

Koala Crunch Time: Logging of Koala Habitat in Compartment 2069, Bermagui State Forest

.....(these) koalas are probably the most critical population in Australia in the sense that they may represent one of only two reservoirs, very small ones, of what is the native genotype of all of the Victorian and South Australian animals left. Dr Alistair Mezler, Uni of Central Queensland, evidence to Senate Inquiry, May 2011.

Forests NSW is proposing to log Compartment 2069 in the Bermagui State Forest. This is halfway between two areas where recent surveys have confirmed that koala activity continues (Mumbulla SF and Kooraban NP). These areas are 8 kilometres apart. With the exception of this compartment, the country between them is largely fragmented and degraded habitat. Koalas have disappeared from much of this intervening area over the past 30 years.

The corridor provides the only forested link between the koala areas shown on the map, as well as providing a critical corridor between Biamanga and Gulaga National Parks. The Traditional Owners of these Aboriginal-managed national parks strongly support the addition of these public forest lands to the national parks as they form part of the same unique cultural landscape.

This compartment directly adjoins Gulaga National Park and its watercourses drain directly into the Bateman's Marine Park. It is identified as an important corridor for habitat conservation and rehabilitation by the Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority. The Authority and associated landcare groups have invested tens of thousands of dollars into habitat rehabilitation (including koala habitat rehabilitation) initiatives in this area.

This compartment has a high diversity of koala feed-tree species in largely mature forest; as such it is good quality koala habitat, possibly the best remaining in this coastal forest corridor. Koalas are still breeding in the Mumbulla and Kooraban forests, but numbers are critically low. Any reasonable approach to koala conservation would protect the surviving habitat between these areas to improve the chances of younger dispersing koalas connecting with identified resident populations and maximising viability of both populations.

Degrading the habitat of this compartment by intensively logging it is totally indefensible.

Forestry have undertaken pre-logging surveys in this compartment using the now discredited RFA methods and found no evidence of koalas. The Office of Environment and Heritage (formerly DECCW) will probably insist that more credible surveys are also undertaken. But given the disappearance of koalas from much of the Bermagui area it is unlikely that current evidence of koalas will be found using this survey method either.

Whether or not koalas are still occupying this area, the case for the protection of koala habitat in this compartment (unlike the spotted gum-dominated country to the east) is very strong. Given the strength of this case, if forestry cannot be stopped in this area then at least all other unoccupied areas of koala habitat nominally available for logging under the RFA in these coastal forests will become vulnerable.

Forests NSW and OEH will know that what happens in this compartment is critical to any long-term solution to the 'koala problem'. After years of procrastination seeking agreement on a 'koala management strategy', they may well now move quickly to an overall 'agreed solution' to the issue of koalas and logging in coastal forests on the Far South Coast.

Clearly, the NSW Government will want an outcome that does not trigger any compensation claims from the logging industry for loss of timber resource but, within that parameter, maximises koala habitat conservation outcomes. So, at the moment, the outcome may well be a mix of protected islands of koala activity outside of which logging of varying intensities will be permitted. This is a totally unacceptable ‘compromise’ as it will preclude any expansion of koala numbers and territory, and thus dramatically impact upon overall viability of the koala population.

This is koala crunch-time. Persuasive and creative pressure from the broader community needs to be applied to both state and commonwealth governments to encourage an outcome that is viable in the long-term for this *most critical koala population in Australia*.

Please do what you can to persuade the decision-makers to put the interests of these koalas first. And please pass this on to anyone who may listen and act.