



Mass Eucalypt Plantings Surge, Threatening Critically Endangered Rainforest in the Byron Bay Hinterland

Big Scrub Rainforest Conservancy calls for measured approach to koala habitat creation in North-Eastern NSW

BANGALOW – January 2023 – Large public and private funding programs have created a surge in mass plantings of fire-prone eucalypts on land that was once home to the critically endangered Big Scrub rainforest, threatening the recovery of local native endangered flora and fauna.

At a public event for Big Scrub Rainforest Day Celebrations in November, Big Scrub Rainforest Conservancy, Friends of the Koala and over 200 members of the Northern Rivers community gathered to call for a measured approach to koala habitat creation.

A panel discussion of ecologists and threatened species management specialists discussed the dilemma of caring for koalas that reside on land where a now critically endangered rainforest once grew – an ecosystem that is home to around 10 species of fauna that are *as or more endangered* than the koala.

The panel discussion also explored the fire danger of planting large eucalypt populations near urban areas and rainforest remnants (as witnessed when rainforest burnt for the first time in Nightcap National Park and elsewhere in 2019), as well as the history of eucalypt plantings that unnaturally increased koala populations near the Big Scrub.

Watch our educational video 'Koalas in the Big Scrub: A Conservation Dilemma'.

Once the largest subtropical lowland rainforest in Australia, the “Big Scrub” was and still is home to the richest terrestrial biodiversity in NSW. With only around 1% of the once-75,000 hectare Big Scrub remaining, it is classified as a critically endangered ecological community under the Federal Government’s [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#) and an endangered ecological community by the NSW Government’s [Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016](#).

This rainforest is built from over **450 species of flora**, of which over 40 are classified as *threatened* in NSW (around 20 are *endangered* or *critically endangered*) and is home to over **60 threatened species of fauna** (9 of which are *endangered* or *critically endangered*).

“It is clear and well-documented that without significant rainforest habitat expansion many of the threatened species of the Big Scrub will join the too-long list of other rainforest species in extinction,” Mark Dunphy, President of Big Scrub Rainforest Conservancy, said.

“We are in full support of koala funding, but firmly believe this funding should not be used at the expense of other endangered ecosystems or species.”

Big Scrub threatened species include the red-legged pademelon, spotted-tail quoll, Albert’s lyrebird, several fruit doves and Coxen’s fig parrots to name a few.

The devastating fires of 2019 heightened public awareness of the plight of the koala, and along with a surge in public funding and the growth of carbon-credit funding specifically for eucalypts, the number of often monoculture or limited-species koala food plantings has grown rapidly in North-Eastern NSW. Many more are also known to be planned on the red volcanic soil where rainforest once grew – plantings that will survive for only a single generation before being out-competed by weed species like camphor laurel – ultimately resulting in the death of koala populations created in the wrong place.

“The message is clear,” Dunphy continued. “Where there was rainforest – plant rainforest. And where there was eucalyptus forest – plant eucalypts and the plant communities that support koala habitat.”

“We know from mapping conducted during settlement that eucalypts, which need open canopy forest to survive, did not occur in the dense, uninterrupted rainforest of the Big Scrub, apart from along the edges and western facing ridges.”

“If we don’t follow the first principle of ecological restoration: *conserve, repair and renew the local native ecosystem*, we are simply repeating the mistakes of our past and not listening to the natural order”, Dunphy added.

“We need to come together to find a way to care for the koalas that have found themselves in the Big Scrub footprint and educate the community so that both the koala and Big Scrub can fight their way back from the brink of extinction.”

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About Big Scrub Rainforest Conservancy

Founded in 1993, we are a not-for-profit community conservation organisation working to save the Big Scrub rainforest in North-Eastern NSW. We care for over 40 remnants of the Big Scrub and have doubled the area of remaining rainforest by facilitating the planting of 2.5 million trees on 700 hectares of land. Our mission is to save from extinction Australia’s critically endangered lowland subtropical rainforest and its many threatened species, with a focus on the Big Scrub. Covering an area of approximately 75,000 hectares between Byron Bay, Ballina and Lismore, the Big Scrub was the largest expanse of lowland subtropical rainforest in Australia, until it was aggressively cleared to 1% of its original size. Find out more at www.bigscrubrainforest.org.

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