

The Hon. Mark Speakman SC MP,
52 Martin Place,
SYDNEY,
NSW 2000,
14th June 2016.

Re: Priorities for koala conservation in NSW

Dear Minister Speakman,

As you are aware the National Parks Association of NSW (NPA) takes a keen interest in koala conservation. We continue to campaign for the Great Koala National Park to protect Australia's favourite species from extinction in NSW.

For some time we have been asking for more extensive consultation to help inform the Office of Environment and Heritage's (OEH) forthcoming Saving Our Species (SOS) koala strategy. We have been informed by OEH that there will be no formal review of the 2008 Recovery Plan for the Koala that expired in 2013, and no consultation has been forthcoming. The effectiveness of recovery planning is contingent on honest appraisal of successes and failures, and this is also key to developing a sound SOS strategy—even though we understand that SOS is not a typical recovery plan.

Because OEH has declined to consult in advance of the development of the strategy, NPA has undertaken an appraisal of the 2008 Recovery Plan via a short online survey to determine the key shortcomings and steps necessary for meaningful koala conservation in the new strategy. We present the results to you here. Importantly, 73% of respondents said that koalas are at a critical stage and must be a top priority, while another 23% said urgent attention is required. This accords with recent research findings that extinction of koalas is a real possibility if conservation issues are not addressed¹. Minister, you must act now. We would like to meet with you at your convenience regarding steps that your government can take to better protect koalas.

Who took part in the survey?

We had 45 respondents in total. Of the 45, State and Local Government made up 23%; interested individuals 20%; NGOs 18%; koala carers 13%; academics 9%; consultants 7%; zoo industry 2%; land managers 1%; others 7%. Almost 75% of respondents were representing themselves as individuals, while 25% were responding for an organisation.

80% of respondents are currently or have recently been involved in koala conservation in NSW. 15% are involved on a daily basis, 50% monthly or more and 25% frequently or a few times over the past year. 70% were familiar with the 2008 Recovery Plan for the Koala, and 80% of the 21 who answered the question had been involved in implementing it.

The performance of the 2008 Recovery Plan for the Koala

Almost 50% of the 21 respondents described the 2008 Recovery Plan as good, with 38% describing it as average. However, almost 50% felt the plan had been only partially implemented and 43% hardly at all. Comments on elements that undermined implementation ranged in focus and included:

- A lack of funding undermining reasonable objectives;
- No cohesive national or regional strategy to guide disparate efforts;
- Inadequacy of SEPP 44;

¹McAlpine et. al. 2015. Conserving koalas: A review of the contrasting regional trends, outlooks and policy challenges. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2015.09.020>

- A lack of clear understanding of koalas and out-of-date knowledge;
- Downgrading of Private Native Forestry (PNF) as a threat;
- Lack of compliance enforcement in PNF and logging of state forests;
- Lack of consideration of impact of Routine Agricultural Management Activities;
- The change from recovery planning to a Priority Action Statement;
- Failure to acknowledge the importance of public forests and;
- Lack of clear steps for implementation.

Positive elements of the plan included:

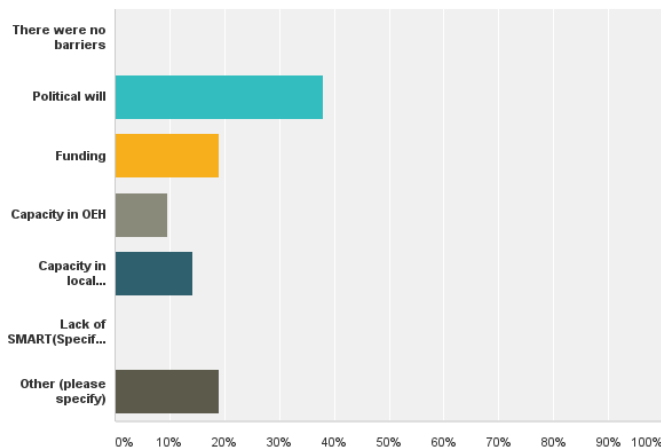
- Rolling out of Koala Plans of Management in Local Government Areas;
- The scientific approach taken;
- Accurate identification of threats, food trees and actions;
- Protection of vegetation and offsets via Part 5 assessments.

Barriers to implementing the 2008 Recovery Plan

The greatest single barrier to implementation was identified as political will (38%), closely followed by funding (20%) and capacity in local (15%) and state (10%) governments. One respondent identified the change from recovery planning to the SOS strategy. Consistent with the positive responses about the plan, a lack of SMART goals was not identified as a significant barrier.

Q13 What do you feel were the greatest barriers to implementation of the recovery plan?

Answered: 21 Skipped: 24



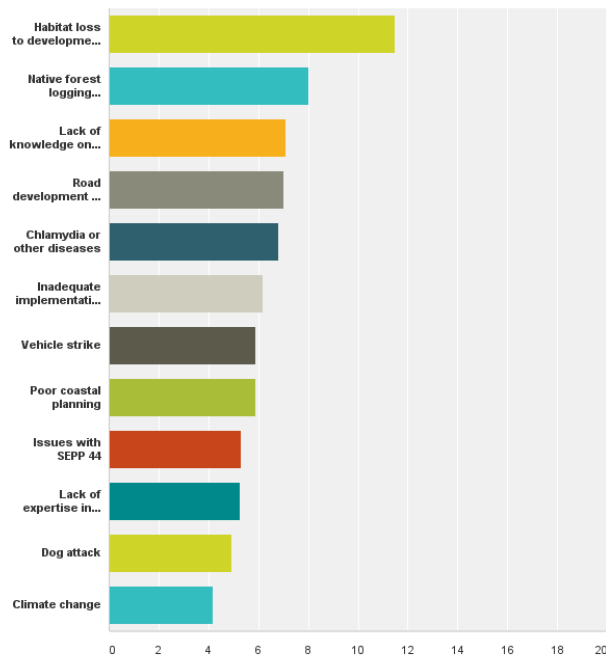
What are the most important issues facing koalas?

Habitat loss and fragmentation as a result of development was identified as the number one threat facing koalas, closely followed by native forest logging on public and private land. Lack of knowledge on population distributions and trends, road development and disease also scored highly with a range of other issues also being identified. Issues identified as important but not available as a response option were:

- Fire;
- Collaboration between stakeholders (government, academic, NGO);
- Funding restoration efforts;
- Changes to native vegetation and threatened species laws;
- Political will to prioritise the koala over development;
- Lack of enforcement of Koala Plans of Management;
- Cats.

Q14 What do you feel are the most urgent issues facing koalas in NSW? (Please list in order of importance, 1= most important)

Answered: 30 Skipped: 15



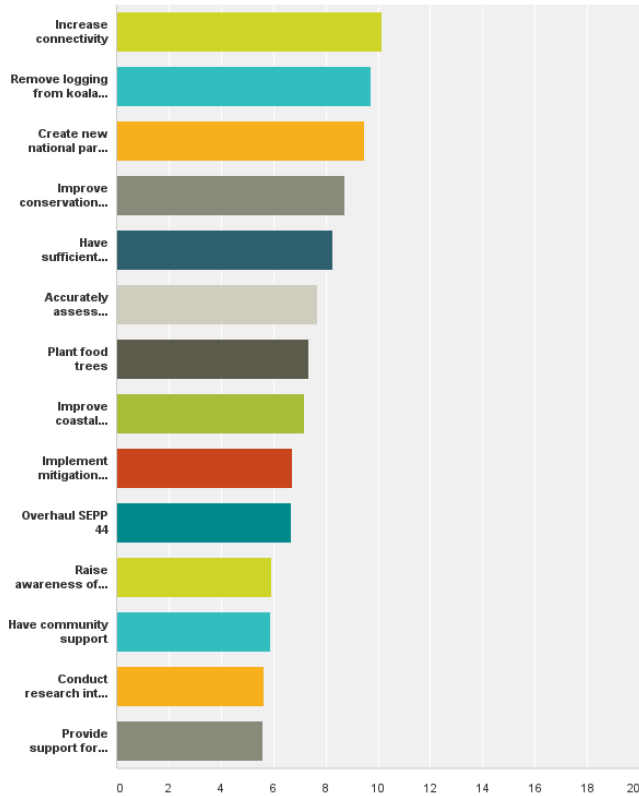
What are the most important elements of a new plan?

Enhancing connectivity was the most important action, followed by removing logging from koala habitat in state forests, the creation of new protected areas and improving outcomes from PNF. Notably, although third overall, the creation of new protected areas received almost 25% of first choices. Consistent with the previous section, accurately assessing population trends and distributions was important. Other actions identified as important but not available as a response included:

- Year-round requirements for fire permits;
- Collaboration between stakeholders;
- Prescribed burning to reduce the threat of wildfire;
- Accurate and defensible mapping;
- Independent identification of core koala habitat and its exclusion from logging;
- Enhanced consultation;
- Bans on dogs from areas adjacent to koala habitat and corridors;
- Clear direction to local government in regards development;
- Laws and incentives to stop clearing, replant and reconnect habitat;
- Reporting road kill;
- Resetting political priorities;

Q17 Please indicate what you feel are the most important elements of a new plan (please list in order of importance, 1 = most important)

Answered: 30 Skipped: 15



What populations are the priority?

There were a variety of responses to this question, perhaps reflecting the respondent’s familiarity with local areas. However, coastal populations were identified as the most important with one respondent suggesting that efforts begin by focusing around the largest protected population on the coast at Bongil Bongil National Park.

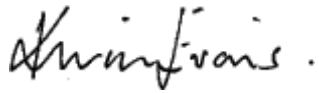
Conclusions

The key implication of this survey are that the NSW Government must act now to protect koala habitat and address threats if koalas are to be recovered. We urge you Minister to reconsider your government’s opposition to the Great Koala National Park, and to consider an emergency intervention fund to purchase high quality koala habitat on private land prioritising land adjacent to existing protected areas and with high connectivity. Some time ago we also raised the importance of your office dealing urgently with the alarming number of PNF licenses currently active in the north coast region (see below). A focus on acquiring high quality, well connected koala habitat would also help solve this problem.

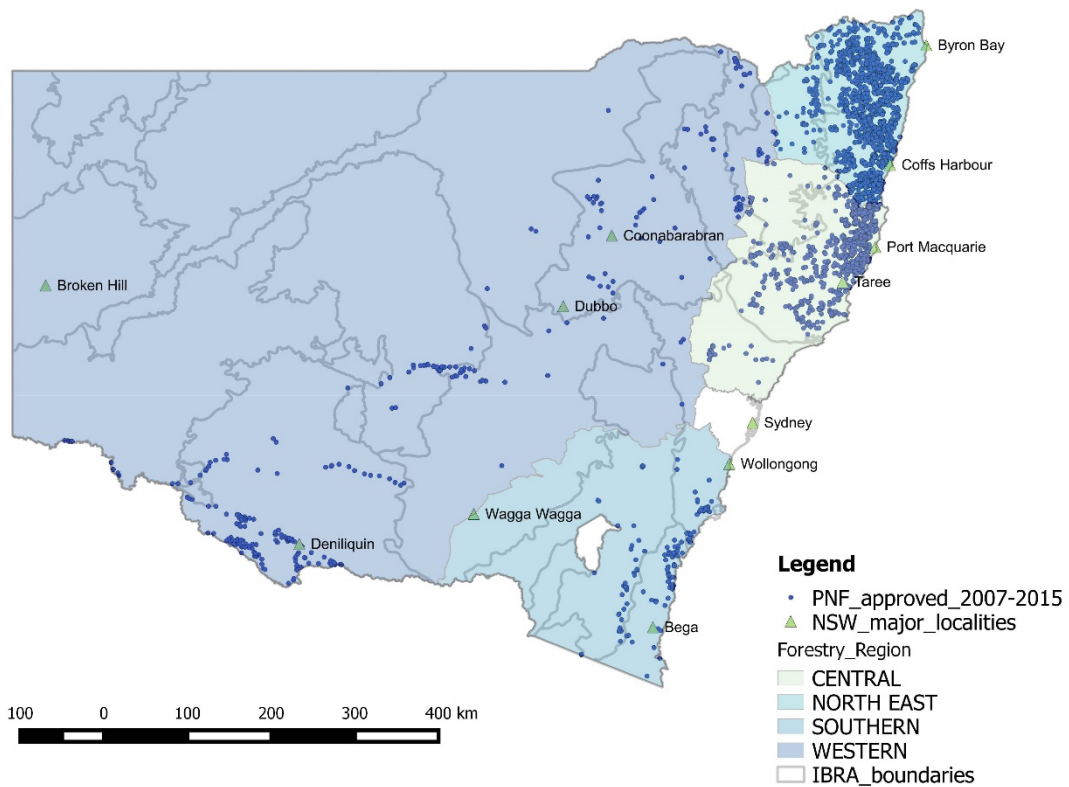
As a more general point, we urge you to change the way your government consults with the public and community groups. At present it is inverted, where the government makes plans or drafts bills and then consults. However at this advanced stage meaningful community input has limited chance of improving the government’s plan. Consulting prior to drafting would, in our view, result in better outcomes.

As always, we are willing to work with the government to help achieve good conservation outcomes. We hope to hear from you soon regarding a meeting to discuss koala conservation. Please note our postal address has changed to PO Box 312, Darlinghurst, NSW 1300.

Yours sincerely,



Kevin Evans, CEO



Private native forestry licenses approved between 2007 and 2015 in NSW. Source: NSW EPA.