



**ROYAL ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY
OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Ms Cate Faehrmann MLC,
Committee Chair
Inquiry into koala populations and habitat in New South Wales

Dear Ms Faehrmann

The Royal Zoological Society of NSW, founded in 1879, has the twin aims of understanding the Australian fauna and assisting in its conservation. The Society has published the scientific journal *Australian Zoologist* since 1914 to ensure that sound science is published and thus available to both scientists and managers.

In relation to the koala in NSW in 2019, and in particular to the Upper House inquiry into koala populations and habitat in New South Wales, the Society makes the following points:

1. Research is the underpinning of any effective management program. Without it, programs can neither be sure that they are targeting the right issues, nor evaluating the success or otherwise of the actions.
2. Research with koalas, as with almost all wildlife programs, is an iterative process of learning, planning, management, evaluation and revision.
3. There are now many voices urging attention to what is seen as the plight of the koala. As a scientific society, our concern is that some of the voices project a viewpoint that is too narrow to be applied as a useful management program and we are concerned where loud oratory replaces sound science. An example includes using the koala as a symbol for the loss of forests. Another example is the casual reflection of a problem, such as dead koalas on a road, with the unjustified conclusion that roads are the main problem causing koala population decline. Most of the issues facing koalas, as with so many species, are complex, with multiple threats being at the root cause of change. So, simplifying a problem as one cause can be most misleading.
4. Ecologists look at the range of the species, and common sense argues that NSW should consider what is happening in Victoria and South Australia (where the koala is not listed by the Commonwealth as a threatened species) and Queensland (where the koala is listed as threatened as vulnerable by the Commonwealth).



5. The focus on the koala has the danger of not paying attention to other species in equal or greater need than the koala. For example, clearing of native vegetation has accelerated in NSW since legislative changes in 2016. A recent report of the NSW Auditor-General concluded that "The clearing of native vegetation on rural land is not effectively regulated and managed because the processes in place to support the regulatory framework are weak. There is no evidence-based assurance that clearing of native vegetation is being carried out in accordance with approvals. Responses to incidents of unlawful clearing are slow, with few tangible outcomes. Enforcement action is rarely taken against landholders who unlawfully clear native vegetation."
(https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf-downloads/Final%20report_Managing%20native%20vegetation_WEB%20version.pdf). This shameful situation is likely to result in many tree-dependent species being threatened, not just the koala.
6. Many groups use the koala as a rallying call to engage the public on a broad range of environmental issues. This focus on one species, without comprehending the underlying ecology, not only does a disservice to the koala, but also to the broad range of species that require our attention.
7. The Society notes that the inquiry into the koala does not want reports or other documents, such as publications. This creates a problem. All the best science is in publication, peer reviewed and widely accessible. However, if these do not become part of the inquiry, then the danger is that the spoken opinions, with or without evidence, will carry the day and the inquiry will reflect oratory, not science. The RZS NSW urges the committee to recognise the foundational role of scientific research and to incorporate its findings into the final report.

Finally, the Royal Zoological Society of NSW would very much welcome the opportunity to meet with your Committee and to address scientific questions relating to your inquiry into koala populations and habitat in New South Wales.

Dr Pat Hutchings FRZS
President of RZS