

They're Killing Blinky Bill

Who (among Aussie readers) didn't count Blinky Bill and his bushland friends among their best friends during childhood?

(Readers outside Australia, google 'Blinky Bill', by Dorothy Wall)

The koala is an Australian icon. It attracts tourism. It drives campaigns for eucalyptus reforestation and preservation of wildlife habitats. Our furry friend is loved, it seems, the world over. But the koala is in grave danger of becoming extinct. Greedy developers and irresponsible regulators have converted thousands of hectares of the bush land it calls home to forests of brick and mortar.

Greedy timber merchants have cut down hundreds of thousands of the trees that provide the animals with food and shelter.

Our wildlife has been chased further and further into the remotest parts of the country where it struggles to survive.

On the Tweed Coast - an area where once the koala bred prolifically - there are just 144 of the species left. About 31 of these live in the Black Rocks area. Many of those live in the area immediately adjacent to Black Rocks Sports Ground. It's a key breeding area for koala, osprey, curlew, and other iconic wildlife. Echidnas amble across the roads and into nearby gardens regularly.

There are expensive programs in operation, partly funded by the local council, to re-establish eucalypt forest and preserve the bush land in the area. Local residents aggressively support those programs, having bought into the area at premium prices specifically because they love living in proximity to beautiful bush land and the wonderful native fauna that inhabit it. So you would think it logical that Tweed Shire Council would be quick to reject a proposal to convert a small, lightly used sports ground to a high use night sports ground with football towers and 48,000 watt lighting.

You would think the mere suggestion of a liquor license would horrify, and any hint of an expanded 25 ha recreation facility with potential to host motor cross events, go karts, shooting, paint ball, golf, etc. would horrify. Particularly after locals complained bitterly about wild partying at the sports ground with accompanying drag races, vandalism, littering and excessive noise, and council locked the gates on the road entering the sports ground in response, you would think there could be no way any councillor would endorse a proposal that involved opening the road to hoons, and allowing bright lights to blaze well into the night.

You would think... but you would be wrong!

Greed prevails. The almighty dollar speaks all languages, and pursuit of it—not concern for the local ratepayers who elect them — takes precedence over any concern for the environment or our native animal friends. Rich developers influence councillors decisions, it seems.

Tweed Shire Council is said to be looking favourably at a proposal that threatens to kill off Blinky Bill and his mates forever —to deprive future generations of the pleasure of his company and the right of quiet enjoyment of the beautiful habitat that he made his home.

It appears Council approval of the proposal might actually be illegal. Law and policy states that development in and around koala habitats must be "appropriate". This isn't. Policy states that sporting facilities should be centrally located and close to schools. This one is many miles away.

There are already adequate sporting facilities in Pottsville, servicing a very small community. Existing facilities are underused. We don't need more. Residents don't want more.

But Blinky Bill and his mates don't generate revenue for councils. Protecting wildlife doesn't win favours from rich land developers whose activities grow council coffers.

So Blinky Bill may soon be nothing but a fond memory - or a mythical literary character that readers think was a figment of Dorothy Wall's imagination.

The cuddly koala might exist exclusively in zoos —or, all too soon, not at all.

I am among the privileged Black Rocks residents who watch them mate in trees just beyond my living room window. My husband often uses a telescopic lens to photograph them chomping happily on the leaves of trees that grow just beyond our fence. We see them in the trees right beside that currently closed road into the sports ground, and we say a quiet thank you that cars can't enter, because we know that they wander across that road often.

But the car tracks are clearly visible where the hoons did wheelies a few months back, and in a few weeks Council is likely to clear the way for that activity to resume and increase.

Our furry friends will have to find new homes, or perish.

I have started a petition at change.org. I'm seeking support for demands that council stop this irresponsible development and observe its own policy of working to protect koala habitat. You don't need to be a local to influence council's decision. This is a tourist destination — thanks partly to the beautiful bush land that surrounds it and the native animals that breed here. Council has to listen to all voices - from anywhere in the world. You can help save Blinky Bill and his mates.

You can help ensure that the lovely furry koala we all love so dearly continues to thrive on the Tweed Coast, and in other areas of Australia where councils, mindful of the precedents being set in Tweed, will feel compelled to respect the wishes of the people and do what is right for the environment and our native flora and fauna.

Blinky Bill will be deeply grateful—and so will I.