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Submission to the NSW Koala Strategy 2017.

Background:

Very little data exists on koala populations, presence and distribution across the New England and Tablelands Region. There have been some plantings undertaken to connect patches of remnant vegetation by landholders, Landcare and associated groups. The NT LLS commissioned a Koala Recovery Strategy assessment in 2015/16 which led to the on ground Cool Climate Koala Project of 2016/17. Field surveys have been undertaken across the Tablelands and the data is currently being compiled.

Current status:

After a lengthy dry period across the Tablelands, which was broken by excellent winter and spring rain in 2016, reports from landholders, and other stakeholders indicate that the population may have declined during this period. We have identified areas which have strong localised koala populations. These are under various degrees of environmental pressure. The area that exhibits the most critical status is in and around Croppa Creek. I know this isn't part of the Tablelands but at this stage we have no data to determine if there is any easterly migration of animals to the central and northern part of the Tablelands. A local farmer and carer, in early February, expressed concerns about the ongoing and creeping clearing of understorey and small remnant patches of koala and associated native wildlife habitat in the area.

Knowledge status:

Considerable research has been undertaken in the Gunnedah Basin, (*Lunney, Lemon et.al*), and that project and continuing research indicates that since 2007/8 the population has declined by **probably 60% and possibly as high as 75%**. Research currently being undertaken has shown that the incidence of chlamydia present in that population ranges from 55 – 67%, depending on the time of sampling and corresponding climatic conditions. This may mean that the Gunnedah Basin population could be at a tipping point of terminal decline. At this point in time, a possible triage situation is developing. These observations may appear alarmist but are well informed both from a personal and a research perspective. As a former farmer at Emerald Hill I saw the koala population grow significantly from the mid-1980's to where it is now. Prior to 2007/8 I would observe between 8-12 koalas a week during my daily three kilometre morning walk around the habitat reconstruction sites at Gunnedah Research Centre. In the last six months at GRC I have sighted one koala. A critical situation.

Recommendations:

What can be done for the Gunnedah Basin population?

- OEH and the Save Our Species has made a start with watering stations in this area with collaboration from the NW LLS, landholders, stakeholders and Landcare groups.
- The concerns at Croppa Creek are a separate issue and increasing connectivity and habitat is of crucial importance. Increased habitat and improved connectivity is the key to address concerns in this area.

What do we need to consider for the New England region?

- The situation in the Tablelands is extremely important to the future of koalas. Collaboration between myself and the Australian Museum to determine DNA linkages between the plains, slopes and tableland is a work in progress.
- The NT LLS Cool Climate Koala project to flesh out the distribution, absence or presence of koala populations is nearing completion. This will assist with input to the NSW Koala Strategy.
- The data vacuum in the New England is significant. A collaborative research project between the UNE, research students, DPI, NT LLS, landholders, stakeholders, Landcare groups and specialised ecologists is an obvious recommendation. A project similar to that undertaken by OEH, the University of Sydney and Liverpool Plains Land Management in Gunnedah would be a major step forward. The capture of koalas in hotspots and fitting them with VHF/GPS tracking collars is the only way we can ascertain what is happen in the New England. The health status of populations, their home ranges, trans-landscape movements, tree species preference for food and shelter and so much more could be derived from this proposed research. People in these hotspots are very protective of "their" koalas and the trust and engagement established by consultants employed by the NT LLS would be essential.

I have spoken with our state and federal members and attach letters of support for my proposals. As we know, the koala is a much loved and iconic animal. We need to do all in our power to ensure that we are in a position to make informed and science based decisions for their future well-being. From more than 25 years of on ground establishment and monitoring of habitat I know that the lead time for useful habitat is around ten years in the Gunnedah Basin and longer in the New England due to the severity of the climate. We need to act as soon as possible.

John Lemon (Director)