



Koalas in the Bega Valley



There were once, 100 years ago, hundreds of thousands of koalas in the Bega Valley. They were so numerous that you could even see them in the trees along Bega's main street! Hunting for the fur trade, habitat loss through extensive clearing, and fire have all decimated that once vast population.

Now all we know for sure is that a tiny remnant clings on in Mumbulla State Forest, with a few scattered individuals possibly elsewhere. And this is what they are going to log and burn. Recent DECCW surveys have shown that this population is slowly recovering, and may now number up to 50 individuals. Studies of tree species preferred by Mumbulla koalas have shown that species diversity appears to be important for them.

Surprisingly, given this population's small size, DNA analysis by Sydney University has shown that Mumbulla koalas are genetically strong, and thus potentially able to increase their numbers without some of the inbreeding problems that have affected other disjunct koala populations.

Koalas need space. They need space to find the most nutrient rich leaves for their highly specialised diet; they need space so that young males, forced from their homes, can find new territories; they need space to handle our changing climate with more frequent and longer droughts; and they need space if their population is going to grow to a more viable size, capable of withstanding major events such as fire or disease.

It is this space that they are being denied. And for what? For the sake of a few months supply of sawlogs and woodchips. Once they have logged and burnt, we may have prolonged the inevitable decline of the local sawlog industry, but we will have lost our koalas for ever!

It is also no good just thinking that we can log carefully. The requirements of koalas are so poorly understood as to make it impossible to be certain which trees they are going to need, or in which direction they are going to need to move. Perhaps forestry believe that they can get away with just "not logging the trees with koalas in them"! And once the forest has been logged it will be burnt, which will nicely finish off any remaining koalas!

The koalas of the Far South Coast are an integral component of our natural heritage – a natural heritage which has endured for millenia – respected by the traditional Aboriginal custodians of the land – a heritage which has led to the designation of this area as Australia's Coastal Wilderness, with a campaign aimed at increasing tourism in the area and thus improving the local economy.

Yet again we face the dilemma of short-term economic gain versus long-term environmental degradation and the loss of opportunity to establish a truly sustainable local economy.

A Koala recovery programme in these coastal forests has the potential to become an internationally recognised species recovery project, since:

- They are an iconic species facing regional extinction, but for which there appears to be a reasonable chance of recovery with appropriate management actions;
- There is a significant role for indigenous people, both because they are custodians of the area (especially the adjacent Biamanga National Park), and because of potential training and employment opportunities that could arise through the recovery program;
- We now have a sound scientifically-based foundation giving us the capacity to monitor the conservation status of the population;
- There are a range of educational and research outreach opportunities involving tertiary institutions, schools and field studies centres;
- We can build a significant role for the local community; and,
- We can develop substantial opportunities for research-based tourism and thus grow the local economy in a sustainable manner.