# SAVING THE KOALA

Koalas are under severe threat along Australia's east coast. Now a vast, new protected area, the Great Koala National Park, has been proposed in NSW to safeguard the iconic species. The problem is, not only do we need the NSW Government to live up to its promises, we need private landowners nearby to assist with koala-habitat connectivity.

Words + Photography **JOHAN AUGUSTIN**

"Koalas are special in our culture—we call them *dunggiirr,*" says Micklo Jarrett.

Once hunted by Aboriginal people, the koala today holds a different but equally powerful place in Indigenous culture: as a totem. Micklo is a cultural leader of the Gumbaynggirr people, whose land stretches along the coast of northern New South Wales. And it's on their land that, in September 2025, the state government committed to protecting a vast new conservation area: the Great Koala National Park, aka the GKNP. Part of that commitment involved placing a temporary moratorium on timber harvesting within the proposed park's boundaries until its actual establishment.

It's envisioned that when it's finally gazetted, the GKNP will cover a total of about 476,000ha—making it one of New South Wales' largest protected reserves. It will include areas of state forest added to existing national parks to create a new, connected conservation landscape for koalas and other threatened species.

## ECOTOURISM AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

With the creation of the new national park, up to a hundred new jobs are expected to be created. Ecotourism will be central to the park's future, offering opportunities for people with deep cultural and ecological knowledge—like Micklo—to work as guides and custodians of the landscape.

Tourists are expected to arrive in growing numbers, drawn by the chance to see koalas and other wildlife in their natural habitat: intact eucalyptus forests.

"Our land has been destroyed for so long," Micklo says, "and with it our culture and our language." But ecotourism to the new park will, he says, "make people aware why we need to protect Country."

## A LONG FIGHT AGAINST LOGGING

The creation of the GKNP marks the culmination of a thirteen-year campaign led by environmental groups and grassroots organisations. One of the most outspoken figures in that struggle has been Mark Graham, a veteran environmental activist often at odds with New South Wales' forestry industry. (*Ed: You may remember Mark from the five-page, extended conversation we had with him in* Wild *Issue #191.*)

Walking through the Coffs Harbour Botanic Garden—a remnant of subtropical coastal rainforest—Mark points out trees that are hundreds of years old. Wild koalas live here, and the area will soon be linked to the GKNP through forest corridors that allow koalas to disperse. "When I was a kid, forestry was more sustainable," Mark says, leaning against a massive tree trunk. "Now 30-tonne industrial machines bulldoze everything in their path."

Although the state government has officially halted logging within the park's boundaries, Mark says loopholes remain. Forestry companies sometimes claim they are harvesting plantations when, in reality, native forests—known koala habitats—are being cleared. "Massive clearfell logging and chipping of the GKNP (across multiple square kilometres) continues today at Pine Creek," Mark says. "This is part of the habitat of the biggest coastal koala population in NSW. Koalas continue to decline across the GKNP as a direct result of ongoing logging."

"The logging must stop completely."

With koala habitats now heavily fragmented along the east coast, restoring forest connectivity is critical, Mark argues.

And Mark's activism has come at a cost. He and his family have received threats, and he remains under constant scrutiny. A man lingers close by and seems to be listening to our conversation. "He's from the forestry industry," Mark says quietly as he walks away. "They're constantly watching me."

Intact forests with good connectivity are vital for koala protection and the integrity of the GKNP

Micklo Jarrett

## REBUILDING FOREST CORRIDORS

Much of restoring forest connectivity is carried out by volunteers, such as Sally Cavanagh. She plants young trees on land bordering the new national park. The fast-growing saplings —a mix of about ten eucalyptus species—form vital wildlife corridors between forest patches.

"I choose threatened species and trees that koalas prefer," Sally says.

In recent years, it's become easier to engage local landowners, especially since government grants now support tree-planting projects on private land. "There used to be rainforest here," Sally says, standing among saplings of young eucalyptus trees. "Now we're bringing it back."

## THE PROBLEM OF PLANTATIONS

Together with Deanna Markovina, a volunteer with the Forest Ecology Alliance, I move through Gladstone State Forest as dusk settles over the canopy. "Keep your eyes open for gliders now that it's getting dark," Deanna whispers while sweeping a torch beam across the trunks. "They emerge from tree hollows and can glide up to a hundred metres."

Southern greater gliders and yellow-bellied gliders are just two of the threatened species that Gladstone SF is home to. The forest, which is managed by the New South Wales Government, will form part of the GKNP.

As we move into higher terrain, signs of logging are visible—clearings where felled timber has been left piled up, slowly rotting away. Yet the massive trunks still standing along the rugged gravel road tell a different story: Vast tracts of intact native forest remain in these mountains. In this hard-to-reach forest, gliders and owls sweep silently between the trees, and the forest continues to support a significant population of koalas. When a glider suddenly appears from a hollow, Deanna's face breaks into a smile.

Deanna's painstaking mapping of the species has helped halt logging here. But nearby, as NSW's Mid North Coast region continues to draw people north from cities like Sydney and Melbourne, wildlife and habitat pay the price. New residents buy up land, clear it, and then sell the timber, Deanna says. "They've also got mortgages to pay."

On private land, there are few barriers to clearing, and the landholder decides what happens to the land. Sometimes Deanna receives distressed phone calls. "Upset neighbours call me because the new owners are taking down the old growth."

Echoing Mark Graham's concerns, Deanna also touches on the controversial topic of 'plantations', and what the word really means here: "Plantations have a long history in our region.

## GKNP FACTS:

The Great Koala National Park will link existing conservation reserves with state forests, creating a protected area of almost 500,000ha. While koala populations remain relatively stable in Victoria and South Australia, numbers are declining rapidly in NSW and Queensland. The primary threat is habitat destruction, making protection through the GKNP critical.

In the early 1900s, Australia was home to several million koalas, before numbers plummeted due to the fur trade. Along the east coast, populations fell by as much as ninety per cent. Today, the total population is estimated at around half a million koalas.

Approximately 12,000 koalas are currently believed to live within the area covered by the proposed GKNP, a number that could triple once forests are fully protected from logging.

The temporary logging ban applies to designated state forests earmarked for the proposed GKNP. The closure affects approximately 300 jobs and six timber mills. The ban does not apply to private native forestry or hardwood plantations. Source: NPA

**IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

Mark Graham has fought for koala protection here for years

National park in waiting? Recent, cynical logging in Gladstone State Forest, destined to be part of the GKNP

Ashley Love, who with others first proposed the GKNP walks with Deanna Markovina in Pine Creek Forest

More logging in Gladstone State Forest

Sally Cavanagh planting trees that wiil benefit koalas in the future

Basically, there are very few 'rowed plantations' in our area, such as agricultural land converted to plantations. Most of the other areas now deemed plantations were once native forests that have been gradually converted to plantations—often just by logging out native vegetation and seeding or planting monoculture," she says.

Most established forests in the region—including those in plantations—have not only supported healthy koala populations in the past, according to Deanna, they still do. Unfortunately, they're still being razed even now by the logging companies. Because even while that temporary moratorium on timber harvesting is in place within the park's proposed 476,000ha boundaries, according to the NPWS, "Plantations have not been assessed as part of the GKNP proposal."

And, says Mark Graham, "Tens of thousands of hectares of the GKNP promised for protection by the Minns government has now already been destroyed, fragmented and degraded by the Forestry Corporation. It means all publicly owned native trees within the GKNP's footprint must remain standing if we're to prevent the ongoing decline of koalas, the further fragmentation and degradation of these globally significant landscapes and to maintain the regional water security that sustains the entire economy."

## SHIFTING ATTITUDES

Even though plantations can still be legally logged, encouragingly, attitudes are beginning to shift when it comes to private land, with Deanna Markovina at the Forest Ecology Alliance, and others in grassroots movements, working to persuade new landowners to leave forests intact on their properties.

"There's a growing awareness," she says. "The winds are shifting along the east coast."

And in Coffs Harbour, Micklo Jarrett prepares for a Gumbaynggirr cultural festival, where he plans to share news of the new protected area with visitors. "*Any* stoppage to logging makes my heart sing," he says. "My mind is at peace knowing the logging within the proposed park boundaries [will be] stopped. There'll be no more destruction in there."

Mark Graham, however, offers an important reality check: "There is still no Great Koala National Park as the Minns government promised. It is now over three years since it was elected, and it's now saying that the GKNP depends on a carbon scheme (ACCUs) with no date for delivery. This was never part of the promised GKNP. And within state forests that need to be conserved for the connectivity necessary for the GKNP's viability and integrity, logging is still occurring." **W**

**CONTRIBUTOR:** Sydney-based journalist Johan Augustin focuses on environmental and travel-related topics.

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