

Hi

Even though it is a reasonable reaction to be very cynical about the latest koala protection strategy, (and wondering what impact the other ones actually had), I do actually care about koalas and because this new investigation has stated that you are actually looking for a diverse range of views on how to better manage koalas, I have decided to contribute, knowing that the likelihood of this time and effort may end up part filling up a once empty beer box. While on that subject, it is a well-known practice for politicians to enrol environmental science and the community to analyse issues such as finding out how we can “protect” koalas. This is a low cost solution and fills a void to alleviate community concern at the time. And then you have other politicians, in an attempt to boost their position in the state, declaring as a major election issue, that they will create 1 massive koala park on the North Coast and with very little science to back it up and definitely not actually considering whether the effects of that promise would benefit koalas. Koalas have to be the most politically maligned animal in Australia. Universally revered as “iconic”, there has actually been very little will to fix the issues that cause it to struggle in some areas. Let’s look at some of those:

In the South-East, where I live, there was an actual thriving koala population around the Bega valley and their prime habitat was Red Gum forests on rich alluvial soils. In the 1800’s that came to an end as agriculture and clearing moved in and those koalas that survived the shooting and trapping to the fur trade, escaped to a second-class habitat in the hills, where they still exist today in very limited numbers and there are concerns about their health, including Chlamydia and lack of genetic diversity. Any time in the last 150 years, the connection could have been made that to get that population back firing, we had to return them to prime habitat by buying back river soils on flood plains and re-establishing red gum forests and then either let the koalas travel to those new forests on their own steam, or just physically relocate them. But instead of that obvious solution, the whole emphasis of the political system has been, that in order to save the koala, you must stop logging. Koalas have been in Australia apparently for millions of years; aboriginals, only say 40,000. We are handing over vast tracts of land for indigenous ownership, because they deserve it, yet the Government hasn’t got the desire to buy a thousand Hectares of river flat, to give koalas a healthy home. And the Greens don’t want this option necessarily, because their first priority is to get rid of logging and they need the poor, struggling koala out amongst the logs.

Of course, the above proposed strategy has been already proven to work on many occasions. Take the ABP Blue Gum plantations in South-West Victoria, where they took over cleared farm land with no resident koala population and planted trees, commencing in 2000. There were some small koala numbers in remnant native bushland in the district and by 2013, they had invaded the plantations and populated to such an extent that ABP were having great difficulty in carrying out harvest operations without injuring koalas. In fact their operations were suspended until they resolved how to safely manage koalas.

Just for the record, in recent times, I am only aware of 2 koala sightings in the newly created Murrah Flora Reserve. One was a photographed koala, residing in a Woollybut tree, that was a coppiced stem that had grown off a stump left from harvesting operations, thought to have been carried out around 1979/80. The other sighting was apparently a koala sitting in a Stringybark, that had significant Epicormic growth, which has been thought to have been created by a previous drought period. It is my developing opinion that koalas seek out dynamic changes and fresh alterations to the forest, because that may be where the best food is with the least build-up of toxins.

To my mind, a large proportion of NP is preserved for obvious reasons, because it has some wonderful treasures in its midst. Some NP, at the other end of the scale are rarely visited, sterile and just patiently sitting there, building fuel loads and waiting for its destiny appointment with a firestorm. I don't see these places as ideal for koalas and not the habitat they are seeking generally, as well as being a potential health risk, in regard to fire. NP have a restrictive, fuel reduction policy, as well as a lack of adequate funding for pests and vermin. Also there is little money spent on scientific research of whether they actually work and create growing populations of flora and fauna. Do they have koala colony's or have they escaped out of the virtual cemetery into some logging regrowth or fuel reduction burn? Of course, very few in Sydney want to know the answers to these questions. It is interesting that koalas came out of the 40,000 years of firestick technology, employed by the aboriginals, as a thriving population. Already in Eden, we are replacing dwindling colonies of endangered species trying to survive in NP, with the same species, repatriated off State Forest, that has had significant harvesting events occur. It may not be politically correct, but there is growing evidence that working forests, managed sustainably, are far more ecologically diverse and thriving, than the staid old NP. Of course promoting this sort of ideology, if you are in some way employed by the government, cannot be tolerated, because it instantly means that if government accepts that it is possible, they will catastrophically fail at the next election.

Some further points:

- Fire has to be the biggest killer and greatest threat to the survival of koalas, yet Government has a virtual policy of waiting for bush-fires to run and then react. Fuel reduction is almost non-existent outside of communities and infrastructure.
- Creating NP does not prevent feral dogs and disease, nor from fire, so how do NP "protect" koalas?
- The failure of Governments to put adequate resources behind finding a vaccine for Chlamydia, irrespective of trying to ensure their survival, should be done immediately, purely on humane grounds.

I think it's about time we got serious, find out the truth and be fearless in promoting it.

Regards, Allan Richards