



Australian Government

Department of Sustainability, Environment,
Water, Population and Communities

Koala populations in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory and national environment law

Australia's most at-risk populations of koalas (*Phascolarctos cinereus*)—those in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory are protected under national environment law. The federal environment minister listed Australia's most at risk koala populations in April 2012 as vulnerable under national environment law.

Species description

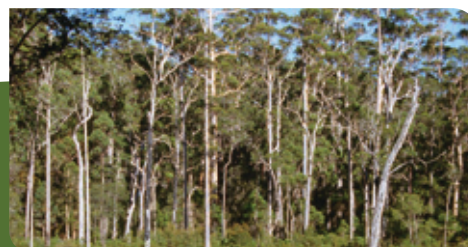
The koala is a tree-dwelling, medium-sized marsupial with a stocky body, large rounded ears, sharp claws and variable but predominantly grey-coloured fur. Males generally are larger than females and there is a gradient in body weight from north to south across their range, with larger individuals in the south and smaller individuals in the north. The average weight of males is 6.5 kg in Queensland, compared with 12 kg in Victoria. Koalas in the north tend to have shorter, silver-grey fur, whereas those in the south have longer, thicker, brown-grey fur.



Is there just one species of koala?

There is only one species of koala. Differences in physical features such as fur colour and body size are attributed to different environmental conditions rather than subspecies differentiation. DNA studies conducted in the 1990s support the conclusion

that rather than be separated into subspecies, the koala should be conserved across Australia as a single species but conservation should also recognise the importance of sub-populations to ensure genetic variation and resilience are maintained.



INDICATIVE MAP ONLY

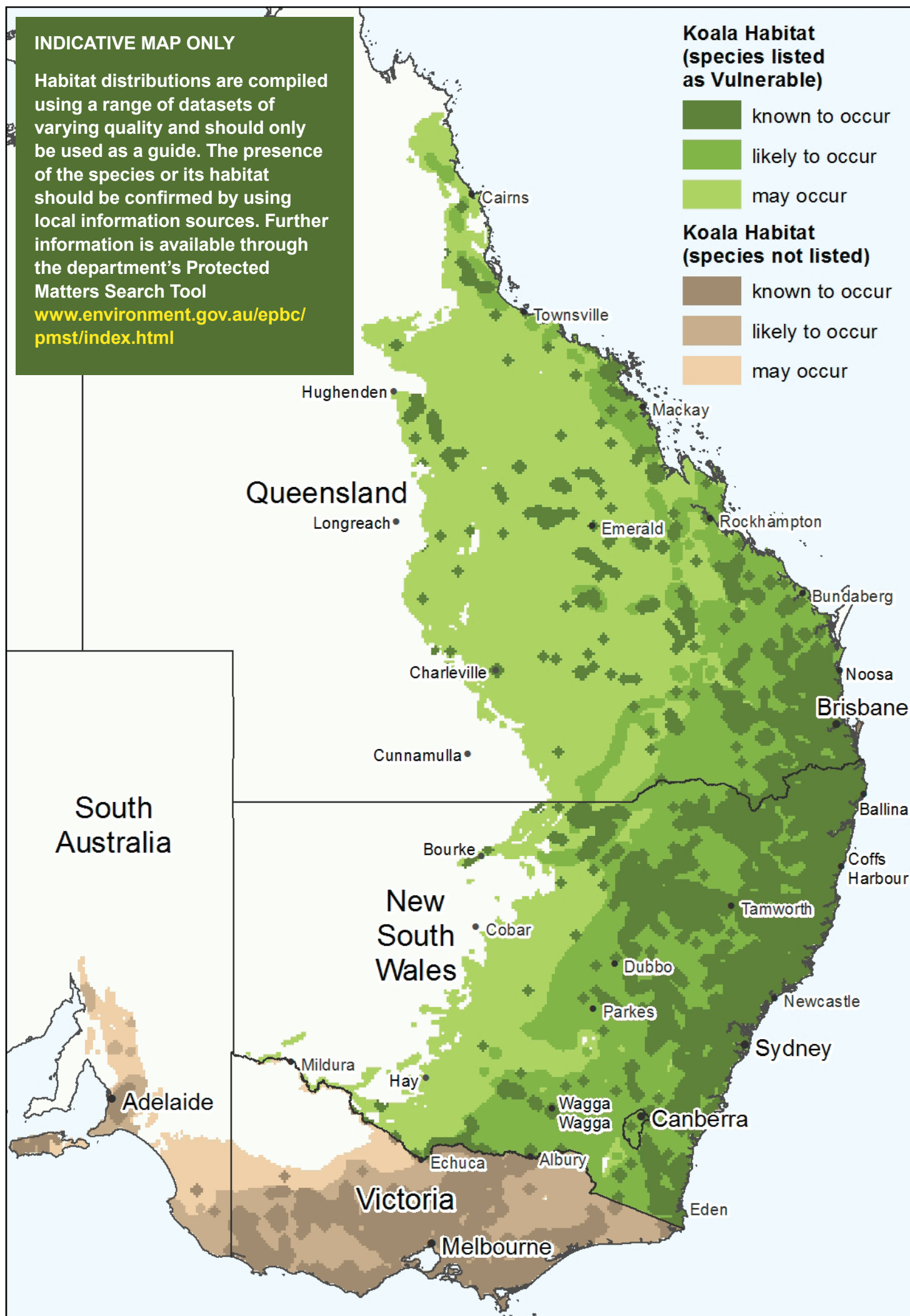
Habitat distributions are compiled using a range of datasets of varying quality and should only be used as a guide. The presence of the species or its habitat should be confirmed by using local information sources. Further information is available through the department's Protected Matters Search Tool www.environment.gov.au/epbc/pmst/index.html

Koala Habitat (species listed as Vulnerable)

- known to occur
- likely to occur
- may occur

Koala Habitat (species not listed)

- known to occur
- likely to occur
- may occur



Where is the koala found?

The koala is native to Australia and widely distributed from northern Queensland to the Eyre Peninsula west of Adelaide in South Australia. Koalas have been moved to new locations and reintroduced into areas, and now occur outside their original natural habitat such as on islands off Victoria, South Australia and Queensland. Habitat distributions are compiled using a range of datasets of varying quality and should only be used as a guide. The presence of the species or its habitat should be confirmed by using local information sources. Further information is available through the department's Protected Matters Search Tool www.environment.gov.au/epbc/pmst/index.html

Habitat description and characteristics of the listed populations

Koalas live in a range of temperate, sub-tropical and tropical forest, woodland and semi-arid communities dominated by eucalypt species. Their distribution is also affected by altitude, temperature and, at the western and northern ends of the range, leaf moisture.

As a leaf-eating specialist, the koala's diet is restricted mainly to foliage of eucalyptus species. They have been observed sitting in or eating up to 120 species of eucalypt, but individual koalas usually get most of their nutrition from one or a few species found at a single site. Preferences may also vary between regions or seasons.

Essentially, just about anywhere there are gum trees there may be koalas. They can be sparsely distributed, and hard to see, so that people may not even know they are around.

What threats do the most at-risk koala populations face?

With so much habitat already lost and fragmented, koala populations may be more susceptible to the effects of drought, climate change and disease. Urban expansion continues to threaten koalas, particularly in coastal regions, both through vegetation loss, vehicle strike, and the threat of predation by dogs.

Why was this approach taken for the species listing?

Some regions have seen their koala populations decline over a number of years, while others have relatively high populations. For example, koala populations on Kangaroo Island and in parts of Victoria are considered too large to be sustainable for their habitat and need to be managed through supervised translocation and sterilisation.

At the other end of the spectrum, koala populations in some parts of coastal Queensland and New South Wales face an increasing threat from urban expansion, disease, habitat loss, vehicle strike, and predation by dogs. Koala populations in these areas may also be more susceptible to the effects of drought and climate change.





Due to the wide variations in population size, health and status, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee recommended that a blanket or a one-size-fits-all approach to a koala species listing would be inappropriate and did not recommend a listing of the whole or national koala population.

The Committee recommended that koala populations in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory were most at risk and required listing under national environment law to ensure the species sustainability. The Committee recommended that protecting koalas in these areas provided for the best conservation outcome for the koala.

The Committee's advice is available at www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=85104

The impact of species listing for the koala in Queensland, NSW and the ACT

National environment protection of the Queensland, New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory koala populations strengthened the existing state and territory protections for this iconic species. National

environment protection doesn't mean that all activities in these areas will require federal environmental approval.

At the householder level, minor activities, such as cutting down a single tree on private land in an area where koalas are listed under national environment law, are highly unlikely to require federal environment approval.

At the planning level, sustainable development that takes into account koala protection can continue, even in urban and peri-urban areas with koala populations.

Only projects likely to have a significant impact on the koala population in Queensland, New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory will need to be assessed under national environment law.

Any new development or project that is deemed to have an unacceptable impact on the listed koala populations will not be approved under national environment law.

Federal environment protection does not mean that anyone accidentally killing or injuring a koala has committed an offence under national environmental law. For example, it is not an offence if you accidentally hit one with your car or if your dog attacks one. In most instances like these, national environment law will not be triggered, with some exceptions, such as on Commonwealth land. State and territory laws may also apply if you kill or injure a koala.

The federal government is developing guidelines to assist landowners and landholders, business and industry that will clarify whether a development will need federal environment approval.



In the meantime the Interim Koala Referral Advice for Proponents has been released and is available at www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/interim-koala-referral-advice.html. This provides preliminary advice on whether a proponent needs to refer their action for assessment under the national environment law.

Making a referral

Under national environment law it is the responsibility of the landholder, owner, business or individual to determine if any new activity or development requires referral under national environment law. To get a decision on whether your project or development requires national environment approval you are required to submit a referral that describes what activity you intend to carry out, where it is to occur and what the likely environmental impacts are. This form is available at www.environment.gov.au/epbc/assessments/referral-form.html

Protecting the Koala

The ongoing conservation of koalas is a matter for all governments; federal, state and local. The Australian Government played a key role in the development of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy 2009–14. The strategy coordinates national action on koala conservation, with state and territory governments being the focal point for the implementation of many of the identified on-ground koala conservation activities.

Building upon the work of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy, a koala recovery plan will be developed under national environmental law. A recovery plan sets out what must be done to protect and restore important populations of threatened species and their habitat, as well as how to manage and reduce threats. Recovery plans achieve this aim by providing a planned and logical framework for key interest groups and responsible government agencies to coordinate their work to improve the plight of threatened species and/or ecological communities. The koala recovery plan will start following the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy's conclusion at the end of 2014.

Since the 2008–09 financial year, the Australian Government has provided more than \$13.6 million of funding to protect the koala. This includes the Australian Government commitment last year to provide over \$10 million under the Biodiversity Fund for projects aimed at rehabilitation, restoration and linking of koala habitat and \$3.6 million of funding for the support for projects and activities run through programs such as the National Environment Research Program, Caring for our Country, Australian Research Council and the Endangered Species Program. These projects involve habitat rehabilitation, revegetation, biodiversity improvement and connectivity and resilience, species monitoring, removal of invasive species, community awareness to stop habitat degradation, improvement to land management practices, development of education and management material, improving ecosystem health and creating corridors or areas of safe passage for koalas.





Recommendations for listing the koala: Senate inquiry and Threatened Species Scientific Committee

The federal environment minister made the decision to list Australia's most at-risk koala populations in April 2012 after considering advice from the Threatened Species Scientific Committee and a Senate inquiry into koalas. Reporting in September 2011 the Senate inquiry recommended that the Threatened Species Scientific Committee review its advice to the minister in 2010 not to list any koala populations in light of the new information presented to the Senate inquiry. The inquiry also asked the federal environment minister to look at options to improve the conservation status of the New South Wales and Queensland koala populations to ensure a resilient population is maintained.

Taking this into account in November 2011 the Scientific Committee found that the koala faced stark conservation challenges across much of its distribution, and was approaching the loss threshold of 30 per cent across Australia for listing as threatened at the national level. The overall figures did not reflect the serious decline and vulnerability of the New South Wales, Queensland and Australian Capital Territory populations.

Accordingly, the Committee advised the minister that the koala populations in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory met the eligibility threshold for a national threatened species listing as 'vulnerable' and required conservation management. This finding replaced the Committee's 2010 advice to the minister.

For links to more information on the Koala and the species listing process go to www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species/koala

