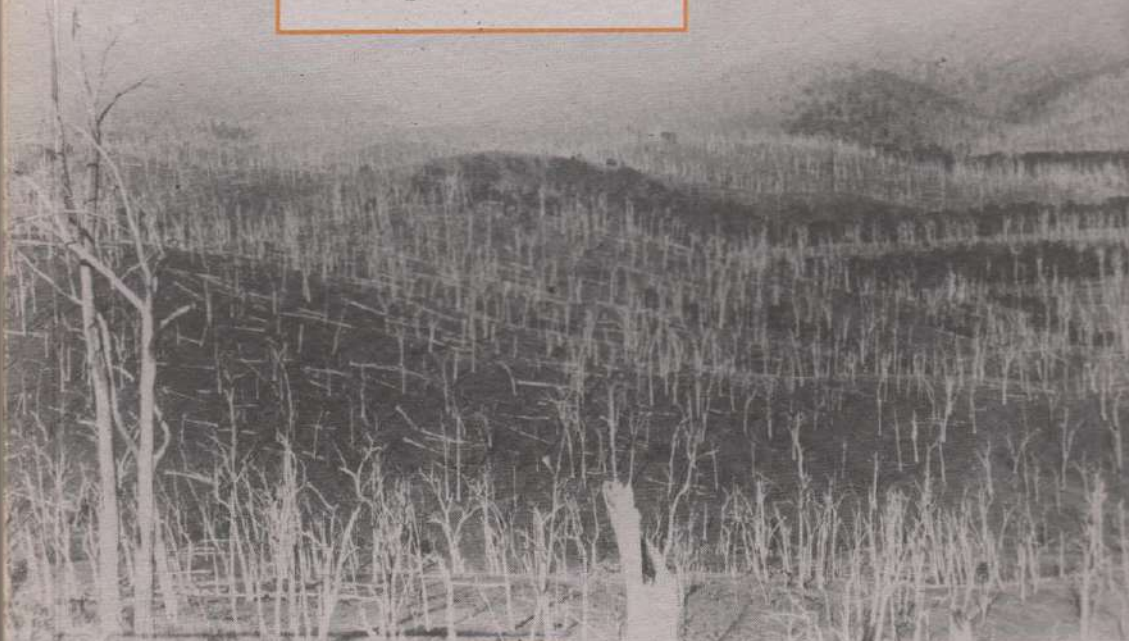




Koala Summit

MANAGING KOALAS IN NEW SOUTH WALES



Edited by Daniel Lunney, Chris Ann Urquhart & Philip Reed

NSW
NATIONAL
PARKS AND
WILDLIFE
SERVICE

39. Can you help us save the koalas at Wedderburn?

Sue Dobson

Campbelltown Committee to Save the Wedderburn Koala Colony, PO Box 1162, Campbelltown, NSW 2560

Introduction

It is a well known fact that our koalas are in a desperate plight, hence the Koala Summit. Sterility and blindness are well documented problems facing koalas, but a graver concern is destruction of their habitat. There has been a great deal of publicity about how disease is wiping out koalas. The truth is that if their habitat is not preserved, there will be no koalas to catch the disease. Disease is more prevalent in koalas where their habitat has been disturbed (Lester Pahl, pers. comm.)

Wedderburn is on the upper tract of the Georges River about 8 km east of Campbelltown and some 60 km south west of Sydney. Here there is a disease-free colony of koalas which is under great threat. Their habitat is threatened by a proposed housing development by Yap Yan Pin Pty Ltd. Road building, tree felling and construction work is in the early stages and then car traffic, and dogs will ruin this natural habitat and kill this disease-free colony of koalas.

Breeding koalas need a safe territory free of vehicular traffic and dogs. Naturally they also need large stands of their favourite *Eucalyptus* trees. Jean Starr from the Port Macquarie Koala Hospital reports that 45% of koalas handled there have been hit by traffic. Obviously, koalas, cars, dogs and land clearing do not mix.

What has the NSW Government done?

Tim Moore, the Minister for the Environment, sought media coverage when he symbolically nailed an Interim Protection Order on a tree to protect the koalas, while a full study could be done at this Wedderburn site. However, a few weeks later this same Minister lifted this protection order. This Minister has betrayed the koalas by his actions. Why did the Minister, or what caused the Minister, to change his mind? Surely the protection of koalas and their habitat is part of the portfolio for the Minister for the Environment. Will Tim Moore be remembered as the Environment Minister who nailed the death warrant for the Wedderburn koalas? It is clear that the NSW Government has given the koalas a low priority. By examining the 1988

NSW Government Appropriation Bill some interesting comparisons can be shown.

Koalas: a \$15,000 grant for a Koala Preservation Society.

But what of these amounts?

A Peace sculpture in Bi-centenary Park
\$ 56,000

Fire arms compensation
\$1,700,000

Tow Truck Industry Corporation
\$1,900,000

Darling Harbour Authority
\$74,000,000

Overseas visits to check Casino operations
\$69,000

How do our koalas rate against these?

How much does the Premier and the Ministers spend on overseas visits each year (Junkets if you like)? It is true that the Government organised this Summit but action more than words is required to save our koalas. So much koala habitat has already been destroyed in the name of progress for farmland, housing estates, industry or timber cutting. It is time to turn around and save a koala colony and its habitat. Disease-free colonies are now rare and this is to our shame.

The Wedderburn koala habitat and its cuddly occupants must be saved from the developers death blow. Money is needed to protect this and other endangered koala habitats, to set up more Nature Reserves and National Parks. Beyond this habitat problem is the need to find solutions for koala blindness and sterility. The conservation/ environmental movement, Governments and the community have a responsibility to ensure the survival of our koalas.

Can you help us save the koalas at Wedderburn?

That was certainly our experience in the trial translocation that we did. We released koalas into a mixed eucalypt forest, not manna gum forest, to see whether Victoria is going to have a problem with releasing koalas, because most of the manna gum forest in Victoria now has koalas. The Western Port islands are going to continue to generate a surplus of koalas. French Island, in particular, will generate a surplus of koalas for the foreseeable future.

We looked at some other types of forest to see how koalas would respond. Some did quite well. We let koalas go in what we thought was suitable habitat, but they did not like it at all. They dispersed 5 or 10 kilometres. Some lived in isolation, which may reflect the natural densities of koalas in the past. These were probably much lower than what we have come to expect. Those we released at Lysterfield were living at a very low density, except for one group in a gully with manna gum that we did not know about.

PIETERS (Queensland University): We have been talking about fragmentation of koala habitat. One solution is the provision of corridors. If local government is going to consider this solution, I would like to mention that it is more than just a matter of planting trees along certain areas. The corridors should also be maintained. Jean Starr's and Peter Smith's papers show that there are problems with corridors, especially when they are narrow and invaded by weeds. If we are going to use corridors, there should be people looking after them.

STARR (Port Macquarie): The koala corridors in Port Macquarie are in a rapidly developing area, and they certainly are not wide enough. They follow the streams which now have development on both sides. They have been bulldozed, extra soil has been pushed into the streams, and there has been an alteration to the water table. Phosphorous is getting into the water and we now have a large problem with corridors within the town. I think that if they were wider, and on higher ground, they would be much more successful. I certainly advocate them for farmland and such areas. I think they could be very successful, if well planned.

However, if councils are to have decent-sized corridors within developing areas, the state government must subsidise local government, allow them to zone 6B and help them to acquire the property.

DICKENS (Blacktown Council): In developing areas, councils could no doubt take corridors into account, and I am sure they will. We have problems with drainage, and have changed our ideas on the way drainage occurs. You can see that in new areas. Instead of pipes and concrete, we acquire large areas for drainage. It is quite possible that other councils are also acquiring drainage areas. These would be ideal for corridors without incurring any extra cost because part of the development by all councils is the acquisition of drainage easements. It is costing councils millions of dollars to acquire these easements. I think that councils who have koalas in their town would be wise to consider, in their planning and development stages, using these easements for corridors.

DOBSON (Save Wedderburn Koala Colony): Why is the Wedderburn koala colony issue being pushed back on our local council when it is a state and a national issue?

P. SMITH (Warringah SC): As you know, under our constitution land is under the control of the Crown. The Crown representatives in Australia are the states, and wildlife is considered part of the Crown. Therefore, the prime responsibility for the management of wildlife is the state government, not necessarily the federal government. Under the NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act (1979), councils have the major role in land use planning. So councils have to take some responsibility; they just cannot shirk it. We had that for a while in Warringah Shire, where the local Avalon Preservation Trust pushed hard for a long time to get council to agree that unless the state puts in a Regional Environment Plan (REP), or overrides council with State Environmental Planning Policies (SEPPs), land use planning is the local council's responsibility.

Campbelltown Council was stuck when they made their decision because they did not know that there were koalas there. Once they had made their decision, it was very difficult to rescind it without major compensation to the developer.

DOBSON: Why should the ratepayers of Campbelltown have to foot the bill for Wedderburn; they just cannot afford it. It is an utter disgrace what is going on in Wedderburn.

DIBLEY (National Parks Association, Macarthur Branch): The mayor of Campbelltown, Jim

Kremmer, was here yesterday. Campbelltown Council has a bipartisan approach and has put the ball back in the state government's hands with a Local Environmental Plan (LEP). Mr. David Hay, the Minister for Planning, has done nothing with it. Council has put it to the state government and the state government has not given an answer, why?

REED: I cannot say what Mr Hay is going to do with that LEP, but I can say that the National Parks and Wildlife Service has, no matter what has been reported in the press, attempted to do what it can, outside of purchasing the land. We have looked at the area. I have inspected it with members of your organisation. I have looked at the habitat in late 1986, early 1987 and in 1988 and I have seen only two koalas.

DIBLEY: No one knew of koalas then; we are told that koalas were not known then and nothing has been done.

REED: Maybe your information is incorrect. We know that people knew that koalas were in that area, but were not telling anybody. The National Parks and Wildlife Service acted within its powers to try and ensure that the prime koala habitat was protected. The Voluntary Conservation Agreement, which has not been given an opportunity to be tested, is now in place between the state government and the developer. It extends the council planning provisions and enforcement of that agreement will protect the prime koala habitat.

DIBLEY: For everyone's information here, the union movement has placed a green ban on the development. That is what the residents of Campbelltown and a lot of others think of that decision.

REED: There is always the possibility that there will be no development. That may save the koalas. However, the biggest problem then is how to manage the land because people now know that koalas are there.

DIBLEY: That is why I am here. What are you going to do?

REED: Well, the Service has negotiated a Voluntary Conservation Agreement over the area.

DIBLEY: We are not satisfied with it. What are you going to do?

REED: We now have to wait and find out what Mr Hay will do with the LEP.

DIBLEY: He will put it back to Mr Moore.

REED: No, it is Mr Hay's decision.

DIBLEY: Why has he not made it. It has been there for weeks.

REED: You will have to contact Mr Hay about that.

DIBLEY: It started off with Mr Moore. He put the Interim Protection Order on in June this year and revoked it in July.

REED: That was necessary because the Voluntary Conservation Agreement had been signed by the developer.

DIBLEY: Again, when we spoke to Mr Moore he told us that was because of legal action by the developer. So who is telling the truth? Your minister has told us one thing and you are telling us another. Who is telling the truth?

REED: No, the Voluntary Conservation Agreement was —

DIBLEY: Mr Moore said that was taken off because of the threat of legal action by an Indonesian based developer, Yip Yan Pin.

REED: I was involved with the meetings with council over the issue. I believe that I know what I am talking about. However, I was not sitting in on the meeting that you had with the minister, so all I am aware of is what occurred in the meetings that I went to. The National Parks and Wildlife Service have negotiated a Voluntary Conservation Agreement with the developer over that area. We believe that it will protect the koala.

DIBLEY: We do not believe it is going to protect the koalas there. What is going to be done? That is what I am here for.

REED: Council has now taken a step which is to —

DIBLEY: "Council has taken a step". It has gone back to the state government. What is going to be done?

REED: I think we shall have to leave it here, because, as I have said, Mr Hay has to make a decision. We have to wait for that decision. The Service is in the Environment ministry of Mr Tim Moore. Mr Hay has the Planning ministry, which is quite separate. When he makes a decision, then we can consider what the next step will be.

LUNNEY: Thank you. I think there is another comment from the panel.