

A WIN-WIN-WIN: HOW ABORIGINAL PEOPLE, KOALAS AND ALL OF AUSTRALIA BENEFIT FROM GREATER GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT IN INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL EXPERTISE

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ABSTRACT

Following the most recent 2019-20 Australian bushfires, the koala is under peril. The ecological knowledge and expertise of Aboriginal people, currently largely underutilised, is imperative for their survival. This paper presents the authors' response to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Amendment (Save the Koala) Bill 2021 under consideration by the Australian Senate. His response supports the intention of the Bill to prohibit the Minister from approving activity that would lead to the further destruction of koala habitat. He argues that in all aspects of protecting Australia's natural environment, the traditional knowledge and practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ecological experts, community representatives and organisations, particularly Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs), must be drawn upon. Genuine partnership between Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments and these Indigenous experts, community representatives and organisations is essential for improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Saving the koalas in the best interest of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are the nation's traditional custodians, all Australians and, of course, koalas themselves.

Key Words: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ecological knowledge and expertise; koala; the Australian Government; Partnership Agreement; Closing the Gap.

1. INTRODUCTION

The need to invest in Indigenous Australian ecological expertise

The numbers of koalas, and various other Australian native fauna, have been in sharp decline mainly due to deforestation and forest degradation. The NSW koala population has declined by at least 28.52% and as high as 65.95% over the three most recent koala generations, inclusive of the impacts of the severe bushfires in the Summer of 2019-20 (Lane, Wallis, and Phillips, 2020). Prior to these catastrophic fires that were in large part due to drought and deforestation preceding their onslaught, koalas were projected by Blanch and Taylor (2019) to be on track to becoming extinct in the wild across most or all regions in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory by 2050. Largely due to the failure of Federal, State and Territory Governments to pass strong laws to protect koala habitats, at least 885,596 hectares of forests and woodlands known or likely to be koala habitat were bulldozed between 2000 and 2016. Following the 2019-20 bushfires, the estimated median reduction in the native occupancy rate of koalas was 71% compared to pre-fire occupancy levels (Phillips, Wallis and Lane, 2021).

The situation requires urgent attention, and the need to draw upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ecological knowledge and expertise is critical. Prior to 1788 and through to today, Aboriginal people have been deeply engaged in conservation of koalas and their habitat, including in Queensland, NSW and ACT where koala populations are now incredibly vulnerable. But while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are committed to the protection and sustainable management of Country, their knowledge and expertise remain largely underutilised. The impact of the 2019-20 bushfire crisis on the land, and the ongoing decline of the nation's flora and fauna, is particularly devastating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and will have an enduring impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of affected communities. Government investment in engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their knowledge and expertise fulfils Article 24 of the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007):

Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals. Indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services.

Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments should support the endeavours of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities in maintaining and developing their cultural practices, as per Article 31 (UNDRIP, 2007):

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

It is imperative to better draw upon the traditional ecological knowledge and expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Investment in Australia's First People is integral to investing in the environmental health of the nation. Such investment must extend to bolstering educational, training, employment and business opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote communities, in order that they may better participate in nature conservation practices aimed at protecting and increasing koala populations and other native Australian animals. With Federal, State, Territory and Local Government fiscal support, extending education and training opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in ecological services, including on Country, would also bolster outcomes.

An area of employment particularly ripe for expansion, pending further investment, is that of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rangers, who draw upon traditional skills and connection and knowledge of Country to protect and maintain local flora and fauna, as well as build and maintain the health and wellbeing of their communities (Preece, 2019). More than 700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed as Rangers around Australia, but there

is room, and need, for significantly more (Country Needs People, 2019). In early 2020, the Federal Government committed \$102 million over seven years from 2021 to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rangers, who play a critical role in protecting Australia's network of national parks and reserves (Allam, 2020). Creating a national land management program would further create jobs at the local level, ensure knowledge is passed on, improve land management practices, and ensure strong partnerships with landowners and environmental interests, and bolster the ongoing, effective maintenance and management of Australia's flora and fauna, and land in general.

Federal, State and Territory Governments must make a greater investment in consulting and employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Rangers, environmental officers and in a wide range of other environmental and ecological services, in order that they may have a much more central role in policy development and program implementation and evaluation. By investing in more Ranger and other jobs in ecological services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, not only will employment opportunities be optimised, but so too will ecological outcomes, including for the nation's koala populations under peril. A greater investment in clean energy, energy efficiency technology, waste management and recycling and other environmentally friendly industries will also contribute substantially to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the rest of Australia doing a better job in looking after the nation's koala populations, the country and the planet. At present a very low number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed in these industries. By Increasing Federal, State and Territory Government funding for ACCOs, a greater range of clean energy, waste management and recycling services to be delivered and more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas to be employed, Australia's native fauna and flora will be protected and multiplied.

Another integral aspect of investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their traditional ecological knowledge and expertise, toward achieving better outcomes for koalas and other native flora and fauna, is increasing the diversification of government investment in local economies in rural and remote communities. There is currently extensive fragility in rural and remote communities due to high costs in transporting goods, a lack of internet connectivity, challenges in recruiting and retaining staff and rampant racial prejudice and discrimination, including in systems of education, employment, business and government (Heaton, 2019). This fragility has a large impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities, and on surrounding fauna and flora. Environmental setbacks include a lack of access to land and water for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.. Outcomes have been and continue to be compounded by the impact of climate change.

Opportunities to broaden Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's engagement and business enterprises on Country, and to better protect Country and its flora and fauna, are optimised through increased support from Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments. In consultation and negotiation with ACCOs, the service delivery of each ACCO needs to be broadened, with additional, appropriate funding attached, so that they may better deliver ecological and environmental health services, delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rangers, Environmental Health Workers and other workers delivering ecological services.

ACCOs are government by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people voted in by local Indigenous communities, and are best placed to make decisions in the best interest of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, including environmental protection interest. ACCOs provided immediate support to communities affected by the bushfire crisis without the benefit of additional funding, resources, staffing or surge capacity, but this is not acceptable and should not be repeated.

It is also imperative to strengthen Federal, State and Territory Government laws, in order that Australia may see the rampant deforestation and destruction of the habitat of koalas and many other wildlife species slowed, and even halted, and perhaps even reversed. A predominant issue is the shortage of primary koala feed trees, which are essential for koala movement and survival. Federal, State and Territory Governments must invest in the regrowth of tens of thousands of primary koala feed trees to optimise the chance of protecting and building the nations' koala population. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental and ecological experts, community representatives and ACCOs must be central in the strengthening of laws pertaining to the protection and regrowth of koala habitats.

2. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensuring the protection and repopulation of Australia' koalas, and other native flora and fauna, is a highly important issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and can be best achieved by drawing upon their traditional knowledge and expertise. Genuine and ongoing partnership between Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts, community representatives and organisations is essential for seeing the results that the nation needs to see. For the sake of Australia's koala population and other native flora and fauna, as well as for the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities and other Australians, through such partnerships and with greater funding from these levels of government must be directed to:

1. invest in the regrowth of tens of thousands of primary koala feed trees to optimise the chance of protecting and building the nations' koala population;
2. strengthen their laws pertaining to the protection and regrowth of koala habitats;
3. invest significantly in consulting and employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Rangers, environmental officers and in a wide range of other environmental and ecological services, and have them central in policy development and program implementation and evaluation;
4. invest in educational, training, employment and business opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote communities, so they may more fully participate in nature conservation practices for protecting and increasing koala populations;
5. develop and implement:

- a. emergency management plans to reduce the impact of bushfires and other natural disasters;
 - b. a sustainable funding model for Aboriginal-led national management programs; and
 - c. cross-cultural training for all fire managers, whether Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or not, to understand and value traditional practises;
6. fund the diversification of local economies in rural and remote communities, to optimise opportunities for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to better engage in ecological practices;
 7. increase funding for ACCOs for the delivery of a greater range of clean energy, waste management, recycling and other environmental and ecological services, in order for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas to be employed and native fauna and flora will be protected and strengthened; and
 8. implement the recommendations put forward by WWF Australia in its 2019 Koala Habitat Conservation Plan, including elevating the conservation of koalas and their habitat to a national policy priority for the Federal Government.

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