

Conserving and recovering the koala populations on the NSW Far North Coast

November 2018

Large landowner survey data collection

Field work synopsis

– by Nicole Garofano (NG)

20 December 2018

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1. Introduction

This component of field work was undertaken by Nicole Garofano (NG), PhD Candidate, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, the University of Queensland, across the four study area shires (Ballina, Byron, Lismore and Tweed Shire Councils) between 7 November and 30 November, 2018.

Field work commenced with one-on-one meetings with a representative from each Shire Council to introduce the purpose of this round of field work. The meetings also introduced NG as the research assistant responsible for being in-region for the month of November to meet with landowners, specifically those who own 20 acres or more and who use their land for farming and/or grazing. The spatial criterion was decided by Prof Clive McAlpine and by analysis of survey responses received to date by Assoc Prof Kelly Fielding et al. which reflected a gap in the data of larger landowner perspectives where these land uses were recorded.

The total number of days spent in the four Council areas were thirteen (13), with an additional three (3) days spent on the Gold Coast¹, making calls and sending emails to prepare for following days' interviews.

Field work planning attempted to 'cluster' interviews into shires, which worked for the first three weeks, but for the last week, traversing all four shires in a day was not uncommon.

Using a list of Access Codes provided by Dr Greg Brown, participants were allocated the code which was manually recorded on a hard copy of the code spreadsheet at time of survey completion, or as shared via email in the case of those participants who preferred to complete the survey themselves. A total of 36 ($n=36$) access codes were handed out².

The next section of this synopsis examines the methods used and the results of the methods including a snapshot of the land uses identified by the landowners recorded. The final section of this document presents very preliminary findings of specific threats identified by landowners, based on a broad brush review of the data collected.

¹ NG stayed with family who live at the northern end of the Gold Coast for the majority of the time allocated for the research, with 3 nights spent in Ballina across Weeks 1 and 3.

² The data presented in section two of this document reflect the methods used to gather all those issued with access codes, though these data would need to be crossed referenced with the completed survey data accessible by Dr Greg Brown to determine which of the online codes have been utilised up to an including 3 December 2018.

2. Methods Review

This section provides a review of the methods used in the survey administration of this specific data collection phase for the project.

It is important to note the approach taken to document the data in this round of data collection can be considered a mixed-methods approach. First, the survey was completed in a face to face interview with 29 of the participants, resonant with a qualitative approach. This allowed for two-way interaction with the respondents, providing more opportunity for the respondent to understand the survey and its uses, as well as being able to document more experiences using the final summary box in an open-ended manner. This was particularly useful for older landowners who had many stories to tell, and from whom responses may not be recorded otherwise (see Section 2.3 for more information). Second, being a survey, the bulk of the results from the responses to the survey variables are reflected as quantitative data for further analysis.

The remainder of this section presents specific elements of the methods review which may be useful in understanding the context in which this round of data collection was undertaken.

2.1 Respondents by Shire

The total number of respondents (n=36) allocated an access code per shire was manually recorded initially. These results are shown in Figure 1.

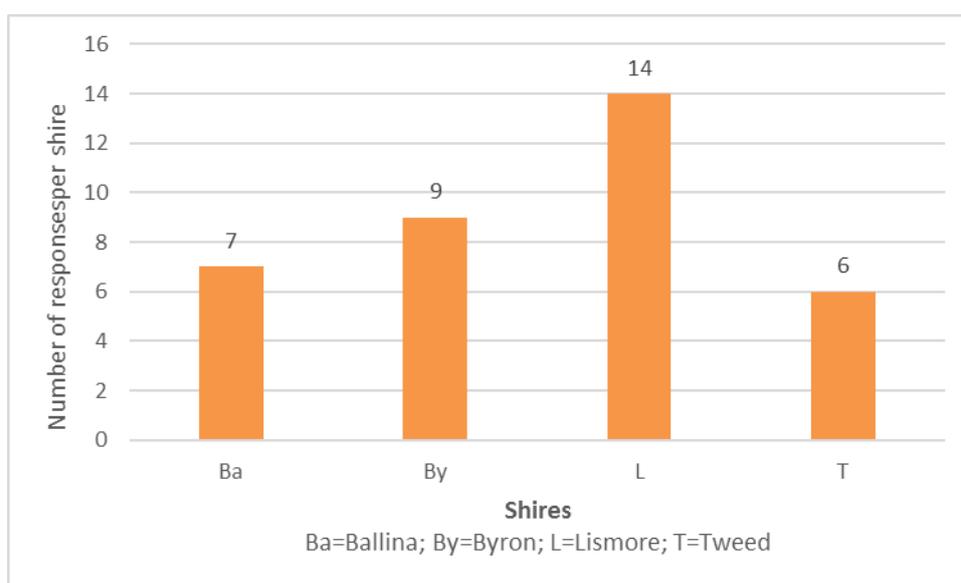


Figure 1: Number of responses per shire

The greatest number of responses was recorded from the Lismore Shire, thanks in part to the recruitment methods used which included both previous UQ contacts and connections from local associations. These recruitment methods are presented next.

2.2 Recruitment methods

Participants were recruited using a snowball approach, using eight recruitment methods (RM). These are:

#	Recruitment Method used
1	Response to Council email
2	Contact provided by Will Goulding (UQ)
3	Contact provided by Clive McAlpine (UQ)
4	Contact provided by Council and called/emailed by NG
5	Contact provided by Cane Growers Association
6	Contact provided by Friends of Koala
7	Response to Australian Macadamia Society email/flyer
8	Response to letterbox drop

The total number of responses per method recorded are shown in Figure 2 below.

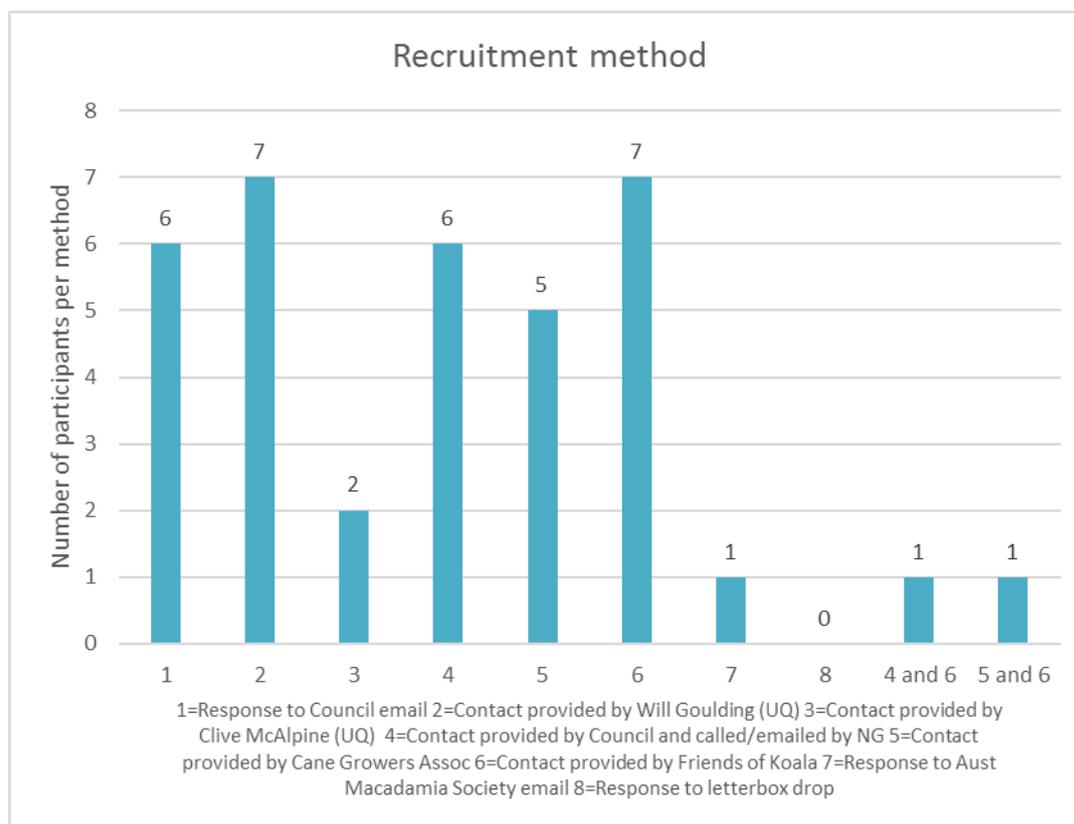


Figure 2: Number of participants recorded per recruitment method

For **Recruitment Method (RM) 1**, Byron shire sent out emails directly to landowners selected by the Farm Liaison Officer, Byron Council. Landowners were invited to respond to the email if they were interested in participating. Those response emails were forward to NG for her follow up.

RM2 was informed by a list of contacts provided to NG by Dr Will Goulding of UQ. Dr Goulding had conducted ecology studies on several properties in 2017, primarily in the Lismore Shire. This list provided some phone contacts, and/or street addresses which NG used to follow up.

RM3 refers to names provide by Prof Clive McAlpine from his knowledge of the area.

In two councils – Ballina and Lismore – no direct email was offered in the manner by which Byron shared the information. This was due to both privacy concerns and not having a direct link to farmers through a resource such as the Farm Liaison Officer in Byron Shire. Both shires did however provide industry contacts for NG to follow up, resulting in the number of responses recorded using **RM4**. (Tweed Shire advised they sent out an email on 21 November 2018 to a list of approximately 80 names; a list developed the Tweed Council Sustainable Agriculture Officer. No responses have been received to date from this mailout).

RM5 refers to Cane Grower Association contacts offered in the first instance after an industry contact was provided by Ballina Shire Council to the Richmond Valley Cane Growers Association (RVCGA). NG followed up by email to the RVCGA CEO, sending a brief of the research as well as a flyer. Several cane farmers responded to this call for participation which NG met with individually. Upon meeting with the RVCGA CEO, NG was also given names for the Tweed Valley Cane Growers Association, whom NG then followed up with and made appointments.

For **RM6**, the assistance provided by two individuals at the Ballina/Lismore Friends of Koalas (FoK) was extremely helpful in securing further respondents. NG met these contacts personally at a NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust meeting on 13.11.18 (See Research Diary Day 5 for more information) These contacts shared my email and flyer with their contact list, with one FoK contact writing up a further list of names and phone numbers across both shires for NG to connect with. These were very useful, however the respondents introduced using this method were somewhat biased as the FoK had engaged with this group, which is by virtue of its name, supportive of koala conservation and are very active with their engagement with landowners to support injured koalas.

RM7 refers to two communication tools administered to the members of the Australian Macadamia Society. The first tool was the delivery of flyers to the CEO of the Society the evening before the national conference, held at Royal Pines Resort on the Gold Coast on November 13 and 14. A total of 68 flyers (37 colour and 32 black and white (b&w)) entitled “Does koala habitat restoration affect your business land use? We would like to hear from you!” (see Appendix A) as well as 25 flyers (all B&W) entitled “Are you interested in providing your views on a community koala habitat research project” (see Appendix B) were delivered to the CEO by NG directly to the resort.

The CEO advised later that week that all flyers were distributed on as many of the seats as there were flyers laid out in the conference room on Day 1 of the event. To date, no responses were recorded as being recruited through this method. However, one respondent was recruited via an email sent out to the members of the Society, on November 28. Being that NG’s presence in the field is now concluded, any interested parties generated from this email will need to complete the survey themselves online, with NG providing the access codes – which was the case for the one email requesting participation on December 1.

RM8 was personal recruitment of landowners in the Tweed Shire. NG delivered a total of 26 flyers to post boxes which were in clusters of 3 or more along the Tyalgum Creek Road. No responses were recorded from this method.

2.3 Types of Survey Administration

The types of survey administration used to record the responses received from the participants in this round of data collection can be categorised as:

1. **Self-Administered 'in-person'**: where survey participants completed the survey “self-administered” in person—while NG was present in the room but did not really assist other than to answer questions;
2. **NG entered responses**: NG entered the responses for the participant on the computer as the participants were interviewed; and
3. **Self-completed online**: Participants were provided with an access code via email to complete the survey on their own time and location, and not in the presence of NG.

Figure 3 presents the overwhelming number of respondents who participated in this data collection round thanks to NG entering the responses.

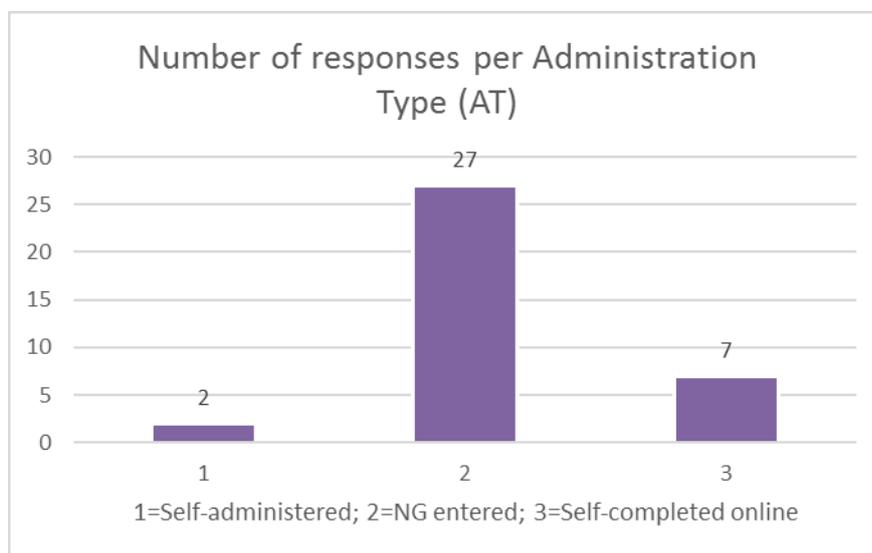


Figure 3: Type of survey administration used to record responses

2.3.1 Effectiveness of Approaches

Approach 2 – NG entering the data while interviewing participants – worked the most effectively with this round of data collection for one or more of three main reasons. First, the majority of the landowners who participated would not have been able to participate because they either did not have access to a computer, or more importantly, did not know how to access the internet for the purpose of survey completion in this format. The demographic questions and the opinion questions could have been completed by some of the participants, but the mapping exercise would have, in the view of NG, prevented more than half of the participants from completing this part of the survey, and potentially simply leaving the webpage before getting to the opinion section. It is NG's belief that 55% (n=20) of the respondents would not have completed the survey themselves at all in this online format because of lack of technical knowledge of using computers and/or the internet in this way.

Second, for those landowners who NG did meet with individually, there was a lack of knowledge regarding the availability of the survey for landowners of 20 acres or more.

Lastly, there was a perceived time issue which for farmers. The survey would take time away from their farm duties, and it was seen that coming in at night after being on the farm from early in the morning to sit at a survey was not a good investment of time.

At all interviews, and via phone or email introductions, the invitation to contribute was set against the background ‘spiel’ that the earlier use of the survey revealed the gap in the data i.e. missing large landowners that use their land for farming and/or grazing. All participants indicated their appreciation in being invited to participate in this more personalised data gathering process, noting that so often if people do not participate, the views are often one sided. Particularly those older landowners without access or knowledge to the internet, were very grateful for the chance for their views to be heard “for once”!

2.4 Landuses of landowners

The types of landuses as indicated in the interview and recorded by NG manually are reflected in Figure 4.

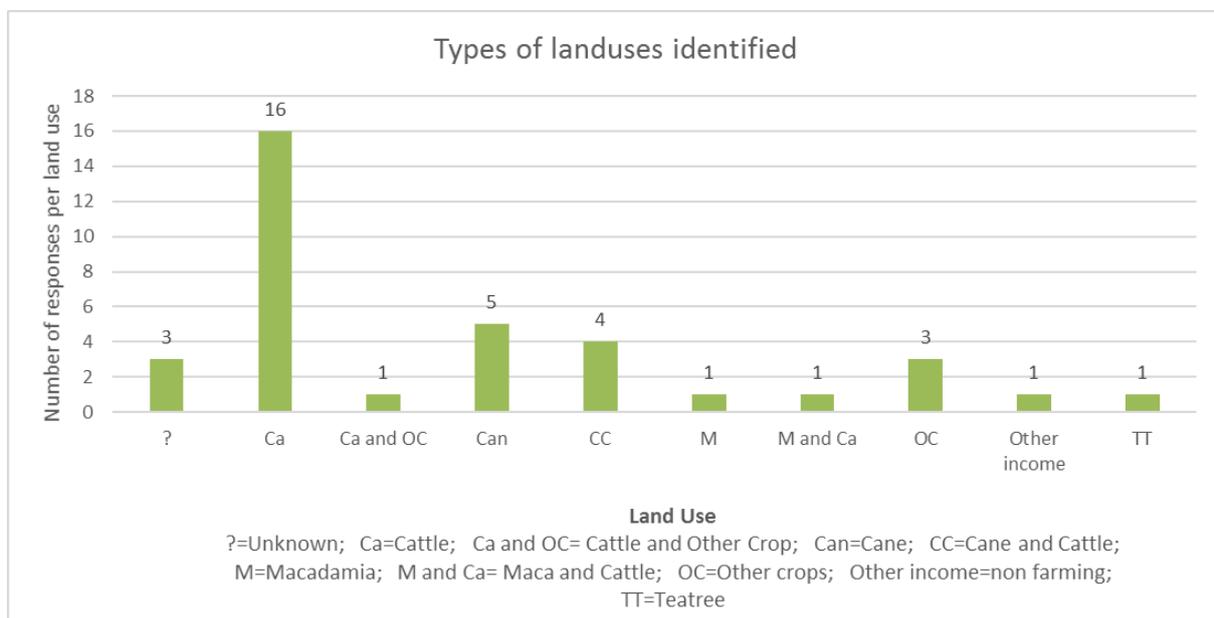


Figure 4: Landuses identified by landowners

NG recorded the landuses identified for all face-to-face interviews, with 3 ‘Unknown’ for those who responded to emails from Council.

2.5 Methods Summary

In summary, the use of this personalised method of recruiting and recording landowner experience and sentiment in this round of survey data collection provided perspectives that may not have otherwise been recorded. All participants appreciated the opportunity to contribute their experience although there was a mix of people who were still somewhat apprehensive about sharing their data regarding koalas for fear of council taking their information and using it against them to rezone land. One respondent had this happen to him, and so, was very strongly opposed to providing information to council. Another noticed an increase in people helping themselves to accessing his land in search of reported koala sightings which had been shared through the grapevine amongst the local residents. This fear factor of reporting koalas could have a large impact on sighting data for this, and future research, where council is involved or has access, particularly to raw data.

3. Key points raised regarding threats

There were two threats which attracted much attention from the respondents: 1) wild dogs (and those domesticated dogs who have gone feral); and 2) the inability of councils, as well as other ‘hobby’, ‘lifestyler’ or ‘lazy’ landowners who do not, for whatever reason, maintain their land. These and other comments which were commonly highlighted are presented next.

3.1 Wild dogs

The presence of wild dogs (regarded by most as domestic dogs who have gone feral) was perceived as a very serious threat in most areas (particularly so in more wooded areas) across all shires. If left unchecked over the next 10-15 years, landowners feel they will threaten not only wildlife, but the ability for humans to feel safe exploring and working their land. One respondent recalled how one day his children were at the back door of their home, and a wild dog was on the other side of the door growling – at their back door. He was not impressed!

Although councils and individual landowners have been adopting baiting activity, there is a concern that it is not continuous and not enough in general. The dogs are interbreeding, with both domestic dogs, and in the case of the Tweed shire, with dingoes. The latter were identified as being transported to the shire about ten years ago as part of a programme to relocate the dogs from Fraser Island.

The issue of wild dogs may provide an area of further research, not just for koalas but for other forms of wildlife and risks to humans in the region in the coming years. One respondent suggested that a study which documents where the dogs are returning to for their dens might provide a more effective baiting programme, while also locating where pups are being harboured, potentially breaking the breeding cycle in the future.

3.2 Land management

The issue of not managing the land, also impacts the dog issue. **Moreover, it is the lack of clearing of undergrowth, and the lack of slow burn fires (which are not permitted as they were in the old days – as one farmer noted, the regulations are too restrictive and remove agency from those who know their land inside and out).** Slow burns completed annually were reported as keeping undergrowth down, which is helpful to koalas giving them access to the base of trees, while also reducing the overall risk of massive bushfires. Most that owned tracks of land that bordered wooded areas, or nature reserves/national parks were in fear of when the bush ‘goes up’. It won’t just be the koalas that will be in danger.

The introduction of various land purchase and/or land management strategies by the National Parks in the former and the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust in the latter, may affect the ability to maintain lands and potentially affect bushfire management, more in the latter. These strategies have just closed their calls for landowners to lodge expressions of interest, so time will tell which landowners will be accepted into these initiatives. More information on these strategies can be reviewed on Day 5 – Research Diary – 13.11.18.

One other comment which was mentioned by many regarding land management was the focus by council of planting new trees in previously cleared landscapes, when there is an explosion of camphor laurel. Much of the camphor was identified on council owned land, but also many privately owned spaces (owned by some of the same adjectives described landowners above). Some suggested there should be an eradication programme of camphor laurel with the areas cleared of the weed to be replanted with koala habitat trees. This method was seen as ‘killing two birds with one stone’ whereby

the weed would be removed and trees would be planted, without moving into land that might otherwise be used for grazing and/or crop production.

3.3 Other issues

Most were not aware of the **current legislation**, but there was no option in Part 3 of the survey to indicate 'I don't know' so responses were recorded as 'Neither' in most cases.

The issue of development and the clearing of koala habitat areas in the planning of peri-urban development areas was discussed. Several commented they were not opposed to development, but that development needed to be planned to make use of disused cane land, or previously cleared lands which were not adjacent to koala zones. As one landowner suggest, "Koalas cannot be moved; planning needs to be moved." Others suggested that in their experience, koalas and people can live together easily, with koalas seen to be adaptive to human presence, as long as their corridors are maintained.

Feral cats were noted as a concern by several landowners, with two asking why cats were not mentioned in the survey. After a brief google search, NG suggested that perhaps it was because they were known to attack only baby koalas, but this was in no way scientifically qualified!

The introduction of speed humps and road signage was seen as a waste of time and money in rural road areas as the koalas were rarely seen on the roadside, except in one area in the lower part of the Lismore Shire where the river and riparian zone trees border the road. Most respondents assumed that because the roads were long established that the koalas knew where to go. Such infrastructure was seen as more beneficial in newer developments which were intruding on established and document koala zones, as is the case with the new freeway extension through Ballina Shire for example, as well as other newer sub divisions such as the Plateau to the north of Lismore.

Another piece of infrastructure that was commented on was the use of **koala fences**, with one landowner suggesting that the use of koala fencing around certain areas "just gives the wild dogs in the area a place to feast every night, if they wanted to. The fences might keep the koalas 'safe' but they are also trapped!"

One landowner suggested the use of information nights which they had attended, run by the Friends of the Koala, were useful in understanding more about the species and the types of habitat they require for their existence. These were seen to be complimentary for all landowners, and perhaps might generate a different level of respect for the species, though the landowner did note that those who do not attend, are usually the ones which require the most information!

3.4 Preliminary Findings Summary

In summary, landowners that were part of this data collection phase were very aware of koalas as they seem to be a constant point of communication and discussion by all four local councils, though Ballina, Byron and Lismore were noted as the most active. For the future, there is a risk of landowners 'switching off' from the issue because they are "sick and tired of looking after koalas." Several landowners do not see them as being under any threat because of habitat loss, rather there is a threat from the wild dogs and threatened access to the habitat trees because of lack of maintenance. Importantly, the review of the responses and of the summary comments recorded in the survey data for all those interviews conducted face-to-face can provide individual perspectives.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This section draws together the key findings and recommendations for the use of the methods adopted in this round of field work and future research opportunities based on participant identified threats.

4.1 Survey methods

Recommendations:

- Work through the farming/ag liaison officer where possible to introduce the study to the landowners, recognising the sample will be biased;
- Invite those positive landowners to recommend others in their area who may provide an opposing view; and
- Keep in touch with council periodically throughout the visit to keep them updated on the progress.

4.1.2 Recruitment methods

The recruitment methods were numerous, however, there were two which were most useful. First was the direct email mailout by council reviewed above. In the council which provided the greatest connection, this email provided the names of seven landowners who had indicated by return email to council that they wanted to participate. This method provided a targeted sample, but a sample which included only those who were in a generally positive relationship with council, were connected to the internet, had access to a computer, and had knowledge of how to use email. This method limited those landowners without such access from being aware of the study and being invited to participate.

The second method which was most useful was the list of people provided by Dr Will Goulding from his personal visits to conduct ecology studies last year. Focused mostly on Lismore, this method provided fifteen names represented a range of landowners – both computer connected and not – who were already aware of the research project. Of this list, five landowners agreed to participate.

Another useful method was connecting to landowners through associations. The cane growers associations were very useful in connecting with six landowners in the Lismore and Ballina shires who participated. And although the Macadamia (maca) Society were very keen to assist, the late delivery of their newsletter item prevented greater numbers of maca growers from being included, if they wanted to be. Though one late email from a maca grower did result in an access code being issued on December 2, 2018.

The least useful method adopted was letterbox drops. The intent was to adapt a systematic random sample approach on the principle of attempting an every 'nth' house approach. Because of the size of the properties, the distance between letterboxes, and the obvious lack of knowledge of the landowners and their personality traits, there were several risks in attempting this method. As a single woman travelling country roads, on reflection, this method is not recommended in this context. There was concern that this method would result in obscure, misguided calls of interest which could result in more trouble than benefit. Perhaps if there were two researchers, one male and one female, the risk would be averted somewhat, but of course the cost of the research would increase to undertake letterbox drops.

Recommendations:

- Maintain the contact lists of landowner details generated from this study for future adaptations of this and related research;

- Connect early with associations to use their networks to share the information; and
- Use letterbox drops in more urban areas for those with smaller landholdings, but for larger landholdings, implemented by a single person, the method is not appropriate.

4.1.3 Types of survey administration

The use of the personalised visits for this set of landowners was most appropriate. Particularly when considering the number of landowners fitting the criteria who were older folks and who held little knowledge of computers, the personal visits and survey completion via laptop by NG was a very useful method of gathering these landowner's perspectives. At least 55% of respondents would not have been represented in this round of field work without such a personal visit. Even for those who were capable of completing the survey themselves, the individual visit provided greater context of the study and generated discussion and provided comments that might not otherwise have been considered important or useful.

Recommendations:

- For any future research where large landowners who farm/graze their land (and who are traditionally older and not computer literate) are pivotal to the survey findings, there needs to be a budget for personalised visits (with extension cord and mobile wi-fi in hand!); and
- Provide access codes for online completion, but where possible speak with the interested landowner on the phone ahead of completion to provide greater context and invite them to add as much information as they would like through the notes tabs on the maps and the summary box at the end.

4.1.4 Landuses of landowners

Recording these landuses was more for interest than of methodological concern, though it may provide additional context for the analysis phase of the research. Cattle farmers were identified as the largest cohort of respondents – both as a single farming interest and those sharing their landuse between cattle and cane. Other crops were less represented, which may skew the data somewhat, particularly given the number of macadamia farms in the Byron and Lismore shires. There was an attempt to include more maca farmers in the study through connection with the Australian Macadamia Society (see section 2.2 RM7), however, this was not successful in attracting respondents, aside from one late received email from an interested landowner.

In general, the farmers who participated had been on the land for several decades, some their whole lives. For some they had moved from one location to another, but had maintained connection to the land and its uses. They had an innate knowledge of the land and its capacity to provide space for the specific landuses and the relevant income they derived.

Recommendations

- Connect with a range of landowners where possible, through associations and societies where specific landusers are necessary to populate the survey.

4.2 Key points raised regarding threats

Wild dogs and maintenance of habitat areas were the largest threats identified by the respondents, not just to koala populations, but to wildlife in general across the study region.

4.2.1 Wild dogs

Wild dogs were identified as a growing concern, with more and more being sighted across the shires. Baiting programmes appear to work in some areas, though some considered the programmes not frequent enough and not large enough to combat the breeding cycles. The appearance of dingoes in the Tweed shire was concerning for landowners, reflecting that there is a real threat not only to wildlife and to large landowner residents, but to coastal residents and visitors, with the dingoes and mixed-bred dogs frequenting beaches on the coastal areas of the shire.

Recommendations

- There is **future opportunity for research into the threat of wild dogs** across the region. One respondent suggested a trapping or tagging programme (perhaps using tranquilising equipment to plant the tags) to track the areas the dogs are frequenting, including their dens to be effective in controlling litters.

4.2.2 Maintenance

The maintenance of habitats, or lack thereof, was a strong concern for most respondents. Either from a lack of slow burn management because of council regulations in this domain, or from 'lazy' or uninformed landowners who have little knowledge of how to maintain the land they have purchased, the threat to both wildlife and humans was evident. The connection to the land held by most landowners, as opposed to those seen as lazy, was the result of spending many decades on their land, working it and managing it as their parents and grandparents would have done. Some landowners felt the 'lifestylers' and hobbyist land purchasers now coming in looking for a 'tree change' added to the maintenance threat as they have little to no knowledge of the land and its maintenance needs.

There was a common view that concerned landowners that Council is unable to maintain their lands, as well as the lack of maintenance in nature reserves under the control of state government. Regulations have resulted in a lack of maintenance programmes, particularly around slow burns. The inaction regarding maintenance, and in particular, weed control, on council owned lands was seen as a great threat to koala (and other wildlife) populations. Several landowners reported the growing threat of camphor laurels across the study area.

Recommendations:

- Research incorporating landowners **knowledge of maintenance techniques** and frequency of certain strategies such as fire, could assist in mapping areas of threat to habitat.

4.2.3 Other threats

Other threats were identified as **development** and its related issues such as **tree clearing, adjacent land uses and their effects to habitats, fencing and ill-placed road infrastructure**. The threat of **camphor laurels** was seen not only as a threat under the heading of maintenance, but was also noted as an opportunity for councils to use the camphor laurel infested areas as replanting zones, clearing the camphor laurels and replanting food trees. They felt it was more effective to clear the camphor laurels and use these areas to replant food trees rather than using previously cleared land that could be used for other things – either farming or development.

Road infrastructure such as signage, fencing, and rumble strips were seen as inappropriate spending of limited council funding in areas which were known corridors and where roadways had been in existence

for many decades. Fences were seen as 'trapping' koalas, putting them 'on a platter' for wild dogs and other species, and were seen to be ineffective in keeping the koalas 'safe'. Most landowners indicated they rarely, if ever, saw koalas on the road – dead or alive – and thought there were other areas that could be invested in, such as retaining existing corridors and implementing infrastructure such as signs in newer developed areas.

Recommendations:

- **Mapping of camphor laurel** and the opportunities which exist to remove those and replant native food tree species is another opportunity for research;
- Conduct a study on the **placement of signage** in comparison to koala populations – dead or alive to ascertain effectiveness of investment; and
- As an interesting research project, perhaps for an honours or masters student, is to **study leaf chemistry of specific trees**. One landowner identified the impacts of a local wastewater treatment plant to local tree populations, noting that since the expansion of the wastewater plant that koalas are no longer frequenting the neighbouring trees. Leaf chemistry could be affected by this 'development'. A small study could be conducted to compare the leaf chemistry of these neighbouring trees to trees outside such a zone to determine any difference in nutrients.

5. Appendices

Appendix A: Flyer Version I – Large Landowner Landuse



Does koala habitat restoration affect your business land use? We would like to hear from you!

The University of Queensland (UQ) is leading a research project which is supported by four Northern Rivers regional councils and funded through the Australian Research Council. The project seeks to understand more about community attitudes towards koala habitat restoration.

At this time we are particularly interested in hearing from rural land holders on larger properties (20acres+) which operate industry or business on their land in the Lismore, Ballina, Byron and Tweed local government areas.

Land holders are invited to participate in the project by completing a survey. They can choose to be visited by one of our researchers to answer the survey questions in an individual interview, or complete the survey themselves, online. The survey needs to be completed by 30 November 2018.

If you are interested in participating, please phone UQ Research Assistant, Nicole Garofano, on 0400 812 398 or email n.garofano@uq.edu.au

For more information on the project, please contact Lead Investigator, Professor Clive McAlpine by email at c.mcalpine@uq.edu.au

 THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND AUSTRALIA | School of Earth and Environmental Sciences

Are you interested in providing your views on a community koala habitat research project?

The University of Queensland (UQ) is leading a research project which is supported by four Northern Rivers regional councils and funded through the Australian Research Council. The project seeks to understand more about community attitudes towards koala habitat restoration.

To help understand these attitudes, we are seeking rural land holders on larger properties (20acres+) in the four local government areas to complete our survey.

Landholders can choose to be visited by one of our researchers to answer the survey questions in an individual interview, or complete the survey themselves, online. The survey needs to be completed by 30 November 2018.

If you are interested in participating, please phone UQ Research Assistant, Nicole Garofano, on 0400 812 398 or email n.garofano@uq.edu.au

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