



The international organisation dedicated
to saving the Koala and its habitat

8 October 2015

Ms. Lisa Neville,
Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water
Level 17, 8 Nicholson St.
East Melbourne
VIC 3002

Via Fax and email

Dear Minister Neville,

On behalf of the Australian Koala Foundation, I am writing in response to your letter emailed 21 September 2015. As with all Government correspondence it has been placed on the AKF website.

It does seem to me that you either did not want to answer my questions or you did not understand what I was asking. I think it is important to remember that everything I have asked should be public information and I hope you will reconsider your response. If not, I will ask your Shadow Minister to ask these questions for me. The public should be fully aware of what is happening to the Koalas of Cape Otway.

I was disappointed when I gained an impression from your letter that you feel the AKF may not be fully aware of what is happening in Victoria, and worse that you appear to have no interest in the AKF being included among the "animal welfare and ecological experts".

While watching a video of one Koala being released (too soon in my view) falling and staggering from the trees, I would again insist that the AKF sees and understands what research and ethics approvals are in place. The AKF Veterinary Protocols would not allow what we have seen in those videos. That is why your Department has done all it can to ensure that these protocols do not gain national recognition.

I was constantly asked by journalists in interviews, "What would AKF do?" I replied, "Thank goodness I am not the Minister, but I am confident AKF could help solve the problems."

Dead trees have been an issue ever since Koalas were put at Cape Otway in 1981 (as a tourist attraction), and solutions to this problem will take decades - probably centuries to fix.

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Unless you, as Minister, fundamentally understand what is happening, you and your successors will not solve it. Mr. Menkhorst said, and has said in the past, that there is a boom and bust cycle going on – I can assure you Minister that this is a disastrous approach to take.

Let me try and explain what we think is happening in Cape Otway and what has plagued your Department with its translocation program for nearly 80 years. You just pick Koalas up from trouble spots and dump them elsewhere, hoping that will fix the problem. Rather, the problem isn't fixed, and instead you've got two problems, which are left for others to solve in the future. And course the problem of dead trees is complex but I think you will be shocked to see how disastrous we feel your problem really is right now. I have to wonder whether you have been properly briefed.

I am going to use common names for the tree species - it will make it easier for you to understand.

Most people think that manna gum is just manna gum, but there are in fact two different types of manna gum that grow in the Otways. Koalas vastly prefer the **common manna gum**, which **does not** grow on the soils found on Cape Otway. Then there is **coastal manna gum**, which **does** grow on the poorer sandy soils of Cape Otway. It is not a primary food source for Koalas in Victoria (see attached food pyramid).

Because of the complexities of ranking and determining good quality habitat, I am going to try and explain to you why and how a Koala needs more than one or two species for a healthy diet.

Humans need a food triangle of healthy food; without it, we ultimately get sick and diseased. Koalas do too.

If I can use the human food triangle example – a balanced diet consists of meat, potatoes, pumpkin, beans, peaches, pudding, ice-cream and a dinner mint. I have spent 28 years learning this logic and I imagine your scientists will, as always, dismiss my simplistic wording. Journalists however will not, and I can assure you that this is all based on millions of dollars' worth of science.

In healthy Victorian habitats, Koalas will have a varied diet from a range of food trees. In different soil types Koalas eat different species. There is the meat (the primary Koala food



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species) – in Victoria these are species such as monkey gum, common manna gum and river red gum.

The meal is served with vegetables (the secondary Koala food species): potatoes (blue gum), pumpkin (coastal manna gum), carrots (messmate) and beans (brown stringybark). And the meal is rounded off with ice cream (swamp gum), maybe some pudding (mountain ash) and an after-dinner mint (narrow leaved peppermint). Yes, the mint is actually a mint!

This diversity is important, both for the Koala, but also for the trees to keep them healthy.

In Cape Otway, the Koalas only have one choice: pumpkin (coastal manna gum). That is their sole food source. The other components of a healthy diet are completely missing. They have been eating pumpkin for nearly 34 years. No wonder it is disastrous for both the Koala and the trees.

Tree plantings in the area since 2012 have focussed on planting more pumpkins (coastal manna gum), with some carrots (messmate). I would be embarrassed if I was the one responsible for choosing the wrong species of tree to plant at Cape Otway. Who made that decision? Plus, it will be at least ten years or more before these trees are of any use to Koalas; it will take twenty to thirty years or more before Koalas can make full use of them and many trees will not survive the climatic conditions. Only 30% may survive.

Sadly, Koalas should never have been put into this landscape, because the preferred trees (meat) for Victorian Koalas do not grow well on these soils. Indeed, Koalas did not ever live in Cape Otway prior to the 1981 translocation. There were none there. The release site was a disastrous choice, like many other release sites I have seen and experienced.

Couple that with other problems on the Cape – the bracken fern, the lack of connectivity, the presence of plant pathogens etc. – and it is no wonder the trees are dying and the Koalas are wasting.

As an aside, when I have visited every other site in Victoria that was or has been a dead tree site – I have seen possums galore in the night eating the trees. Your department needs to convince me that possum levels are not also to blame for tree deaths.

AKF has assumed your Department has checked to see whether there is species diversity at the chosen release sites but if I were you, I would check. I am disappointed that you refuse to consult with the AKF or provide us with the science to support your choice of release sites. The media think the Koalas are going to “live happily ever after”, and perhaps they will.



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It would be a PR disaster to have them die. I suspect they will be given royal treatment, and about time.

Let me close by saying it is disappointing how quickly your department, time and again, turns the blame for the situation at Cape Otway onto Koalas. I am hoping my pumpkin lecture will give you food for thought.

Your department, in my view does not have the slightest interest in attempting to disentangle what is driving tree deaths in the area; the only action your department ever takes is the reactive culling of Koalas. Until the root causes of tree death in the area are identified, this is a problem that will just keep occurring. I hope you will see in the attached diagram that we are pretty sure the Koalas have just been on the ghastly end of bad government decisions for decades. Your department should be, and probably are, aware and better still inform the public correctly. I am hoping this is news to you and if not, then I wonder why you have not explained this to the journalists who visited during the best practice show recently.

I am hoping you might also acknowledge that part of the problem is the lack of engagement from your department. Koala management in Victoria has been shrouded in secrecy for years. If the current actions your department is undertaking in Cape Otway are truly justified, then there should be no problem with ending this secrecy and better still open the debate for discussion.

I would hope that in your next reply you answer all our questions in a thorough and informed manner and of course AKF would be prepared to engage in dialogue.

Yours faithfully,

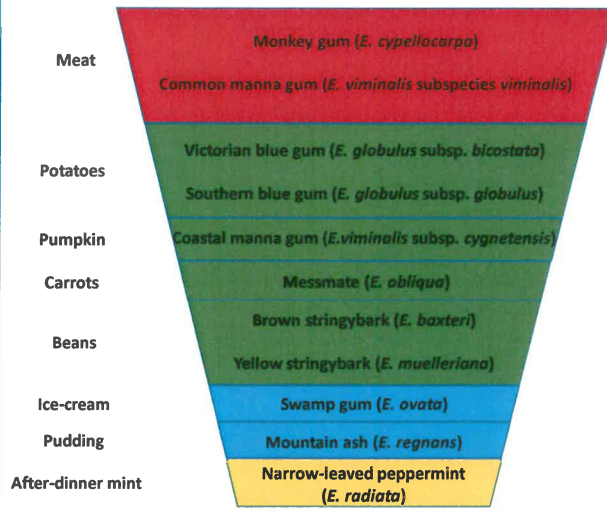
A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Deborah Tabart OAM".

Deborah Tabart OAM
Chief Executive Officer
Australian Koala Foundation

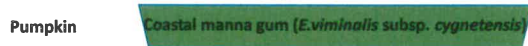


Victoria's Koala Food Pyramid

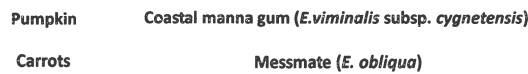
Koalas in coastal areas of Western Victoria would normally be eating this:



Koalas translocated to Cape Otway in 1981 have only had:

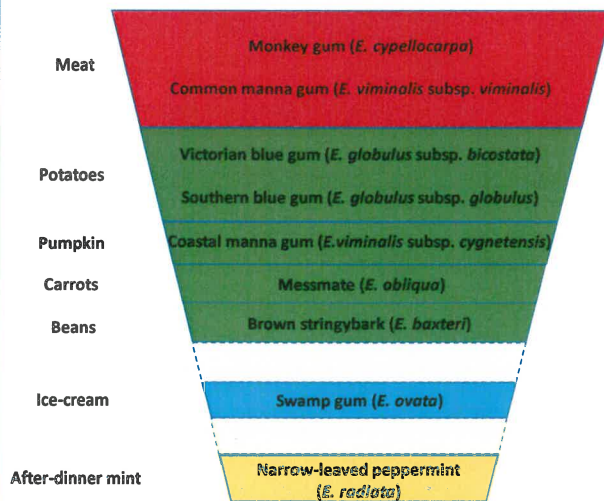


Who decided to plant 93,000 new trees at Cape Otway since 2012, but only planted pumpkin and carrots?*



* Koalas will not be able to use these trees until 2025 (at the earliest)

The Victorian Government is going to relocate Koalas to areas around Lorne. The AKF thinks these trees should be present at any potential release site †:



† AKF assumes the Victoria Government has checked to see whether these species are present before releasing any Koalas.