestration, reduce erosion and waterway pollution, and significantly increase biodiversity levels and ecoservices that are provided to us absolutely free by our forests.

We have asked the Minister to instruct her departmental heads to give serious consideration to all the matters we have raised, and act in the best interests of the forests, the Koalas, and all other fauna that depend on those healthy ecosystems to survive.

John Edwards
Honorary Secretary.