

MURRAH FLORA RESERVES PROTECT KOALAS, BUT AT WHAT COST?

Published in National Parks Association Winter edition of Nature NSW, 2016

“When we moved to Murrah State Forest over 30 years ago we were besieged by wildlife. The abundance was just amazing. Nothing we planted survived the possums, wallabies, and parrots. The bandicoots dug things up and the wombats caved in the best of fences. We kept bees, and several kinds of sugar gliders came in groups at the first sniff of honey, the bush rats, mice and bats moved in.

We could not leave the windows open in summer because of possums at night and goannas by day. The bird life was abundant, and hugely varied. The bush just hummed with life. The river had a stony bottom, lush aquatic plant life, and deep pools with small fish, eels, redfin, bass, and the native cray, the marron.

After decades of logging for woodchips, Murrah State Forest became silent; koalas, wildlife, flocks of parrots, potoroo, Christmas beetles and cicadas disappeared, owls and gliders were rarely heard, the rivers silted up with sand, and the diversity of the forest’s tree species was reduced to silver top ash and highly volatile forest casuarinas.”¹

Between July 2012 and June 2015 a huge community-based endeavour saw survey teams of contractors, volunteers, Aboriginal Land Council and agency staff, search for koala pellets under more than 30,000 trees at more than 1,000 grid-sites across the 30,000 ha Bermagui to Murrah study area. The results were encouraging, with a population estimated of 30–60 animals², up from the 23–47 estimated from a similar survey undertaken between 2007 and 2009³. Given the scattered nature of the koala activity, the risk of intensive logging impacting on what was clearly still a small and vulnerable population, was clear to all.

On 1 March 2016, the Minister gave Bermagui south of the Bermagui River, Mumbulla, Tanja and Murrah State Forests a reprieve. They became protected and known as the Murrah Flora Reserves⁴. This act makes an important contribution to the viability of the remnant population of koalas and hollow-dependent species left in these forests. “Let’s be clear about this”, said David Shoebridge MLA⁵, “this is a real win for nature and this crucial koala habitat in the South East Forests, and it has only come about because of the long term activism of forest protectors”.

Sustained community blockades and protests occurred in Mumbulla Forest and Bega during logging in 2010. Aboriginal elders led community marches into the prohibited logging zone and people were arrested. After almost two months the logging was abandoned after it was found to be illegal. The logging contractor was compensated \$18,000 for not being able to finish the operation. The Aboriginal community received nothing for damage to their heritage.

Creation of the 11,800 ha Reserves to protect these koalas confirms what the sector has been hesitant to admit; that logging degrades koala and other wildlife habitat. It also proves that, the Government has the power to stop loss-making, habitat-destroying, climate-insensitive logging for woodchips, the Government has heeded empirical evidence, and has responded to conservationists’ steadfast claims that woodchipping degrades the environment.

The Aboriginal neighbours, who own the adjoining Biamanga National Park and co-manage it with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), were initially side-lined as creation of the Reserves was not made from culturally sensitive considerations. However, the Environment Minister invited the Biamanga Board to manage the Reserves with the NPWS and assured their perpetual protection.

It is said that ‘greenies are never happy’ and why should they be? Over 400,000 ha of State Forests in southeast NSW are still at risk of being logged for woodchips. There was no commercial sacrifice. To compensate for the 11,800 ha rendered unavailable for logging, the State Government granted Forestry Corp. \$2.5 million from the Environmental Trust Fund (ETF) to permit logging further up the

coast until the endpoint of the subsidy in 2019⁶. National Parks Association Far South Coast branch (NPA FSC) President, Dave Gallan, said: "...there is something perverse about using Environmental Trust money to subsidise fuel for log trucks".⁷

It is also quite perverse that the ETF's \$2.5 million dollars was earned from commercial and suburban polluters in the Sydney Basin for rubbish tip charges to be paid to the logging sector to help it meet a woodchip quota which was not reduced to compensate for not logging the protected Reserves. Knowing that logging pollutes and creates a carbon deficit, simply put: the big city polluters fund their country forest collaborators.

Compartments north of the Bermagui River were excluded from the Reserves. One provides a koala corridor between Biamanga and Gulaga National Parks. It was partially logged in 2012 and, despite a Ranger having recently seen a koala near there; this compartment could now be hit hard.

So, what incentives would persuade the State Government to protect all our native forests? The Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) for the southern forests expire in 2019 and 2021. Climate change threats and competing overseas eucalypt plantations were not significant factors when the RFAs were written. The Australia Institute⁸ determined that native forest logging by Forestry Corp. generated losses of \$79 million over the last seven years. Obviously, it would be economically and environmentally efficient to stop logging State Forests.

The Great Southern Forest (GSF)⁹ campaign of the NPA FSC branch is based on the premise that the Government could protect all our ancient forests in perpetuity by using carbon credits, worth about \$19.5 million pa¹⁰, from the carbon-dense State Forests via an Emissions Reduction Fund. This benefit could be used to create, or boost, jobs in climate-sensitive industries such as plantations, forest restoration, wildlife protection, pest and weed eradication, fire preparedness, and eco and nature-based tourism.

The logged forests of the southern region may never return to their halcyon days of even 30 years ago. Today, government has a moral imperative to base management decisions on protecting, connecting, and beginning to restore these degraded forests. Creation of the Murrah Flora Reserves is a welcome beginning, but the survival of all native forest-dwelling species is tenuous in light of the unknown occurrence of wildfire and the impact of climate change. Insuring our native forests against any detrimental contingency can only be achieved by stopping logging all native State Forests forever.

Dr Bronte Somerset. NPA FSC Branch. 18 April 2016

¹ Suzanne Foulkes, Murrah, NSW.

² Allen, C. D., Pietsch, R. & Saxon, M. (2016) Corridors and Core Habitat for Koalas. Report on surveys conducted in 2012-2014 for Koalas on coastal forests in the Bermagui/Mumbulla areas of South eastern NSW. OEH.

³ Allen C. D., Saxon, M. & McDougal, K. (2010). Koala surveys in the coastal forests of the Bermagui-Mumbulla area: 2007-2009. An interim report. NSW. OEH.

⁴ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-01/reserves-save-koalas-soth-east-nsw/7211410> (sic)

⁵ <http://greens.org.au/news/nsw/crucial-south-east-forests-protected-after-years-campaigning>

⁶ 0853, Primary Industries, Flora Reserves in Bermagui, Murrah, Mumbulla & Tanja State Forests. Questions on Notice, Mr Shoebridge to the Minister for Primary Industries, and Minister for Lands & Water.

⁷ http://www.serca.org.au/media-releases/2016/Gallan_Taysom.pdf

⁸ The Australia Institute. The financial and economic losses of native forestry in NSW. *Money doesn't grow on trees*. Discussion paper. Roderick Campbell & Richard McKeon. March 2016. <http://www.tai.org.au/content/money-doesnt-grow-trees>

⁹ <http://www.greatsouthernforest.org.au>

¹⁰ Perkins, F., Macintosh, A. (2012) *Logging or carbon credits. Comparing the financial returns from forest-based activities in NSW's Southern Forestry Region*. The Australian Institute. Technical Brief No. 23, June 2013, ISSN 1836-9014