

Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

Cooperation to protect communities, koalas and long-nosed potoroos

Phil Paterson

NSW Rural Fire Service Hotspots Project

[Link to slides](#)

Before I start I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this country and pay my respect to elders past and present. As this discussion is primarily about cooperation and looking at outcomes from a range of agencies I'd also like to acknowledge some important people that are part of that process: Chris Allen from National Parks who's managing the koala project, Olivia Ford from Local Land Services and is involved with the potoroos along with her colleague Cathy Thomas who is a traditional owner and Paul Stewart chair of Biamanga National Park who's also involved with that project. The other part of our Hotspots team in this region, my colleague Kevin Taylor who works with us an ecologist.

The work I'd like to highlight today is a community based project that has come out of running Hotspots workshops and it's about empowering communities and aiming for multiple outcomes including: the capacity to manage and mitigate risks to the community and assets; and actively involving communities in the plans of management for two threatened species populations, the koala and the long-nosed potoroo. The project is running on the NSW south coast around the Bermagui area. Originally we were approached by Chris Allen who has been involved in a long-term koala strategy over a broad landscape. To give some perspective, we move through a greater landscape from areas south of Bermagui. This image shows a fairly typical coastal landscape in this area (slide 2) and is a combination of really old landscapes and really new landscapes. On the coast there are lots of these intermittently closed and open lake systems. It's also a really important landscape for traditional owners. We've been working over a relatively large landscape. We've held two workshops, one was at Tanja which is about 30 kilometres south of Bermagui and the other closer in to the Bermagui area.

The significance of the local koala population is that it's the only population of koalas on the coast between Newcastle and the Victorian border. It's small and we think that perhaps there's between 60 to 80 animals and its spread over a big area. It's a fairly healthy population, but obviously key threatening processes are things like fire. The potoroo are confined to specific areas, including the rainforest gullies and moving out into these previous agricultural areas. A lot of this area has been logged, a lot has been agricultural land. The community is quite diverse. There was agriculture and logging in the area but recently there has been a shift to lifestyle blocks. There is very high tourism value in the area and it's a tremendously significant landscape for the traditional landowners. There's also three really significant National Parks, Mimoso Rocks, Guliga and Biamanga. The Guliga and Biamanga Parks are significant as they are managed by the traditional owners, and I'd like to acknowledge the work of Paul Stewart and others on the board of management for these parks. We can't do the work of this project without getting local buy-in and local knowledge.

One of the considerations we had in developing this project was how to get local ownership and local buy-in from the community. Originally we ran a Hotspots workshop but with added key messages related to managing potoroos and managing koalas. Part of what we did to get the community ownership was then to run smaller workshops in other regions in the area which we ran between the two key workshop programs. Through this process people developed their own fire management plans for their properties and then began to look more broadly at the greater landscape and consider how they could cooperate with neighbours. Operationally we came out with some good things like local fire action plans, so people were starting to become actively involved in looking at their own property risks but were also develop an understanding of the principles of managing fire in the broader landscape.

Participants of this project were involved in some of the survey work for koalas and potoroos. There was a big band of volunteers who surveyed for koalas and similarly for the potoroo. The project itself is also involved in some of the monitoring work and Kevin Taylor went down prior to the second workshop where we did the burn and invited community along to be involved in Elliott trapping over the area. Olivia and Cathy Thomas put in camera traps and in the area also. Volunteers went in and surveyed for koala activity. This work opened up the capacity for Olivia and Cathy, Paul and Chris to go onto individual properties and do further survey work on private properties they otherwise wouldn't have had access to. All of the participants are now part of that survey project.

We also trained local volunteers to assist in delivering the workshops. Where there is a fire component in the workshops we trained the local RFS volunteers. This process has helped to develop the local connections with the community. The local brigade had great fun being involved and learnt a lot about the implications of fire for koalas and potoroos. This also provides the local RFS with an opportunity to connect more closely with the local community and develop trust. The survey work strengthened these developing connections even further.

The camera traps at the burn site and nearby interface areas that Cathy was working with gave us some great images of the local fauna (slide 6-10) including this antechinus, a fox, a long-nosed bandicoot and a potoroo. These images were taken in an interface area where forest moved into an area that had been grazed. Foxes are a key threatening process for the potoroo. There were potoroos on the property and adjoining gullies where we did the burn, so these are fairly significant areas. This image is of a local koala (slide 11) that appeared about a week after we put in the burn at Tanja. He's a single male and was found near the road. They checked him out for chlamydia and other health issues and released him back into the bush you see here.

The survey work was done by a combination of RFS staff and local volunteers and a lot of work was done with the RFS state mitigation team. We're also about to get a dog to help with this surveying work. All of this is supporting us in getting the buy-in from the local RFS crews. This map (slide 13) shows the mapping results from the surveys which highlight the areas of activity for the koala. This was important to be completed before we put in the burn.

There have been many important outcomes from this work and this has helped to set our future direction for the area. We are going to set up a "cafe" or Community Hub comprised of members of the community and local "experts". This group will have access to the agencies we've been working with and potential to influence relevant work. This Hub is based around the community rather than around an agency. We've been able to establish important networks for a range of community interests

including networks with RFS district and brigade, National Parks, Local Land Services and traditional owners. The community has become actively involvement in development of bush fire risk management plans with a “whole of landscape” approach. This supports us in integrating these threatened species in the plans of management. Community is working closely with RFS and other agencies in managing hazard and there is the capacity to develop training and further information opportunities for local community. There will be ongoing community involvement in the fauna monitoring. One of the further outcomes is a significant research program put into place by OEH focusing on koalas and the recruitment of preferred habitat trees.

The next step we’ll take with the project is to use our Phoenix program to look at predicted fire behaviour over the landscape in a range of scenarios. We’ll look at predicted fire impact and intensities over the area and consider how this will impact the koalas and potoroos and then consider how to build this understanding into the plan of management. This also relates to how this will impact on the community as we need to consider how to exclude fire from certain areas where possible whilst still protecting the community. There is a high level of cooperation in this project with sharing of data and resources between OEH and RFS. This will be ongoing and connect with land managed by traditional owners and how they will manage risks in these areas.