

Koalas and dogs



Introduction

The Queensland Government has developed the *Nature Conservation (Koala) Conservation Plan 2006 and Management Program 2006–2016* (the Koala Plan) to protect koalas and their habitat and to ensure their survival. This plan identifies the threats to koala conservation and strategies to resolve them.

Dog attacks on koalas are among the most significant threats that need to be addressed. This fact sheet provides more information on this issue and how dog owners can play their part in protecting koalas.

The Koala Plan recognises the value in people owning dogs, but strongly supports the position that it is a basic responsibility of dog owners to ensure that their pets do not injure or kill other animals, including protected wildlife such as the koala.

Dogs and koalas: the facts

Between 1997 and 2003 the Environmental Protection Agency's

Moggill Koala Hospital admitted more than 1000 koalas that had been attacked by dogs. Once attacked, koalas rarely get a second chance, with over 80 percent dying. It is estimated that 300 koalas die each year in south-east Queensland alone as a result of dog attacks, making it the third most common cause of death after habitat clearing and vehicle strikes.

A survey of dog attacks in south-east Queensland has identified the key elements of the issue. These are:

- Most attacks on koalas take place in the dog's own backyard.
- Not all dogs attack koalas. Ninety-six percent of attacks on koalas were by dogs over 10kg. Generally, the larger the dog, the greater the likelihood that it could be responsible for a fatal attack on a koala.
- Although dog attacks occur throughout the year, they are more likely to occur between July and September (peaking in September). This is when koalas

are breeding and therefore more mobile.

- If there are two or more dogs present at a property there is a higher incidence of attack.
- Attacks on sick koalas are no more frequent than for healthy ones.

It should also be remembered that koalas are capable of defending themselves. They have sharp teeth and claws capable of causing deep wounds and any dog that attacks a koala may risk serious injury.

Take extra care with your dog when koalas are breeding

Between July and September, male koalas will be moving around in search of mates and trying to establish their dominance over an area. At this time the weaned young, born the previous year, will also be leaving their mothers and moving into adjoining territories. This is the time of year when koalas are at their most vulnerable to dog attack and dog owners should do whatever they can to keep koalas safe.

What can I do to make my dog, and property, koala-friendly?

A range of measures can be considered by dog owners to reduce the risk of their dog attacking a koala.

Things you can do:

- *Keep your dog under control at night.*

Most koala attacks occur at night so limit your dog's movements at this time to greatly reduce any likelihood of it chasing or catching a koala. The solution can be as simple as keeping your dog inside or on an enclosed deck or veranda at night — where it can be both a better watchdog and a better companion. Kennels and other forms of enclosures can also be used to confine dogs, or they can be kept comfortably on leads — especially if they are given something like a bone to stop them from getting bored.

- *Don't assume your dog is koala friendly.*

Dogs sometimes behave differently when their owner is not present, particularly if a strange person or animal enters what they consider to be their territory. Making sure koalas are safe to traverse your backyard could save you from discovering an injured or dead koala when you return home.

- *Keep your dog and koalas apart.*

If a dog is worrying a koala that is in a tree, remove the dog from the area so that the koala can come down from the tree and move out of the area without any further disturbance.

Where confining a dog is not possible, another option is to keep the koalas out of a yard through the use of koala exclusion fencing. Existing fences can be modified to exclude koalas by attaching a smooth metal or perspex strip at least 50cm in height to the top of the fence that koalas are unable to grip. Fences can also be made with a section of unsupported wire (usually chain link wire mesh) at the

top so that when a koala climbs on it, the top of the fence flops over under the animal's weight, forcing it to jump back to the ground. Where a new fence is being installed, it can be made from materials that a koala can't climb e.g. sheet metal or fibre sheeting products. Trees and shrubs should be at least three metres away from exclusion fencing.

In some cases, the cost of altering or building fences will not be practical and may make the option of constructing a smaller enclosure for a dog or even using a lead worth reconsidering.

- *Check the trees on your property to see if koalas are present.*

Before leaving your dog unsupervised in your yard, check to see if there are any koalas in trees on your property. Ask your neighbours if they have seen koalas in the area recently.

- *Train your dog to stop chasing other animals.*

If you are concerned that your dog might chase a koala, another option is to consider obedience training. This will not only protect koalas but also give you greater control over your dog. Advice on obedience training techniques can be provided by dog training schools in your area.

- *Check with your local government to see what dog owners are required to do to protect koalas from dog attack.*

- *Choose a small dog.*

If you are getting a new dog and it will be living in an area inhabited by koalas, consider getting one that is unlikely to grow to a size greater than 10kg. Small dog breeds can provide the same companionship and property protection as larger dogs, but pose a lesser threat to koalas. There are a range of breeds and crosses that fall within this size range, including many of the terriers.

What should I do if my dog has attacked a koala?

The first thing to do is to remove the dog from the site of the attack. If the koala is injured, you should contact your local wildlife care and rescue organisation by ringing the EPA hotline (1300 130 372). If the koala is dead, its pouch should be checked for young, which can be cared for and ultimately released back into the wild. Dead koalas should also be reported to the EPA or your local wildlife care organisation.

If the koala is alive, it is very important that you do not put yourself in a position to be injured or expose the koala to further injury and stress. Avoid interfering with the koala if possible until a wildlife carer can collect the animal. You can confine an injured koala temporarily while waiting for a wildlife carer by placing an upturned box or large bin over the top of it with a weight on top.

However, if you are forced to catch the koala in order to transport it to a wildlife carer or a vet, there are a number of precautions you can take. Wear thick, long gloves that protect your forearms if they are available, and use a towel or blanket to immobilise the koala before picking it up. The koala should be placed in a cardboard box that can be closed and with a hessian bag or towel on the bottom for it to grip on to. Any handling should be carried out quickly to avoid making the koala struggle and causing it unnecessary stress.

Do koalas live near you?

You may not even realise that koalas live nearby and cross your property. If you are not sure if koalas are in your area visit: www.epa.qld.gov.au/koalaconservation/ to find out if your property falls within a known Koala Habitat Area. While on the EPA website you can also go to 'wildlife online' and make a list of all the wildlife that is known to occur in your neighbourhood. You can also check the trees on your property for signs of koalas. While koalas can be hard to see, they leave behind obvious scratches on the trunks of trees and scattered pellet-shaped droppings on



Koala-friendly dog

the ground. In the breeding season between September and May you may hear male koalas calling. You can also ask your neighbours if they have seen koalas in the area.

How can we be more koala-friendly in new urban developments?

Where new urban areas are being planned and developed, a number of koala-friendly measures may be considered which will ensure koalas can move safely and freely across the landscape. These measures include:

- incorporating koala sensitive development into the planning, design and construction of the development;
- restrictions on dog ownership using covenants or community title. Restrictions may involve creating 'dog-free' or 'small-dog' estates; or
- constructing koala exclusion fencing on part of a lot or premises to separate dogs from koalas.

Further information

Koala Plan

Further information is available in the *Nature Conservation (Koala) Conservation Plan 2006 and Management Program 2006–2016*. Copies are available on the EPA website at www.epa.qld.gov.au/koalaconservation/ or contact the EPA Customer Services Centre on (07) 3227 8185.