

# What's Happening

## IN THE WORLD ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 13, NO 1 SEPTEMBER 2012

### Australia's Koalas Need Help

**K**oalas are small marsupials that live in four states in southern and eastern Australia. Mostly they live along the coast, where many Australians also want to live. Koalas are disappearing because they are losing much of their habitat to human activities. In the spring the government took a step to protect the koala in two states, but environmentalists believe that the koala needs much more protection.

It is not an exaggeration to call koalas incredibly cute. They are both harmless and defenseless. They grow only to about 2½ feet long and weigh about 15 pounds. Thick, gray fur covers their bodies, and they have curved noses and large, furry ears. The average lifespan of a koala in the wild ranges from 10 to 14 years. Females give birth to a single baby, called a "joey," once a year. A joey spends its first seven months in the mother's pouch, then clings to her back for another few months.

Among all mammals the koala's diet is the most specialized. They eat only leaves, and most of their diet consists of eucalyptus leaves. Those leaves contain little protein, so they provide koalas little energy. Koalas are active at dusk and dawn. Otherwise they rest 18 to 20 hours a day in order to save energy.

In the early 20th century the koala suffered at the hands of humans. Hunters killed millions of koalas for their fur, which they traded in the United States and Europe. In the state of South Australia koalas nearly became extinct. Some koalas live there now because the government moved them from the state of Victoria.

For a century humans have been destroying the eucalyptus forests and woodlands where koalas live. Humans have cleared land for their growing communities, so now houses, businesses and roads stand where koalas once lived. Logging and mining operations also have damaged wooded areas. In urban areas koalas become victims of dogs, cars and disease. Australia once had at least ten million

koalas, but now there are fewer than 100,000 in the wild.

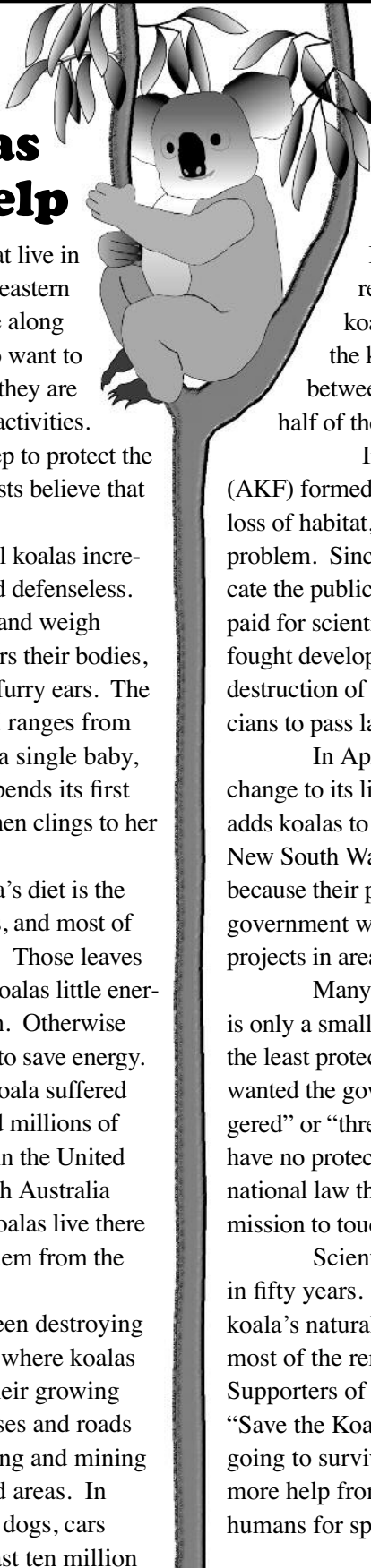
The Koala Coast in the state of Queensland shows how quickly things are changing for the koala. It is near Brisbane, the state's capital city, and recently was home to more than 6,000 koalas. According to a government report, the koala population there fell by 64 percent between 1999 and 2009. In the past three years half of the remaining koalas there also have died.

In 1986 the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) formed to fight for the koala. It discovered that loss of habitat, not disease, was the koala's biggest problem. Since then the AKF has been trying to educate the public about the dangers that koalas face. It has paid for scientific research about koala habitat, and has fought developers and industries whose plans include destruction of habitat. The AKF also encourages politicians to pass laws that protect the koala.

In April the Australian government made a change to its list of animals that need protection. It adds koalas to the list in two states, Queensland and New South Wales. It describes them as "vulnerable" because their populations are falling. Now the federal government will have to approve all future building projects in areas where koalas live.

Many environmentalists say that the new listing is only a small victory. A "vulnerable" listing provides the least protection to animals. Environmentalists really wanted the government to list the koala as "endangered" or "threatened." Koalas in two other states still have no protection at all. The AKF is fighting for a national law that would require developers to get permission to touch any tree in areas where koalas live.

Scientists warn that the koala could be extinct in fifty years. Approximately eighty percent of the koala's natural habitat already has been destroyed, and most of the remaining habitat is on private land. Supporters of the koala celebrate every September as "Save the Koala" month in Australia. If the koala is going to survive, it needs not only their help, but also more help from the government as it competes with humans for space.



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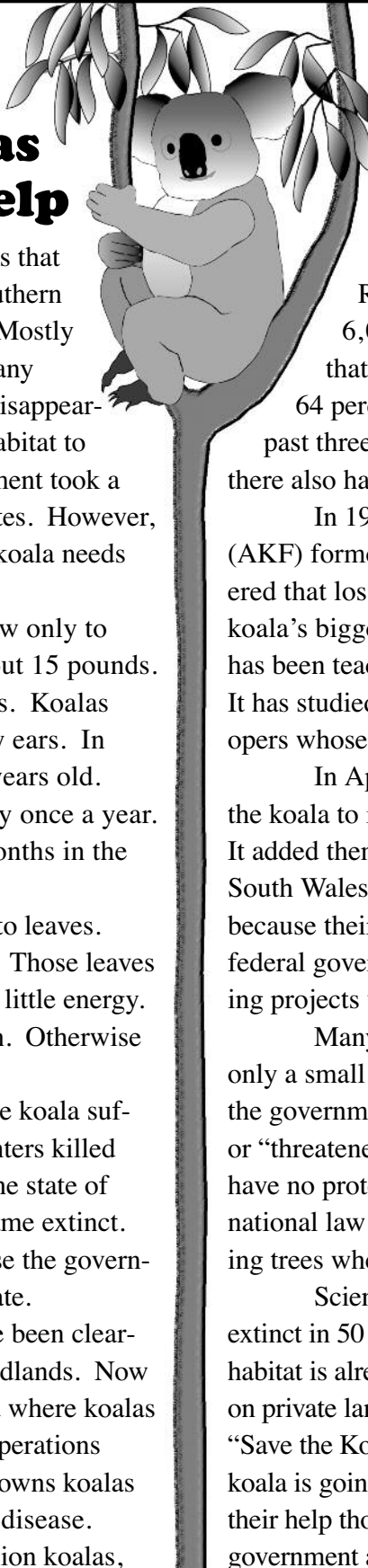
**K**oalas are small marsupials that live in four states in southern and eastern Australia. Mostly they live along the coast, where many Australians also live. Koalas are disappearing because they are losing their habitat to humans. In the spring the government took a step to protect the koala in two states. However, environmentalists believe that the koala needs more protection.

Koalas are cute. They grow only to about 2½ feet long and weigh about 15 pounds. Thick, gray fur covers their bodies. Koalas have curved noses and large, furry ears. In the wild they live to be about 14 years old. Females give birth to a single baby once a year. The baby spends its first seven months in the mother's pouch.

The koala's diet is limited to leaves. Mostly they eat eucalyptus leaves. Those leaves contain little protein, so koalas get little energy. Koalas are active at dusk and dawn. Otherwise they rest 18 to 20 hours a day.

In the early 20th century the koala suffered at the hands of humans. Hunters killed millions of them for their fur. In the state of South Australia koalas nearly became extinct. Some koalas live there now because the government moved them from another state.

For 100 years humans have been clearing the eucalyptus forests and woodlands. Now houses, businesses and roads stand where koalas once lived. Logging and mining operations also have damaged habitat. Near towns koalas become victims of dogs, cars and disease. Australia once had at least ten million koalas,



but now there are fewer than 100,000 in the wild.

The Koala Coast in the state of Queensland shows how quickly things are changing for the koala. Recently it was home to more than 6,000 koalas. The government reported that the koala population there fell by 64 percent between 1999 and 2009. In the past three years half of the remaining koalas there also have died.

In 1986 the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) formed to fight for the koala. It discovered that loss of habitat, not disease, was the koala's biggest problem. Since then the AKF has been teaching people about dangers to koalas. It has studied koala habitat, and has fought developers whose plans would destroy habitat.

In April the Australian government added the koala to its list of animals that need protection. It added them in two states, Queensland and New South Wales. It describes them as "vulnerable" because their populations are falling. Now the federal government will have to approve all building projects where koalas live.

Many environmentalists say that this is only a small victory. Environmentalists wanted the government to list the koala as "endangered" or "threatened." Koalas in two other states still have no protection at all. The AKF wants a national law that prevents developers from touching trees where koalas live.

Scientists warn that the koala could be extinct in 50 years. About 80 percent of the koala's habitat is already gone. Most of what remains is on private land. Supporters of the koala celebrate "Save the Koala" month every September. If the koala is going to survive, it needs more than just their help though. It also needs more help from the government as it competes with humans for space.

# Background Information

Koalas bring in more than \$1 billion in tourism per year. About 75 percent of all visitors to Australia want to see a koala, and they buy millions of stuffed koala toys.

In 2004 the AKF requested that the federal government give “vulnerable” status to koalas throughout Australia. The government rejected that request. The AKF believes a national Koala Protection Act is the best way to protect koalas.

Many credit the U.S. for helping save the koala. When it listed the koala as a “threatened species” under the U.S. Endangered Species Act in 2000, it banned the import of koala furs.

Koalas get the disease chlamydia when their habitats are disturbed. After being hit by cars, it is the second major cause of admission into veterinary hospitals.

The AKF has a program for planting trees that will provide food to koalas. So far donations to the program have allowed the AKF to plant more than 19,000 trees.

“No Tree...No Me” is the Australian Koala Foundation’s slogan.

Some koala specialists say that the Koala Coast will have no koalas left in five years. More than 600 people have been moving there every week. It is Australia’s fastest growing area.

The AKF has developed and is working on a Koala Habitat Atlas. It uses digital technology to identify, map and rank koala habitat around Australia. It gives local land-use planners important information for making practical decisions. It also identifies vegetation that koalas prefer, even where koalas do not live now. Those areas could become places where koalas could live in the future.

Drought, fire and fracking now also threaten koalas’ health and habitat.

Every year about 250,000 tourists visit the Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary in Brisbane. Lone Pine’s 130 koalas form the world’s largest population of captive koalas. Tourists can hold, pet and learn about koalas there.

The San Diego Zoo has 70 koalas, the most outside of Australia. It temporarily loans out about half of them to other zoos in the world to raise awareness and funds for koala habitat protection.

## Topics for Discussion and Writing

### Pre-reading:

- Tell what you know about animals in Australia like the kangaroo, koala and platypus.

### Comprehension:

- Identify some past and present threats to the koala’s survival.

### Beyond the Text:

- Why would the government respond to the desires of businesspeople like developers, even if it hurt the koala?
- Name some ways that places in the U.S. help and protect wildlife.
- Why does it matter whether a species survives or not?

## Vocabulary (\*advanced article only)

*Article-specific:* marsupial; habitat; lifespan\*; pouch; mammal\*; eucalyptus; protein; extinct; logging; mining; vulnerable

*High-use:* environmentalist; to cling\*; specialized\*; diet; otherwise; urban\*; recently; according to\*; research\*; developer; approximately\*; to compete

## Sources

*The Australian* August 21, 2012

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August 4, 2012

*Times of London* May 7, 2012

*Canberra Times* April 30, 2012

Australian Broadcasting Corp. “The World Today”  
April 30, 2012

*Sydney Morning Herald* April 27, 2012

Koala Land [www.koalaland.com.au](http://www.koalaland.com.au)

Australian Koala Foundation [www.savethekoala.com](http://www.savethekoala.com)

## Core Curricular Standards

### Reading—Grades 5–12

- Quote accurately from text / Cite textual evidence /
- Draw inferences / Determine central ideas /
- Analyze structure of text / Interpret words and phrases

## CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

### ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

- Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension
- Writing Strategies and Applications
- Listening and Speaking

### Science

- 4.3
- Ecology