



ISLAND KOALAS DISTINCT

The record of the Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) on North Stradbroke Island is scant even though it has inhabited the island since pre-European history. The indigenous people do not refer to it in their Dreaming or Creation stories, and there is no record of the island Aborigines hunting the koala, either for food or for use of the fine fur. Their tribal land use is of coastal origin, without fire-stick farming or club hunting of the extensive fauna of island mammals.

Scientifically, the koala is a peculiar animal. To this day it is considered a scientific oddity, like the platypus, and has become a loved figure in the Australian psyche. It is Queensland's State emblematic animal, and the world's fourth most iconic animal.

Stradbroke koalas are the only naturally occurring island population, and they are genetically distinct.

Loss of habitat is accepted as the major threat to koala survival. Unfortunately for the island koalas (along with several other island fauna), since 1950, sandmining – for mineral sands (ilmenite and rutile) and silica sand – has removed large tracts of ancient habitat. Mining companies are still permitted to clear koala habitat. Although replanting after mining has greatly improved in recent times, the past legacy of poor rehabilitation outcomes has been the loss of koala trees and corridors in key areas.

It is known that the koala is breeding despite the interruptions to its island habitat. The population is disease-free, suggesting its adaptation to changed circumstances and associated stress. Chlamydia, affecting the eyes and causing sterility, is triggered by stress.

It is possible to see koalas when walking through island bush and especially in areas of swamp wetland. In general they favour the western fringing swamps and adjacent high dunes, but there is a greater concentration of animals at Amity Point and in the Myora area. Their preferred tucker trees are the Blue Gum (*Eucalyptus tereticornis*) and Swamp Mahogany (*Eucalyptus robusta*). Some also feed on Paperbark (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*).

Fire, purposely lit as well as the controlled burns, has been the cause of many koala deaths. Koalas are also killed on the busy island roads. Increasing numbers of island feral dogs have been creating another koala hazard around the three townships of Dunwich, Amity Point and Point Lookout. Reported attacks are becoming frequent.

The mainland koala population has recently fallen below viable levels and is now at risk of becoming extinct. Meanwhile, the first detailed research program to map habitat and to count the island population is currently being conducted by the University of Queensland's Koala Research Unit (Department of Zoology), the University of New South Wales working with CRL, and Redland City Council.

SIMO continues to campaign for measures to protect all koala corridors and habitats on Stradbroke, to plant food trees, to sign koala road crossings, to eradicate feral animals, and to raise awareness of the island's unique population.