

KOALAS THREATENED BY FOREST FUEL PLAN

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Photograph by Vanessa Hunter. Local children named pin up girl, Sapphire in a competition. Caption coined by Ginger, nine, and Sunday, six: "Who are you? Are you here to steal my food?"

Sapphire was born at Potoroo Palace, Merimbula. She is hairier and larger than most commonly known koalas. She belongs to a unique Southern Koala species or genotype whose ancestors were Australia's original koalas. Her kind lives in a few of our south coast forests in New South Wales. These koalas were almost extinct, but this year, surveys show that they may be recovering, as about 60 have been located in local forests.

This is very exciting for our community because, if this species had *carte blanche* in the forests, it would allow them to continue to come back from the brink of extinction. It could mean that our children may be able to walk into the forests and actually see them in their natural habitat.

There are many reasons our koalas were driven almost to extinction. Firstly, they were killed for their pelts, and feral animals, disease, road kill, fire, and logging of their habitat, have all played a part. Perhaps the reason for their slight increase in numbers has been more

favourable weather conditions although the real reason for the increase is difficult to pinpoint.

But, we shouldn't be too optimistic. Sapphire's cousin koalas in SA, NSW and Qld. were recently added to the Federal Vulnerable Listings under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC). Logging in the State's native forests is permitted by Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs), which are exempt from the power of the EPBC Act. So although koalas elsewhere are protected, Sapphire's home range is logged to supply the export woodchip market.

To add to concern about their habitat, the O'Farrell government is set to overturn a ban on burning native forest wood for electricity, a practice last seen in the 19th century. Removing the ban would give a green light for the construction of electricity plants powered almost exclusively by native forests. This deeply flawed plan is being proposed in an attempt to prop up the collapsing export woodchipping market. And we are not just talking about feeding forest floor litter into the furnaces. If this plan goes ahead, any tree that is not good enough for the sawmills could cut and burned for energy. This doesn't mean just sawdust and woodchip waste but whole trees including the darker redder trees that koalas favour. The Government sees this as creating 'renewable' energy but forests aren't crops – they don't just grow back seasonally. 'True renewables' are wind, tide, and solar.

Imagine knowing that native trees had been burned so we could watch TV! Sadly, the practice of using our native forests for energy is known in the retail electricity industry as 'dead koala power'.

Nothing in the forest is 'waste' – every tree is integral to creating healthy ecosystems and plentiful habitat for girls like Sapphire and her families and friends. Who else but the community will stand up for Sapphire? We need to speak out on her behalf. We need to tell our politicians that to let our forests burn for electricity could sound the death knell for Sapphire and her species. Koalas like Sapphire, and the wildlife found in these forests, need to be free to live, to roam and to breed without the threat of losing habitat. The ban on burning native forests for electricity must stay firmly in place.

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