

Koalas at Cape Otway

Koalas in the Otways: understanding the facts

Victoria and South Australia have large and thriving koala populations, especially around the coastal areas of Cape Otway which contain one of the most favoured koala habitats, Manna Gum woodland.

In contrast to Victoria and South Australia's secure koala populations, koala populations in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australia Capital Territory are in decline and have been listed as Vulnerable under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

Cape Otway Koala population

Due to hunting, land clearance, wildfires and disease pressure, koala populations declined significantly in the late 1800s, leaving only a few remnant populations on the mainland and some translocated populations on French and Phillip Island.

From the 1920s to 1980s, translocation programs successfully reintroduced koalas back to what is thought to be their natural range in Victoria.

In 1981, 75 koalas were reintroduced to Cape Otway from French Island. These animals are the founding individuals of the current Cape Otway koala population.

The favourable diet and climatic conditions at Cape Otway, along with the absence of predators, disease and wildfires, and a high koala fertility rate, has enabled the Cape Otway koala population to grow rapidly.

The population inhabits the favoured Manna Gum woodland, which occurs predominantly on private land.

Koala over-abundance

At the time of the translocation to Cape Otway the Manna Gum woodlands covered approximately 450 hectares. No significant land clearing has occurred since the introduction, but over-browsing by the rapidly increasing koala population has significantly reduced the condition and amount of habitat.

A sustainable koala density in Victoria is considered to be less than one koala per hectare in most native forests and woodlands.

By 2013 and 2014, koala population densities were reaching up to 20 Koalas per hectare at Cape Otway.

Current koala densities at Cape Otway vary, but are as high as 17 per hectare in some areas.

Where populations of koalas are higher than sustainable levels, over-browsing and defoliation of favoured food species leads to starvation and ultimately death.

Cape Otway Koalas are able to move from the favoured Manna Gum woodland on private land into the adjacent mixed species forests of the Great Otway National Park, but it appears that a rapid change in diet is not easily tolerated and koalas are reluctant to move from the Manna Gum trees.

Managing Koala over-abundance

Over-abundance of koalas at Cape Otway is a complex long-term issue brought about by their love of Manna Gums, their reluctance to change food source, favourable climatic conditions and an absence of predators in the area.

Management of over-abundant koala populations can involve a range of measures aimed at improving the welfare of the koalas and the health of the vegetation, including:

- translocation,
- fertility control
- tree protection; and

- in extreme cases welfare interventions may need to take place to ease the suffering of any sick or starving koalas.

In early 2015, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) consulted a panel of animal welfare and ecological experts on how to proactively manage the koala overabundance at Cape Otway.

DELWP now has short-term actions in place and a pathway to long-term management of the koala overabundance at Cape Otway.

The Cape Otway Koala Management Actions (see www.delwp.vic.gov.au for a copy) aim to achieve healthy native forests and a sustainable population of healthy koalas at Cape Otway.

The welfare of koalas is our first priority and has guided the staged action approach.

Management actions

Emergency Welfare Intervention – 2013/2014

When the Cape Otway koala population density reached an unsustainable peak in 2013, an emergency welfare intervention program was initiated by the Department.

During the interventions, captured koalas were assessed by veterinarians based on Koala Welfare Assessment Guidelines, developed by Zoos Victoria veterinarians and the Department.

A total of 960 Koalas were assessed. 686 koalas were found to be in very poor health and were subsequently humanely euthanased by veterinarians. The euthanasia of koalas was not undertaken lightly, but was considered necessary to protect koala welfare.

After the intervention koala population density at Cape Otway was still high.

Health Assessment - May 2015

The first recommended action by the newly convened expert panel was to conduct a koala health assessment to gain information about the health status of the population and how that relates to the condition of habitat.

During the four day health assessment a total of 100 koalas were captured and their health assessed from

10 sites across Cape Otway, with varying tree canopy cover.

Of the 100 captured, 71 koalas were found to be healthy enough for release, but unfortunately 29 Koalas were assessed as being too sick to survive re-release and were humanely euthanased to prevent further suffering.

An assessment of the canopy cover indicated that the Cape Otway habitat (Manna Gum trees) is generally in poor condition.

The results indicated a link between poor canopy cover and poor koala health. Of the 10 sites assessed, there were three sites where the koalas were assessed as being in poor health. Across the other seven sites the Koalas were generally found to be in average body condition.

Next Steps at Cape Otway

Results from the health and habitat assessment confirmed that further actions will need to be taken to manage the welfare of the koalas at Cape Otway.

DELWP has sought guidance from the expert panel on the short and long term management actions.

In September 2015 DELWP will be assessing the health of approximately 300-400 koalas, euthanizing any unhealthy koalas to prevent prolonged suffering, fertility controlling healthy females and selecting a sample of healthy koalas for a trial translocation.

The trial translocation will involve moving around 30 koalas from the Manna Gum woodland to a habitat of mixed Eucalyptus tree species.

Successful translocation of koalas relies on a number of factors, including:

- the health of the koala and its ability to deal with stress,
- suitable recipient habitat; and
- a recipient habitat that does not already support a significant existing koala population.

Throughout the trial the koalas will be monitored to see if they can successfully adapt to the mixed tree habitat. This will help inform the possibility of a larger scale translocation.

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Koala overabundance at Cape Otway timeline

- 1920s-1980s – koalas translocated across Victoria.
- 1981 – Koalas introduced to Cape Otway area, which had preferred habitat for Koalas. Manna Gum woodland on private land covered approximately 450 hectares.
- Mid 2000s habitat started to become over-browsed by koalas. A lack of predation or hunting pressure also contributes to the increase in population density.
- Late 2000s – Concerns raised by local community about koala numbers, over-browsing and tree impacts.
- 2013 – Reports indicate poor koala health at Cape Otway. Population densities reached up to 20 Koalas per hectare. The Koala Technical Advisory Committee and Independent Panel of Experts considered the situation and the Department prepared emergency welfare plans.
- 2013-2014 – Three emergency welfare interventions conducted. During the interventions healthy Koalas were tagged and released, unhealthy Koalas were euthanased to prevent suffering, healthy females were fertility controlled.
- 2013-2014 - Over-browsing by the Koala has significantly reduced the condition and amount of Manna Gum habitat.
- 2014-2015 – Slight recovery of habitat post welfare interventions, however koala density remains high.
- March 2015 – State Government pledged to proactively manage koala density issues and be open and transparent with community.
- March 2015 – Expert panel of scientists established by the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water Lisa Neville convened.
- April 2015 – Cape Otway Koala Management Actions developed and released
- May 2015 – First recommended action, a koala health assessment was completed and results confirmed further action should be taken to manage the welfare of koalas.
- July 2015 – Consultation with the panel of expert scientists on the next management actions.
- August 2015 – Suitable site for a trial translocation located following habitat modelling as per the Management Actions.
- September 2015 – Further welfare actions to be undertaken to manage koala welfare and commence a translocation trial.



A koala being released at Cape Otway after a health assessment.