

# Conserving the Mornington Peninsula Koala Population

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Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) populations in Queensland, New South Wales, and the Australian Capital Territory have recently been listed as Endangered under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. Koalas are not listed as Endangered in Victoria but, like all wildlife in Victoria, are protected under the Wildlife Act 1975. Although koalas are not yet listed as Endangered in Victoria, some of the state's populations are struggling, particularly in Ballarat and Gippsland.

In the 1800s, Mornington Peninsula's original koala population completely disappeared due to hunting for the fur trade. Today, habitat loss and fragmentation are the most predominant reasons for their decline. Other factors include attacks by predator animals such as dogs, disease, road deaths, invasion of exotic species, and unsustainable habitat due to development.

The Australian Koala Foundation explains that mainland koalas were introduced to French Island, where they thrived, and were later reintroduced to Victoria. The population was stable until

approximately forty years ago, and the continual decline in habitat means the transfer of koalas from French Island is no longer an option.

Victorian koala populations are very isolated. A study done by Deakin University showed that sixty-nine percent of available koala habitat is on private property and very fragmented, as depicted in the Mornington Peninsula koala distribution study map.

The destruction and fragmentation of habitat results in koalas spending more time on the ground moving from tree to tree rather than moving through tree canopies. Travelling on the ground

makes koalas highly vulnerable to road accidents and attacks by dogs, foxes, or cats. The increased exposure to threats also means they have higher stress levels, making them more prone to disease and sickness.

Genetic diversity is essential as it gives species a better chance of survival. Koalas on the Mornington Peninsula are not genetically diverse (like most other Victorian koalas). As koala numbers decline and populations are separated by fragmentation, genetic diversity decreases due to inbreeding.

Other factors such as land use, land management, ecological history, edge effects, and spreading weeds and pest species make it particularly challenging when conserving vulnerable species.

**Top:** The Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) is listed as Vulnerable on the *International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species*. Image: Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation.



## Why is the Conservation of Koalas Important?

The koala is one of the world's most iconic animal species. Being endemic to Australia makes them an attraction for tourists, and one of Australia's most identified species. Their cute and cuddly appearance makes them an ambassador for Australian native wildlife.

Koalas are important for the ecosystem as their scat deposits fall to the forest floor, promoting woodland understory growth and regeneration. Their droppings are also known to be a source of food for insects and many small mammals.

Besides conserving the koala, increasing tree cover will provide habitat for native bird species such as lorikeets (*Trichoglossus moluccanus*), kookaburras (*Dacelo novaeguineae*), and the Endangered powerful owl (*Ninox strenua*).

Bio-corridors linking vegetation will also benefit mammals such as possums, bats, echidnas, kangaroos, and wallabies. Regeneration of the understory will provide food and habitat for species such as native mice and rats, lizards, snakes, frogs, countless insect species, and microorganisms.

Conserving and regenerating biodiversity in Australia and the Mornington Peninsula is one of the most important challenges we face today. Biodiversity is essential for all processes that support life on earth, and maintaining a healthy ecosystem means clean air, clean water, a stable climate, and an abundance of food.

The koala population stability on the Mornington Peninsula is directly linked to the availability of habitat trees, particularly Eucalypt trees such as manna gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*), swamp gum (*Eucalyptus ovata*), messmate (*Eucalyptus obliqua*), and narrow-leaved peppermint (*Eucalyptus radiata*).

## Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation

The alarming news that one of our most iconic species is at risk has inspired community groups into action. The Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation Group works to raise awareness of the challenges koalas face on the Mornington Peninsula.

As a large group of volunteers, we work to protect and increase significant koala habitat. We organize habitat restoration activities on the Peninsula with a focus on creating and connecting koala habitats. We also provide information to the community and trees to property owners to increase the native vegetation in suburban areas.

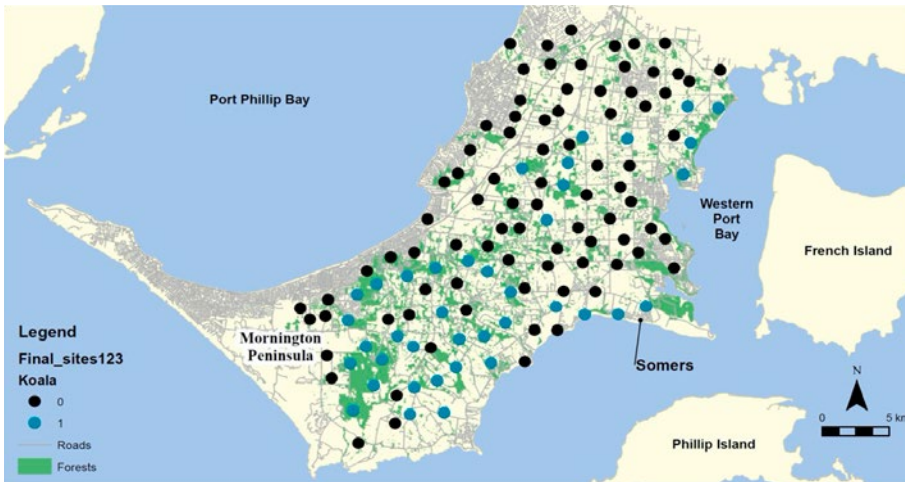


Trees were planted in Arthurs Seat State Park, Victoria, in 2021. Image: Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation.



A tree planting day in Somers, Victoria, in 2021. Image: Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation.





A Mornington Peninsula koala distribution study map. The blue dots represent koala sightings, and the black dots represent koala habitat. Image: Paola Rivera, Deakin University, 18 August 2020.



Eucalyptus seedlings for the 2021 planting project grown by the Conservation Collective. Image: Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation.



A koala sighting in Main Ridge, Victoria. Image: Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation.

## How You Can Help Koalas

1. Preserve and plant native trees.  
Where possible, preserve native trees and other areas of bush that connect koala habitat in your area. Plant koala food trees, especially manna, swamp, and narrow-leaved peppermint gums,
2. Plant local indigenous plants.  
Plant guides can be found at [bit.ly/IndigenousPlantGuide](https://bit.ly/IndigenousPlantGuide)
3. Report your sightings of koalas at [mpkoalas.org.au](https://mpkoalas.org.au)
4. Reach out to your local council and local Member of Parliament to let them know that koala conservation and mitigating climate change are important to you,
5. Become a member of Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation. Every membership helps to plant five trees,
6. Be alert when driving. Drive slowly when driving through koala habitat,
7. Ensure fencing is koala-friendly. A koala-friendly fence is one that koalas can easily climb over, through, or under, allowing them to move freely around their habitat, and
8. If possible, keep your dog inside or in an enclosed area at night and check your yard before leaving your dog unsupervised.

**Funds provided by the Australian Wildlife Society assisted the Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation Landcare Group in maintaining and increasing available habitat for Mornington Peninsula's koalas through tree planting and raising community awareness and education, particularly around road safety.**

## BRINGING HOPE TO THE MORNINGTON PENINSULA KOALAS



Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation Group members are planting trees for local koalas to provide hope for their future. Image: Mornington Peninsula Koala Conservation.