KOALAS

IN THE COASTAL AND HINTERLAND AREAS OF SENSW



CONSULTING WITH THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

Summary

In October 2005 the Department of Environment and Climate Change (DECC) and Forests NSW agreed to develop a Koala Management Framework for coastal and hinterland areas of southern NSW between the Tuross River and the Victorian border. The Handback National Parks[1] and nearby areas[2] are within this study area.

It was agreed that a high level of community consultation should be undertaken prior to producing the Framework. Following consultation with DECC Aboriginal staff a separate project was initiated to gain the views and knowledge of Aboriginal people.

This report summarises information gathered in this process to date. Because there are some members of the Aboriginal community who still need be contacted, this document should be considered as an interim report.

Consultation consisted of meetings, workshops and discussions with Aboriginal people and organisations and was developed around the following questions:

- Do you know where koalas are, or have been in recent times?
- Have you any stories about koalas that you would like to share with us?
- Why do you think koala numbers are so low in this region?
- What support do you think that the Aboriginal community needs to assist the management of koala areas in the Handback National Parks?

Information about a range of koala sightings from a coastal area east of Bodalla to the Victorian border emerged. Some cultural information regarding Aboriginal people's traditional connections with the Koala was also provided.

Aboriginal people consistently stated that koala numbers had DECClined because of wildfire, predation, illness and logging and because of the high level of environmental and cultural destruction that had occurred since European occupation.

Aboriginal people see that the conservation of the Koala is important and they want to support the conservation and recovery of the species in partnership with the white community. But this can only occur through a higher level of Aboriginal involvement in broader conservation and land management work. And to achieve this they need support, particularly in training and employment opportunities. A sighting in August 2007 by two Aboriginal men of a female koala with backyoung in forests to the west of Wapengo Lake, the first such reported sighting in the region for twelve years, highlights the important role that Kooris can play in koala surveys and monitoring.

Consistent themes emerged as to what kind of support was needed:

- Educational opportunities for Aboriginal children and teenagers that focus on the local environment and Aboriginal culture should be enhanced through schools, TAFE, the local field studies centre and Culture Camps.
- Educational kits need to be developed for Culture Camps and other educational institutions that focus on Aboriginal contributions to koala conservation.
- Culture Camps provide important educational opportunities in the fields of Aboriginal culture, environment and leadership. They offer opportunities for the Aboriginal community to teach their children in ways that more closely reflect their traditional culture.

[1] Biamanga and Gulaga National Parks
[2] Hereafter described as the Study Area

- Aboriginal women have an important role in Culture Camps, particularly in teaching younger children of both sexes, and teenage girls. There should be greater support to encourage their participation. This would be enhanced if Aboriginal women staff employed by DECC and/or the Board of Management for the Handback Parks had specific duties assisting in organising camps.
- Additional training opportunities need to be available to older Aboriginal people in conservation and land management, leadership skills and cultural awareness. Training needs to be based in the bush and reflect Aboriginal culture as much as possible.
- Work should be available for people who have undertaken training. Often, Aboriginal people have undertaken training but then employment in the field of training is not available. This increases disillusionment and alienation.
- Training and ongoing work could be based to some extent on the re-establishment and ongoing management of traditional pathways in Handback national parks, using traditional management approaches (particularly those concerning fire management) as much as reasonably possible.
- The establishment of a sanctuary-based approach to koala reintroduction and recovery should be considered. Aboriginal people working out of Jigamy Farm would particularly like to establish a wildlife sanctuary south of the Farm.
- Aboriginal people's capacity to contribute to conservation and park management initiatives would be enhanced with the development of resource and visitors centres near to the Handback Parks.

The drawing together of some of these themes raises the possibility that training and ongoing work for Aboriginal people could be focussed in part in the area to the west and north of where the Biamanga NP breeding association of koalas is centred.

These activities could be based on developing traditional management approaches (particularly around fire management), re-establishing traditional pathways and undertaking surveys and monitoring for koalas and other threatened fauna.

Such an approach would achieve the following outcomes:
- It would broaden and deepen our knowledge of, and capacity to monitor the Biamanga NP breeding association of koalas.
- It would assist in reducing the threat of wildfire and associated back-burning.
- It would provide the Aboriginal community with training opportunities and the prospect of making an important contribution to koala conservation in SENSW.
- It would provide opportunities to trial traditional Aboriginal burning practices in forested areas of SENSW.
- It would provide a range of training opportunities in fire management, wildlife monitoring and associated skills for young and older Aboriginal people.
- It would enhance community-based fire management approaches that are being developed by landholders to the east of this breeding association of koalas.

Acknowledgements

Aboriginal people's sharing of information and views about koalas and their management is gratefully acknowledged.

Lynne Thomas & Chris Allen
Department of Environment and Climate Change September 2007

Background
In October 2005 the Department of Environment and Climate Change and Forests NSW agreed to develop a Koala Management Framework for the Far South Coast Region. The Study Area includes the Handback National Parks[3] and nearby areas[4].

It was agreed that a high level of community consultation should be undertaken prior to producing the Framework. The aims of the consultation process were to:

- Clarify views on the conservation status of the koala population in the study area;
- Identify and document potential threats to the koala population on all land tenures;
- Identify potential actions and processes to reduce these threats on all land tenures.

As part of this process, consultation with the Koori community was considered important because:

- Important koala populations are known to be resident and/or close to the Handback National Parks. The Koori community therefore has a vital role to play in the management and recovery of surviving populations
- Koalas are known to be culturally important for some South Coast Aboriginal communities. It was a significant ancestor in terms of its role as a wise elder and was, according to documented creation stories, responsible for bringing the spirit ancestors from islands in the north west to the continent of what is now known as Australia[5].

A koala Working Group was formed from persons nominated by DECC to assist the consultation process. Aboriginal community involvement was sought for the Working Group. However, this was not possible due to the short timeframe and significant commitment by community members to other initiatives, particularly the Hand-back of land by DECC.

Following consultation with DECC Aboriginal staff it was DECCided that a separate project would be initiated to gain the views and knowledge of Aboriginal people. An Aboriginal Project Officer, Lynne Thomas, was employed to assist this process.

Report structure

This report provides a summary of the methods used and the information collected in the Aboriginal consultation process. Some discussion of the results of the work undertaken thus far, and some suggestions as to how some of the management strategies suggested by the Aboriginal Community, are also included.

Some key members of the Aboriginal community, particularly those now living to the north of the study area, were not consulted. For this reason this document should be considered as an interim report, with further consultation necessary.

Methods

The methods used included the following:

- An article Coastal Custodians providing information about the consultation process and advertising a workshop at Wallaga
- Posters and fliers distributed to Aboriginal Land Councils

---

[3] Biamanga and Gulaga National Parks
[4] Hereafter described as the Study Area
[5] Wesson S (2003) Koalas and the People of SE Australia; A report for the Koala Recovery Program (South Coast Management Area.

- Informal discussions with Aboriginal people, including DECC staff. This included meetings in parks, visiting people, and telephone calls, including a telephone discussion with the Bega ALC Coordinator
- Meetings with Aboriginal organisations
- The preparation of a powerpoint presentation on koalas. This was primarily based on the Dreamtime story telling how the koalas guided other Spirit Ancestors to Australia and also included information about European impacts on koalas and ways in which the Aboriginal community have been helping to conserve koalas and koala habitat over the past few years.
- Workshops at the Wallaga Lake Koori Village Community Centre and at Jigamy Farm, near Eden. These focussed on both the koala and the long-nosed potoroo. The potoroo is another threatened species that is culturally important to South Coast Aboriginal people.

The Workshop preparations included posters with relevant information, brochures and fliers and the powerpoint presentation described above. Information presented by this report's authors, Lynn Thomas and Chris Allen, included koala history, ecology, Aboriginal/koala cultural connections and the important role that Aboriginal people have with koala management in the Handback NP's.

In initial communications and workshop presentations it was emphasised we wanted to share information and support a partnership approach to caring for koala country.

The consultation process itself was built around the following questions:
- Do you know where koalas are, or have been in recent times?
- Have you any stories about koalas that you would like to share with us?
- Why do you think koala numbers are so low?
- What support do you think that the Aboriginal community needs to assist the management of koala areas in the Handback National Parks and adjacent areas?

Results

Nature of Consultation

The consultation involved the following
- Personal discussions with 18 Aboriginal people
- Meetings with the Eden ALC
- Discussions with Bega ALC
- Attendance at the Wallaga Lake Community Working Party
- Workshops at Wallaga Lake Village and Jigamy Farm

A summary of information that emerged from these meetings and discussions is provided below. DECC retains a more detailed record that may be accessed with permission from appropriate members of the Aboriginal community

Past Sightings

The following information emerged about where Aboriginal people had seen koalas in the past. The order that this information is presented is geographically based, from north to south.
- Koalas had been heard bellowing in the Aboriginal land known as Jamieson, east of Bodalla, both quite recently and in past DECCades.
- Koala sighted on Gulaga Mtn (western side) in the 1980's.
- Koala sighted on the foothills of Gulaga Mountain by an Aboriginal elder and leader in the 1980's.

- Koala with a young was escorted by an Aboriginal elder across the Princes Highway at Dignam's Hill in the 1970's.
- Several people referred to the Dignams Creek area as a koala area; it appears to be generally known as such within the Aboriginal community, particularly those with connections with Wallaga Lake.
- In 2001 a koala was heard bellowing in the Gulaga NP, near Dignams Creek approximately 2k west of Wallaga Lake.
- In the 1990's a koala was heard bellowing on the Murrah River, Loop Rd, Biamanga NP.
- In August 2007 a koala with back-young was sighted in the Wapengo catchment, approximately 2 kilometers to the west of the Wapengo Bridge (Bermagui Tathra Rd)[6].
- Several koalas were sighted in Nunnock Swamp area (New Line Rd) in about 1974 during a hunting trip.
- Koala sighted on the Mt Darragh road in the late1980's.
- There was an Aboriginal encampment in the late 1950's and early 1960's at Kiah (Snake Rd) on the western side of the Princess Highway. They used to hear koalas bellowing there. Three koalas were seen on side of the road, trying to climb up a steep embankment, but weren't able to scramble up it. They stopped the vehicle and helped guide them to a part of the road where they could escape into the bush.
- Koalas might be in forests to the south of Wonboyn.
- Koalas sighted occasionally during logging operations in the 1970's in the Timbillica area near the Victorian border.
- There was general agreement at the Eden workshop that koalas were still surviving in the Nadgee Wilderness.
- A large male koala had been seen crossing the road in Genoa in the 1970's.
- Koalas were frequently seen in Varmey's Ridge area, near Berridale in the 1950's.

Cultural information

- One person (in his sixties) remembered working with his father as a young man and was shown koala scats on several occasions and was told that this was the way to tell if a koala was around.
- Koalas in the South Coast were a women's totem; koala country was cared for by women.
- One woman, now in her sixties and from the Northern Tablelands had learnt that her mother's totem was that of the Koala; she had only learnt this recently. Until she learnt of this she was not aware of totems in Aboriginal culture.
- One man remembered that when he was a child he lost his younger brother and he was very sad. His nana told him that when children died their spirits joined the koalas on the "other side" of Gulaga Mountain. He wasn't sure whether this was something told him just to comfort him, or that it was a more widely held belief.

Reasons for DECCline in Koala numbers

Regarding the issue of why koala numbers had DECClined, four reasons were stated repeatedly: fire, predation, sickness and logging. It was also suggested that the DECCline and disappearance of the Koala was because of the high level of environmental and cultural destruction that had occurred since European occupation.

[6] Information about this was reported to one of the report's authors after this consultation.

What support is needed for Aboriginal people to manage koala areas well?
Aboriginal people see that the conservation of the Koala is important and they want to support the conservation and recovery of the species in partnership with the white community. But this can only occur through a higher level of Aboriginal involvement in broader conservation and land management work. And to achieve this they need support.

Consistent themes emerged as to what kind of support was needed:

- Educational opportunities for Aboriginal children and teenagers that focus on the local environment and Aboriginal culture should be enhanced through schools, TAFE, the local field studies centre and Culture Camps.
- Educational kits need to be developed for Culture Camps and other educational institutions that focus on the contributions of the Aboriginal community to koala conservation and broader environmental subjects. These should vary in content so as reach young people of all ages.
- Culture Camps need greater support, particularly to enable Aboriginal women to teach younger children of both sexes, and teenage girls. This would be enhanced if Aboriginal women staff employed by DECC and, when it takes responsibility for employment, the Board of Management for the Handback Parks, had specific duties assisting in organising camps.
- Additional training opportunities need to be available to Aboriginal people in conservation and land management, leadership skills and cultural awareness. Training needs to be based in the bush and reflect Aboriginal culture as much as possible.
- Work should be available for people who have undertaken training. Often, Aboriginal people have undertaken training but then employment in the field of training is not available. This increases disillusionment and alienation.
- Training and ongoing work could be based to some extent on the re-establishment and ongoing management of traditional pathways in Handback national parks, using traditional management approaches (particularly those concerning fire management) as much as reasonably possible.
- The establishment of a sanctuary-based approach to koala reintroduction and recovery should be considered. Aboriginal people working out of Jigamy Farm would particularly like to establish a wildlife sanctuary south of the Farm.
- Aboriginal people's capacity to contribute to conservation and park management initiatives would be enhanced with the development of resource and visitors centres near to the Handback Parks.

Discussion

Difficulties of consultation

Aboriginal communities are currently going through a difficult period. The dismantling of governance structures such as ATSIC and CDEP without adequate replacements, ongoing issues of drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, alienation, lack of transport and education opportunities are all factors that are contributing to these difficulties.

These factors made the consultation process difficult. As one ALC Coordinator stated, Aboriginal people have enough on dealing with their own problems to be concerned about much else.

But despite these difficulties we believe we have sampled sufficiently to gain a useful assessment of Aboriginal perspectives on koala conservation and management. The message is clear; Aboriginal people want to be involved in caring for koala country,

they particularly want their young people to have this opportunity and they need support to be able to do this.

Koala Dreamtime Ancestor
Wesson (2003)[7] reports the primacy of the role the Koala Dreamtime Ancestor plays in some creation stories. These indicate that was a significant ancestor in terms of its role as a wise elder and philosopher and was responsible for bringing the spirit ancestors from islands to the north west of the continent to what is now known as Australia.

Martin R and Handasyde K (1999)[8] also include creation stories highlighting the Koala's cultural significance to Aboriginal people, including the koala Ancestor's role in causing and preventing drought.

Correspondence relating to interviews conducted at Wallaga Lake in 1939[9] suggest that the "native bear" may have had special significance in Aboriginal ceremonial life in the locality.

These creation stories, together with the results of this consultation process with the Aboriginal community, highlight the role that Koala recovery efforts in SENSW could have in drawing together and providing a high profile example of indigenous cultural and ecological approaches to threatened species conservation.

Training and education within Aboriginal communities
A focus on training in wildlife survey methods and fire management, developing, sharing and implementing traditional methods of land management and the cultural education of young people are core needs.

These activities need to be based in country as much as possible, preferably through the development and use of Culture Camps, probably with some focus on Aboriginal traditional pathways.

Culture Camps
Culture Camps have an important role in Aboriginal society. These help Aboriginal people stay connected with family, country and culture, all of which are so much a part of the earth and the environment.

Traditionally Aboriginal people came together in such camps for trade, burials, telling stories, sharing food, ceremonies, learning about the environment and its animals and dreaming tracks.

Some of the places where these camps occurred are still visited today.

Even in recent DECCades these camps have continued and offered opportunities for elders to pass on responsibilities, roles and cultural information.

Culture camps now are less important in Aboriginal society. In part this is because Aboriginal people do not have access to many of the places where they used to camp. Additionally, many have been destroyed.

---

[7] Wesson S (2003) A Report for the Koala Recovery program (South Coast Management Area). Department of Environment and Climate Change PO Box 656 Merimbula 2548
[8] Martin R and Handasyde K (1999) The Koala. Natural History, Conservation and Management. University of NSW Press Ltd, Sydney 2052 Australia
[9] Letter from Norman Tindale to Brian Egloff (1979). DECCC Files

Despite this culture camps still continue. Some of these provide boys and young men with opportunities to learn about Aboriginal culture. Additionally, there is a women's cultural camp as well that moves between various South Coast locations.

With a greater level of support, Culture Camps could provide greater educational opportunities in the fields of Aboriginal culture, environment and leadership, supporting members of the Aboriginal community teach their children in ways that more closely reflect traditional teaching and learning.

Funding to employ an Aboriginal liaison person to help develop, organise and implement a Culture Camp program would significantly enhance the potential of these camps. Kits that provide educational framework to assist in building and passing on knowledge of environments surrounding the camps would also assist this program.

An invigorated culture camp program would also enhance Aboriginal people's capacity to reconnect with koala areas, teach their children about the ecology of the Koala and other wildlife, survey and monitoring methods and land management options.

Traditional Fire Management and Pathways

While this consultation process was underway, two documents[10],[11] came to us that reinforce the feedback we received from Aboriginal communities.

One document (Watts 2006) discusses and recommends the re-implementation of traditional Aboriginal approaches to fire management.

The other (Blay 2005) provides information about traditional Aboriginal Pathways (including maps) and recommends a greater focus on their management.

The essence of what in combination these reports recommend is a greater focus on the building of knowledge and managing traditional pathways, and the reintroduction of traditional burning practices in some areas. Traditionally these burning practices radiated out from campsites and extended out from pathways.

There is a conjunction here between these recommendations and the need for koala surveys and monitoring, and good fire management along the northern and western side of the area we believe is currently occupied by the breeding association of koalas in Biamanga NP.

An Aboriginal staff member of DECC has subsequently advised that a much more complex network of tracks would have been maintained than is suggested in Blay (2005). This advice would need to be considered carefully when re-implementing traditional management approaches for such pathways.

The drawing together of several of these themes raises the possibility that training and ongoing work for the Aboriginal community could be focussed in part in the area to the west and north of where the Biamanga breeding association of koalas is located.

---

[10] Blay, J. (2005) Bega Valley Region Old Path Ways And Trails Mapping Project, Department of Environment and Climate Change PO Box 656 Merimbula 2548

[11] Watts G. (2006) Aboriginal Burning Regimes, Paper presented to Southern Directorate Rangers Conference

These activities could be based on developing traditional management approaches (particularly around fire management), re-establishing traditional pathways and undertaking wildlife surveys and monitoring, particularly for the koala.

This initiative would achieve the following:

- It would broaden and deepen our knowledge of, and capacity to monitor the Biamanga NP breeding association of koalas.
- It would assist in reducing what is probably the greatest threat facing these koalas; that of wildfire and associated back-burning.
- It would provide the Aboriginal community with training opportunities and the prospect of making an important contribution to koala conservation in SENSW.
- It would provide opportunities to trial traditional Aboriginal burning practices in forested areas of SENSW.
- It would provide a range of training opportunities in fire management, wildlife monitoring and associated skills for young and older Aboriginal people.
- It would enhance community-based fire management approaches that are being developed by landholders to the east of this breeding association of koalas.

Training and education in the wider community

Educational work concerning regional koala conservation and broader land management needs has to be extended more deeply into the wider community as well, particularly through existing educational institutions.

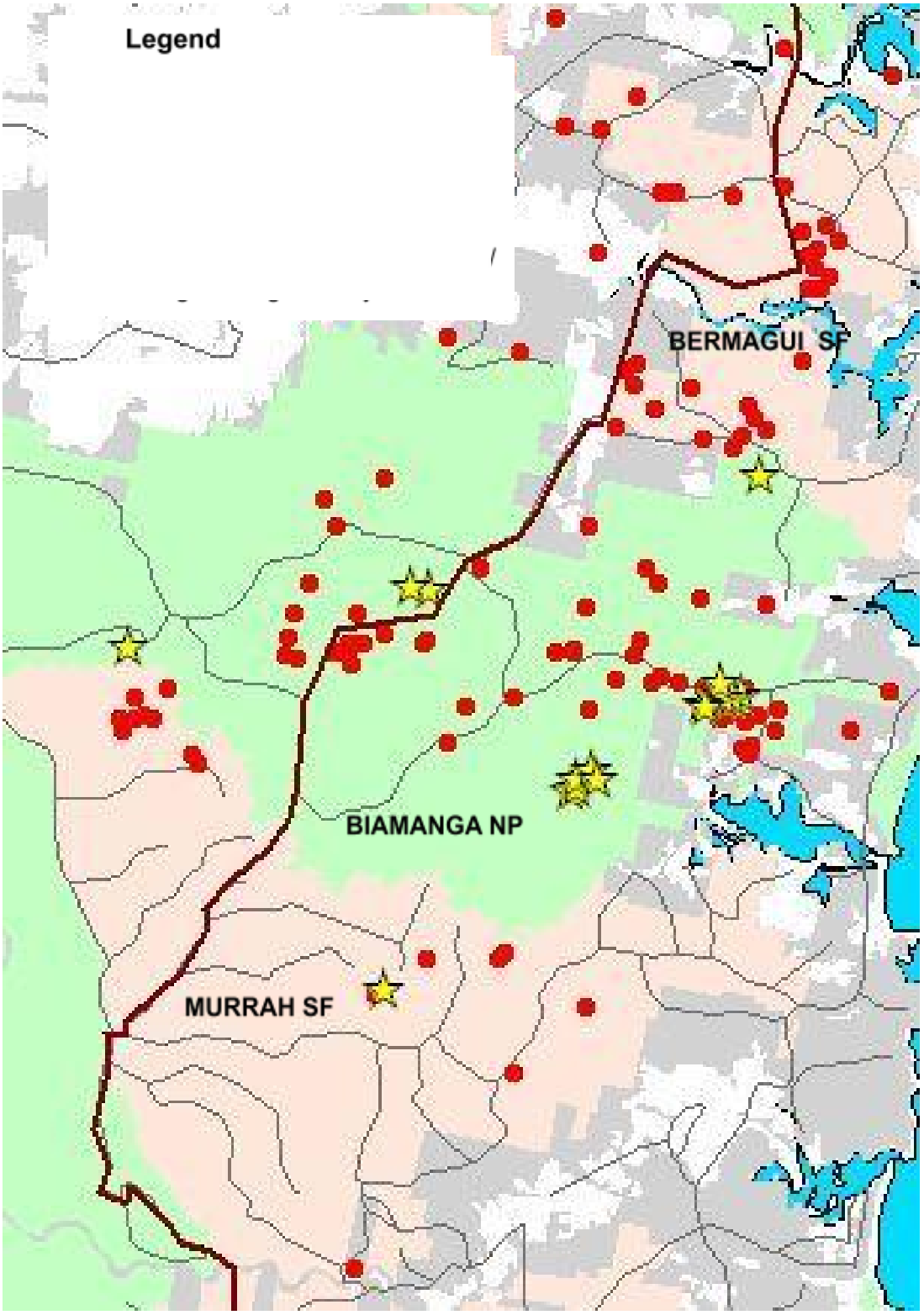
These institutions need to be aware of the regional importance of koala conservation issues and incorporate information about these into relevant courses.

To assist this process we need to develop and provide information and educational kits that focus on the contributions of the Aboriginal community to koala conservation and broader environmental issues. These could vary in content so as reach out to young people of all ages; from Kindergarten to TAFE.

These kits could be developed in consultation with Aboriginal communities and local environmental organisations like the Bournda Field Studies Centre, the WIRES Wildlife Sanctuary and Education Centre near Merimbula, and the Crossing Land Education Centre.

By focussing on the contribution of Aboriginal communities these kits will encourage Aboriginal children to learn more and develop a greater understanding and interest in the natural environment. This will flow through and enhance the learning experiences offered by Culture Camps.

FIGURE 1: BIAMANGA NP, RECENT KOALA RECORDS AND SUGGESTED ROUTE OF THE MUMBULLA/GULAGA ABORIGINAL WAY[12]



[12] Blay, J. (2005) Bega Valley Region Old Path Ways And Trails Mapping Project, Department of Environment and Climate Change PO Box 656 Merimbula 2548