

Koalas – past and present

History of koalas in Australia (European settlement to 1930)

Before European settlement of Australia it is thought that koalas were common across their natural range. Koalas occupied large tracts of eucalypt forests from north Queensland down the east coast of Australia to the south-east corner of South Australia. Habitat and food preferences of koalas, which differ across their range, determine the distribution of this species.

Colonisation of Australia by the early settlers resulted in the clearance of eucalypt forests for agricultural and pastoral use, and timber for building. Eucalypt forests near watercourses were significantly impacted or totally cleared. As the number of settlers increased koalas become the target of hunting and a growing fur trade. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the koala fur trade resulted in the death of several million koalas across eastern Australia. At the same time their distribution and numbers were also being significantly reduced by other factors such as disease.

In the early 1900s State Governments introduced legislation to protect the koala with the Commonwealth Government introducing controls relating to the export of koala skin. On 10 November 1927, the Commonwealth Government stopped issuing permits that allowed for the export of koala fur.

History of koalas in South Australia

In South Australia, koalas were historically only found in the lower south east and were thought to be extinct by the 1930s due to hunting for the fur trade. Public concern for the koala resulted in their protection under state and commonwealth legislation. The koala fur trade ceased by 1930.

Between 1923 and 1925, 18 koalas, sourced from French Island in Victoria, were introduced to Flinders Chase National Park on Kangaroo Island in an attempt to conserve the species, which at that time was considered under threat. These animals were released into an enclosure at Rocky River, within the National Park. This population quickly became established and some animals managed to escape from the enclosure. These koalas successfully moved into nearby areas and their numbers rapidly increased. The overbrowsing of eucalyptus trees by large populations of koalas was first reported in the mid 1960s.

From 1959 -1969 koalas from Kangaroo Island were also successfully introduced to a number of other locations in South Australia including the Mount Lofty Ranges, the Riverland and Eyre Peninsula. In 1969, koalas were reintroduced to the south east - their former natural range.

In 1997, the Koala Management Program began on Kangaroo Island following concern about the damage koalas were causing to eucalyptus trees from overbrowsing, and the impact of this on the long-

term survival of the koalas. Koalas do not regulate their breeding according to the amount of available habitat as many other native species are able to, and will continue to breed even when the habitat cannot support any more koalas, as is the concern on Kangaroo Island. Without proper management in natural areas, Kangaroo Island's koalas could potentially eat all of their available food supply and starve. In addition to the effects of this on the trees themselves and the koalas, this would also negatively impact other local species reliant upon those trees as an important part of their ecosystem.

The purpose of the Kangaroo Island Koala Management Program is to effectively manage the koala population on Kangaroo Island, given the abovementioned concerns. This involves managing habitat through restoration of natural areas overbrowsed by koalas, and managing koalas through surgical sterilisation and translocation programs. The latter involves moving koalas away from critically damaged natural areas on Kangaroo Island, to the south east of South Australia (the koala's former natural range).

Not all koalas look the same

Koalas have adapted to the environments where they live. For example, koalas found in Queensland and northern New South Wales have short fur, which is an adaptation to the warm and tropical temperatures experienced in this part of Australia. Koalas found in South Australia and Victoria have longer fur to keep them warm in cooler, temperate regions. Southern koalas are also significantly larger than koalas found in Queensland and northern New South Wales.

	Northern koalas	Southern koalas
Distribution	Queensland Northern New South Wales	Southern New South Wales Australian Capital Territory Victoria South Australia
Fur	Short grey fur. Coat colour can vary between individual animals and due to age.	Dark brown or grey, heavier and shaggier fur. Longer fur in their ears and around their face.
Size * (head and body length)	Male 674mm to 736mm (average 705mm) Female 648mm to 723mm (average 687mm)	Male 750mm to 820mm (average 782mm) Female 680mm to 730mm (average 716mm)
Weight *	Male 4.2 to 9.1kg (average 6.5kg) Female 4.1 to 7.3kg (average 5.1kg)	Male 9.5 to 13.5kg (average 11.8kg) Female 7.0 to 9.8kg (average 7.9kg)

* Source: Strahan, Ronald (Ed) (1998) Complete Book of Australian Mammals, Australian Museum.

Conservation status of koalas in Australia

The conservation status of the koala varies between states and geographical regions.

STATE / TERRITORY JURISDICTION	CONSERVATION STATUS	STATE LEGISLATION
Queensland South East Queensland (Koala Coast region) Rest of State	Vulnerable Least concern	<i>Nature Conservation Act 1992</i>
New South Wales	Vulnerable Two populations listed as endangered	<i>Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995</i> <i>National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974</i>
Australian Capital Territory	Not listed	<i>Nature Conservation Act 1980</i>
Victoria	Protected Not listed	<i>Wildlife Act 1975</i> <i>Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988</i>
South Australia	Protected	<i>National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972</i>

(Source: National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009-2014)

National koala conservation and management strategy

The South Australian Government (Department of Environment and Natural Resources - DENR) is a representative on the National Koala Conservation Strategy Steering Committee, which contributed to the development of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009 - 2014. The Strategy provides a national framework for the conservation of koalas.

DENR is also a member of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy Implementation Team. The Implementation Team is involved with promoting and coordinating the actions identified in the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009 - 2014.

References | Further reading

National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009 - 2014

Phillips, Bill (1990) *Koalas: the little Australians we'd all hate to lose*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra

Hunter, Simon (1987) *The Official Koala Handbook*, Chatto & Windus Ltd, London