HOTSPOTS FIRE PROJECT

Case Study: Working together for koalas

Farmer Chris Franks is doing his bit to help the local koalas

When every koala counts

Imagine a small, struggling koala population - one so threatened that a single wildfire could destroy the population's chance of survival.

Facing the issues head on

On the south coast between Tathra and Bermagui, this is a worrying reality for concerned landholders and management authorities. In recent decades, two alarming trends have emerged - the disappearance of the area's koalas and signs that the bush is 'gearing up' for a major wildfire.

Such a fire could not only spell the end for the local koala population, but could threaten life and property throughout the region. The problem raises some interesting questions…

Should action be taken now, rather than waiting for the next wildfire (or hoping that one never comes)? Can something be done to reduce the risk of wildfire, without impacting on the local koalas? And can people work together - despite strong and differing views about fire and koalas - to come up with a workable plan?

The people of the south coast don't have all the answers but what they are doing is putting their heads together, talking through the issues and being proactive about fire management. Inspired by a shared concern for the local koalas, they've begun to recognise the value of neighbourhood collaboration between properties and tenures to manage fire across the broader landscape.

Farmer inspires teamwork

Chris Franks is more than just a farmer with a soft spot for koalas. Recently, Chris and his wife Bev hosted a workshop at their property, Mundui, allowing people to come together and talk openly about koala and fire management issues.

Bordering Bermagui Nature Reserve, Mundui is a mixed farm of angora goats and farmed meat rabbits. About a quarter of the 80 hectare block is still forested. Over the past 45 years, Chris has watched the local environment deteriorate and koala numbers dwindle. Historically, he hasn't always been on the best of terms with his biggest neighbour - NPWS. However, more recently, his philosophy has changed to one of working as best he can with nature, people and systems. A further turning point occurred at the workshop when Chris realised his concerns were far from isolated. Using the support and advice available from community and agency experts, he now hopes to safely burn a small section of forest on his property.

THE SOUTH COAST IN BRIEF

Location: South coast of New South Wales

Area: Approx 400,000 ha of forested land in the Bega Valley Shire

Mean annual rainfall: Approx 800 -1000 mm

Land use: Agriculture (dairy, beef cattle, some niche industries, forestry), conservation

Vegetation types: The coastal dry shrub forest and coastal wet gully forest now being the two most important ecosystems that sustain the surviving koala population

Landform and soil types: Coastal ranges primarily on metasediments, cleared agricultural area primarily on granitic soils

Tough times

South coast koalas were once abundant but may number less than 100 today. The population to the south west of Bermagui is centred in Biamanga National Park. This is one of only two known surviving koala populations in coastal areas between Wollongong and the Victorian border. Clearing of habitat from the more fertile areas, logging, hunting, predation, disease and inappropriate fire regimes are all thought to have taken a toll, with wildfire now posing one of the biggest threats.

These days, Biamanga National Park is a patchwork of dense, slow growing post logging regrowth and more intact mature forest. Private land and the longer established Bermagui Nature Reserve border much of the critical habitat. Along with Gulaga National Park, Biamanga National Park has now been handed back to the Aboriginal Community. Working together with the parks' new owners will be a key task for koala conservation efforts in the region.

Nature Conservation Council of NSW
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This project has been assisted by the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust.

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Getting together

Another local champion of the koala's cause is Chris Allen. Like Chris Franks, Chris Allen is keen for people in the area to work together on koalas and fire management. Both men fear the impacts that an unplanned fire, coupled with associated backburning, could have on this threatened species.

Chris Allen manages a Threatened Species Recovery Project* for the New South Wales Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). Often working closely with private landholders, he says he took up the koala flag in 1989 and has hardly stopped since. He believes a high level of knowledgeable community involvement is critical to averting the koala's extinction in the region.

Working together, the pair organised for landholders and agency staff from the Rural Fire Service, Forests NSW and DEC to get together for a workshop at Chris Franks' place in late 2005. The workshop provided a chance to discuss and plan integrated approaches to managing fire in forests south west of Bermagui for the protection of koalas.

A range of viewpoints were expressed, one being that because the koala population is so small, the loss of any animals would be a problem - fire should therefore be kept out of koala habitat, with management carried out around the edges to protect this 'asset'. Others spoke of the growing sophistication of approaches to fire management - for instance, the ability to keep planned fire out of gullies and flame heights low. The practice of creating burnt and unburnt mosaics with lots of escape routes for native animals was also discussed.

Photo courtesy of Dick Marks, Australian Koala Foundation

Among other things, the planning session helped to identify potential fire paths, areas of community concern and a more strategic and integrated approach to fuel reduction burns. It is hoped the community will now be better prepared for a bad fire season and better able to protect assets and biodiversity - koalas included.

Strategic and very carefully planned burns that involve all parties are now being undertaken along the north east edge of the core koala area. The intention is to develop a low fuel buffer between core koala habitat and private property as well as reduce the potential impacts of uncontrollable wildfire on these properties. This buffer will also reduce the need for backburning operations in the event of wildfire. Such backburning poses a major threat to the surviving koalas.

WHAT LAND MANAGERS CAN DO

Fires occur in a landscape context. Think about how different areas and vegetation types are related in terms of fire.

Try to work together and respect differences of opinion. Perhaps organise a workshop? See if there is scope to collaborate or learn from one another.

Coordinate fire activities with neighbours to provide a mosaic of vegetation in different stages of post fire development. Burnt patches provide areas of low fuel loads where fire can be slowed and the extent of future fires controlled.

Fire and koala management workshop, October 2005

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Acknowledgements

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Reading

• Allen, C.D. (2005) *Far South Coast Koala Surveys and Monitoring*. Report for Department of Environment and Conservation, Merimbula. Contact Chris Allen (02) 6495 5008 to request a copy

Further Information

The Hotspots Fire Project is managed by the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, with funding from the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust.

For further information contact the Project Coordinator on (02) 9279 2466, email hotspots@nccnsw.org.au or visit www.hotspotsfireproject.org.au.

Credits

Text: Julie Hinchliffe. Research: Waminda Parker and Gillian Basnett.

Photographs: page 1 top Chris Franks, page 2 top Dick Marks, Australian Koala Foundation, page 2 bottom Chris Allen