

Cumberland Plain Conservation Plan- Comments by Geoff Francis

The CPCP will involve the destruction of 1014 ha of Critically Endangered Cumberland Plain Woodland (CPW), more than 10% of the small remaining area of this Community. This is completely unacceptable. Some of this Community which will be destroyed lies within reserves such as Shanes Park and Wianamatta Regional Park. The connectivity of Colebee Nature Reserve with neighbouring bushland will also be destroyed. These reserves were offsets for previous developments such as the M7 Motorway and are administered by National Parks and Wildlife. They should have a high level of legal protection. The routes which have been chosen for the Outer Sydney Orbital (M9) and other main roads are extremely destructive. The M9 and other main roads need to be re-routed to bypass these reserves, or tunnelled underneath them.

The main offset which is proposed for the destruction of CPW and other Endangered Communities is the Georges River Koala Reserve along the southeastern margin of the Cumberland Plain. While this is a very worthwhile Reserve, and does contain some Critically Endangered Shale Sandstone Transition Forest (SSTF), it includes non-threatened sandstone plant communities and is not really a like-for-like offset for the destruction of CPW and related communities.

About 60% of the Georges River Koala Reserve consists of land which is in public ownership. Some of this publically-owned land consists of Council reserves which are managed for conservation under an existing plan of management. Thus some of the land to be incorporated in the Koala Reserve is land which is already protected. There is no real additionality in the rebranding of public land which is already protected. More of the offset for the destruction of CPW and related communities should be privately-owned land, and more of it should be located in core areas of the Cumberland Plain rather than on the southeastern margin.

The draft Sub-Plan B on Koalas maps several Koala corridors linking the Georges and Nepean Catchments (Figure 8). One of these, Corridor E (Ousedale Creek to Appin North) no longer exists. The eastern end of it was cut by the development of the Appin Way Greyhound Track, Macarthur Motorcycle Club and Delta Force Paintball Range between 1975 and 2010. The fences and other infrastructure on these sites obstruct wildlife movement. The eastern end of Corridor F has also been cut off by developments in Western Appin.

Other Koala corridors A to D linking the Georges and Nepean Catchments are mapped in the Sub-Plan. The draft Sub-Plan proposes that 120 km of Koala exclusion fencing be constructed, much of it along Appin Road, but does not include wildlife overpasses or underpasses. The construction of exclusion fencing without overpasses or underpasses will cut Koala corridors A to D and prevent them from functioning as corridors. Sub-Plan B needs to include at least one overpass or underpass per corridor for them to function as genuine Koala corridors.

The existing situation with road upgrades and widening in Western and Southwestern Sydney is very unsatisfactory. The Picton Road upgrade was planned and construction commenced without any provision for exclusion fencing or wildlife overpasses and underpasses. This increased Koala roadkill. Later, when funding from Save Our Species became available, it was retrofitted with a conventional

Cyclone fence without the flip-down or rollover top of a designed Koala exclusion fence. Although the fence has reduced Koala roadkill, this has been a very unsatisfactory process. On all future upgrades of roads running through Koala habitat, the need for designed Koala exclusion fencing and wildlife overpasses and underpasses should be a requirement for the approval of the project. It needs to be built into the project design, rather than retrofitted.

It is proposed that up to 100,000 trees should be planted to restore Koala habitat, mainly in the Georges River Koala Reserve and around Appin (Appendix A, Commitment 13). This raises the problem of ecological restoration of CPW and SSTF. There have been a few fairly successful attempts to regenerate small areas (up to 0.5 ha) of these communities, but they took decades. Attempts at rapid restoration of larger areas have either failed or are works in progress with uncertain outcomes.

One of the main limiting factors is modification of the soil by sowing exotic pasture grasses and fertilising them with Superphosphate, which was subsidised by the national government from the 1930s to the early 1970s. The modified soil inhibits the germination and growth of eucalypts and some native shrubs. Eucalypt plantings in soils like these are only likely to grow very slowly, and take a long time to grow large enough to become Koala food trees.

The other problem is the very vigorous and resilient pasture and other weeds, which grow very well in the modified soils and invade native plantings. Larger plantings of about 1 ha have actually been overrun by weeds. The requirement for post-planting weed control increases over time, until it exceeds the resources available for it.

Greening Australia developed a method of scalping the topsoil and mass planting by direct seeding. It removes the modified topsoil, and produces promising initial results after about 6 months. However, over a period of years there is increasing weed invasion of the plantings and bare patches where only the hardiest weeds can grow. At present, there are no really viable methods of rapid, large-scale restoration of CPW or SSTF.

This makes it critical to retain as much as possible of the surviving CPW and SSTF, rather than allow them to be destroyed in new developments. It also means that offsets for the destruction of these areas should be existing fair to good quality remnants of these communities, rather than clapped out former grazing land on which they have been badly degraded or destroyed.