



KOALAS

SLOW LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

For one baby koala and his complicated family, Brisbane city living is hectic – and deadly

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* SYNOPSIS

Koalas: Slow Life in the Fast Lane, reveals the usually hidden social and breeding behaviours of koalas, and showcases never-before-seen animal behaviour and new scientific breakthroughs. The central question the film asks is this: ‘Can koalas live side by side with people in today’s increasingly urbanised Australia?’ The film explores this and answers, ‘yes, it is possible – but only with the help of science and conservation’.

Our narrative follows one extended family of koalas to capture their day-to-day dramas. This family lives in a Brisbane ‘hotspot’, where their natural bush home is surrounded by encroaching urbanisation. So on top of internal social pressures, these koalas have to contend with the external stresses of habitat

Curriculum links

This study guide is mainly aimed at lower and middle secondary school levels, and may also be useful at higher secondary level, with relevance to general subject areas and specific topics: Biological Sciences, Environment and

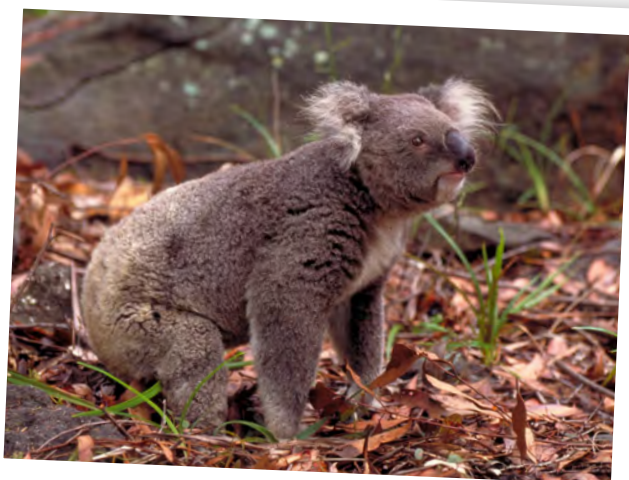
Ecology studies, English, Literature, Media and Film studies, SOSE/HSIE and History, Civics (local government), Landscape Architecture, Tourism, Urban Design and Town Planning studies.

loss, cars, dogs, and disease. This koala hotspot is monitored by two biologists who, with the help of technology, track the koalas’ movements, tree usage and behaviour. Scientists are beginning to understand the growing conflict between humans and the future koala colonies. One of the scientists keeps a video diary to reveal the unusual antics of suburban koalas. The latest scientific studies reveal there is much more to the koala’s behaviour and social system than previously thought. Australian biologists recently discovered that within koala colonies there is a vast array of social behaviour; including males threatening each other, territorial displays, fighting and deception. They even found that koalas might have a basic ‘language’!

Now, for the first time, an in-depth natural history documentary has been made about koalas that shows the conflicts and dangers that occur within the usually hidden world of a koala colony. New discoveries are helping scientists to interpret animal behavior in unexpected and intriguing ways.

These scientific discoveries provide a window into how urbanisation is impacting on the intricate workings of a koala colony, and so provides an opportunity to showcase how this iconic Australian animal is coping in today’s world.

Above: Dr Sean Fitzgibbon and DR Bill Ellis hold young koala ready to be tracked.
Photographer: Malcolm Ludgate
Below: Travelling male crosses excavation site.
Photographer: Gary Steer





* ASSUMPTIONS, MYTHS AND STORIES ABOUT KOALAS

Before looking at the realities of life today for koalas, as depicted throughout the documentary film, we should first think about what we thought we always knew or heard about the ways koalas live and behave, and ask ourselves whether we were correct or not. (For basic and updated information on koalas in general, see 'Australian Koala Foundation' and 'Koalas' in website references.)

- Discuss in class what you have always thought you knew about koalas, from what you have seen, read or heard. For example, to what extent have fictional stories and fiction films influenced your impressions? When we usually see photos, drawings and film of koalas, what are they generally depicted as doing, and where are they generally located?
- Comment on the impressions that potential tourists from overseas are usually given about Australia's indigenous wildlife in general, and the koala in particular. Find a photo of a koala that you think conforms to the image tourists have of these animals. Find a photo that doesn't conform to that image, and explain the difference between them and what might have caused that different image of the koala to occur.
- It is a common perception that koalas are stupid creatures with dirty habits; some people believe that if you stand under a tree in which they

Above: Mother piggybacks Joey on ground level (Mary and Bruce).
 Photographer: Gary Steer
Middle: Close up of Koala and Gum Leaves.
 Photographer: Wade Fairly
Below: Large Koala perches in tree.
 Photographer: Wade Fairly

are sitting, they will urinate on you. You may wish to discuss in class whether this is really 'stupid' behaviour and a 'dirty habit' or whether there may well be some quite logical reasons in the animal kingdom as to why the koala might behave in this way.

- Carry out some research to find out why koalas have been referred to as 'koala bears'. Where did the name, 'koala' originate? Find out how the koala is represented in Australian Aboriginal mythology.
- If you have not done so before, read one or more of the Blinky Bill stories for children originally written from the 1930s onwards by Dorothy Wall, and view some of the Blinky Bill animated cartoons, about the adventures of a young koala. Discuss in class the images and characteristics these stories present of the koala. For example, is there anything 'koala-like' about the way in which Blinky Bill is presented? Are the stories specifically 'Australian', or could they be set anywhere? (See 'Blinky Bill' in website references.)
- Following from the previous activity in which you read, viewed and discussed some Blinky Bill stories, plan and write your own short Blinky Bill story for children, in the same style and approach to plot, characters, settings and themes. You may wish to include illustrations to accompany your story. Note also that later in this study guide there is a similar activity in which you are asked to write a different interpretation of a Blinky Bill story. See the section titled 'Koalas and the spread of human urbanisation'.

* KOALAS: NATURAL HABITAT AND ENVIRONMENT

The program follows what happens to koala colonies in their natural environment when urbanisation, characterised by the spread of land clearing and the construction of houses and roads etc, occurs





Above: Koala in tree basking in sun. Photographer: Wade Fairly
Below: Mother and Joey in grass (Mary and Bruce). Photographer: Gary Steer

around the outer regions of fast-growing capital cities such as Brisbane in Queensland. First we should note what a koala habitat might be like without the extensive presence of modern-day human populations in the vicinity.

- From the program and from further research, on poster paper draw three maps of Australia. Ensure you include Tasmania! On the first map, indicate the regions and the extent of koala populations from around the year 1812. This is an era in Australia's history where the ecosystem was still largely unaffected by the growth in European settlements and the increase in land clearing. On the second map, indicate the koala populations of a century later: 1912. This represents the distribution after extensive land clearing and the construction of cities, towns, grazing pastures and farms had taken place. For the moment, leave the third map untouched; we will return to it later, in the section on 'Koalas and the spread of human urbanisation'.
- Following from the previous activity, and after an examination of the first two maps, write a description of the type of natural environment (such as land, vegetation, seasonal rainfall and temperatures, and even natural predators) that coincides with the existence of koala populations. Why do you think koalas have not existed in natural colonies in other regions of Australia, such as across the north of the land mass, along the western coastal regions and in the island state of Tasmania? Also comment on the differences between the information portrayed on the two maps, and the possible causes of those differences.
- We are informed during the program that 'despite there being over 700 types of eucalypt, only thirty species comprise the bulk of the koala diet'. Carry out research to find out which species of eucalypt koalas may prefer as a food source. Explain how scientific discoveries can advance our knowledge about koalas, and how this knowledge could be applied into the future.
- We are also informed that gum leaves are toxic.

First, ensure in class discussion that you know the meaning of 'toxic'. If gum leaves are toxic, explain how young koalas biologically overcome this problem when still in the suckling stage, and living in their mothers' pouches. How do they eventually move onto digesting leaves by themselves?

- It has been previously believed that the eucalyptus in the constant gum leaf diet causes koalas to fall into a sleepy, drunken state. Now there is a different explanation as to why koalas sleep for most of the day, and are active only for about five hours a day. In your own words describe the reason for this need of sleep and rest.
- During one sequence of the film, the documentary presents camera shots of a wet, miserable-looking koala sitting in a tree, stoically enduring a heavy downfall of Queensland rain. From the program, explain the two main environmental purposes of the koala's thick covering of fur.
- After completing these previous activities, comment on the way in which koalas generally have adapted their existence to what we might refer to as a 'typical' eastern Australian natural environment. You may wish to construct a visual presentation on poster paper of this adaptation.

* KOALAS: BEHAVIOUR, BREEDING, COLONIES

A great deal of the program allows us to see into the 'secret world' of koalas, and the way into which males and females, the newly-born, the young and mature, the dominant and the subordinate, organise themselves into colonies based on natural territory that is constantly fought over, attacked and defended. It is a world – we are told by the narrator – of 'communication, conflict and even deception'. Later in this study guide, we will examine how this natural order of existence has been disrupted by the encroachment of human urbanisation, and the



steps being taken by research biologists to try to solve some of these issues.

- From the program and from any further research you have carried out, describe the way in which a typical koala colony is organised. Refer to the roles and the behaviour of alpha males, subordinate males, travelling males, and females. Explain, for example, how a subordinate male and a travelling male can assume the status of alpha male, and the conditions that allow them to do so. Why do some males become travellers? Why is it preferable and advantageous that more males disperse and travel around than females?
- Plan and write the same short story twice, in which an alpha male is challenged by a travelling male. One version should be from the viewpoint of the alpha male, while the other version should present the traveller's point of view.
- Following from the previous activities in this section, comment on why the documentary narrator refers to life in the koala colony in terms of '... conflict and even deception'. Who might be trying to deceive whom, how is this



attempted, and why? You may wish to discuss examples of similar types of deception within other living species. You will find one example under 'Deception' in website references.

- Explain the purpose and the effect of these two modes of communication that are observed among koala populations: the 'bellow' and the smearing of scent from a chest patch. Some bellows have characteristics that are not apparent in other bellows. Why do females at the breeding stage seem to respond to a bellow from one male, but not from another?
- During the mating season, the female koala is in 'oestrus'. Define the meaning of oestrus. What time of the year does the koala oestrus season begin, and how long does it last? Physiologically female and male koalas have reproductive organs that are unusual, certainly compared to those of mammals such as humans. From the program, describe the female



and male reproductive organs. How does the alpha male try to ensure that after he has mated with a female, only his offspring (and no other males' offspring) will be born from that female? Explain what the long-term purpose of this biological function might be.

- After a 'joey' koala is born, how long does it remain with its mother before it becomes fully independent? Even though it has grown in size over time and can move around by itself, explain why a joey continues to take advantage of living in its mother's pouch many months after its birth.

* KOALAS AND THE SPREAD OF HUMAN URBANISATION

So far we have drawn from the contents of the program to look at the ways in which koalas live, and organise their colonies, under what we might call normal, natural conditions. But what happens when their natural environment is altered by the spread of urban land clearing and the development of outer suburbia? Can koalas adapt to increased change, and can they survive, especially without positive intervention by researchers in the biological sciences? The program documents the effects of urbanisation on entire koala populations through



Above: Overlooking Brisbane suburbs. Photographer: Stephen Cunningham
Middle: Scientists Cathryn Dexter and David Black radio tracking koalas in Brisbane suburbs. Photographer: Stephen Cunningham
Below: Side close up of Koala chewing leaf. Photographer: Wade Fairly



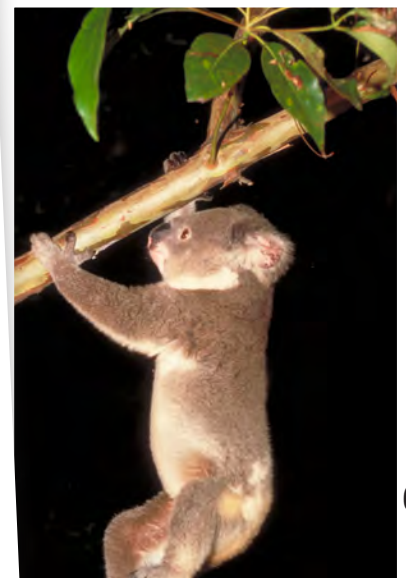
construction of freeways, as well as housing, shopping and urban town centres. The film uses the fast-growing outer suburbs of Brisbane as a test example.

- Earlier in this study guide, in the section titled, 'Koalas: natural habitat and environment', you may have carried out an activity in which you drew on poster paper two maps of Australia. This activity was to demonstrate the relative locations of koala populations in 1812, and one century later in 1912. You should also have drawn a third map that was left blank. Now return to that third map and, from the film and other sources you've seen, complete the third map of Australia showing the state of koala populations in 2012. Examine the maps and comment on the rates of change between 1812 and 1912, and between 1912 and 2012. Are the rates constant between each 100-year period or not? Offer reasons for your answer. What has contributed to these changes in the past century? Consider, for example, aspects of human civilisation that weren't prevalent or widespread before 1912 – or, in fact, even prior to the 1950s – such as mass economic development, technological advancements, and human mobility.
- Extensive land clearing and development has eradicated vast areas of natural gum tree habitat for koalas in many suburbs of Brisbane. However, some patches of habitat have been left untouched. Explain why this is not a satisfactory situation for koalas. Look, for example, at the most-preferred and ideal population densities of koala colonies and compare them to the daily reality in these present-day habitats. How does this competition for space

Above: Female koala (Mary) overlooking suburbs. Photographer: Stephen Cunningham
Middle: Dr Bill Ellis with Koala joey. Photographer: Malcolm Ludgate
Below L-R: Adult koala huddles in the rain. Photographer: Gary Steer; Young Koala hangs from branch at night. Photographer: Gary Steer

contribute to higher stress levels in day-to-day living? Is there a difference in stress levels between males and females? What happens during the mating season? Also explain why some koala colonies are confined to these types of locations and find it difficult, if not impossible, to escape from them.

- It is not merely land clearing and the construction of long and wide freeways that are a problem to koala populations. As we see in the program, humans living side by side with koala populations may also lead to issues. Discuss in class then write a commentary on the threats and impositions to the safety and movement of koalas where large human populations live. Consider, for example, the relationship that we take for granted between ourselves and our own domestic pets of cats and dogs. Comment also on the construction of fences and the planting of non-Australian flora and how these might affect the welfare of indigenous animal species such as koalas.





- What do the aerial maps superimposed with computerised tracking movements of ‘travelling males’ such as Captain Bogart, as shown during the program, tell us about the issues some koala populations face in modern times? Describe your reaction to the home video scene of a travelling male sitting on a house veranda eating an apple. Why does one of the scientists appearing in the program, David Black, refer to these koala experiences as ‘heartbreaking’? Write a first-person paragraph from the viewpoint of a travelling male such as Captain Bogart, at the end of a long and tiring day.
- In connection with the previous discussions, the program also refers to the increase in koala colonies of the disease chlamydia. First, define ‘chlamydia’ and describe the main facets of this disease and the effect it has on koalas. Offer reasons as to why the incidence of chlamydia in koalas has increased and what could possibly be done to reduce it. (For more, see the information on chlamydia under the ‘Koalas’ heading, in website references.)
- It’s not just chlamydia that’s threatening koalas. Another threat comes in the form of a koala retrovirus, which – much like HIV in humans – suppresses a koala’s immune system. It is also having a devastating impact. Explore the impacts, differences and similarities of chlamydia and this koala retrovirus.
- In pairs or small groups, create a double-page display for a local outer-suburban newspaper examining the wide and interconnected range of issues affecting local koala populations. These might include topics such as colonies occurring in close proximity to land development, urbanisation and human lifestyle threats, and the construction of roads. For example, you might include interviews with local

Above: Dr Bill Ellis holds young koala. Photographer: Malcolm Ludgate
Below: Travelling male crosses excavation site. Photographer: Gary Steer

residents, real estate developers, local government councillors, state politicians, environmentalists and animal welfare groups for their views about the problems and how they might attempt to solve them, or find suitable, workable compromises.

Some issues you might examine are whether it is possible to allow further urbanisation at all without adversely affecting indigenous wildlife. Or you may explore whether town planning regulations related to growth and expansion are adequate or inadequate. On the other hand, is it feasible that the natural environment be preserved at all costs at the expense of housing accommodation for humans where populations are rapidly rising and the need for space is paramount? Add photos, illustrations, graphs and charts of figures and statistics as desired, and use desktop publishing software to format your presentation.

- Earlier in this study guide, in the section titled, ‘Assumption, myth and stories about koalas’, there was an activity in which you were asked to write a typical Blinky Bill fiction story based on your reading of the published books and viewing the TV series. Now plan and write another story using the same approach, but this time about a modern-day Blinky Bill and his friends who are experiencing firsthand the issues we’ve been looking at throughout the program and in this study guide. Remember that you are writing for a reading audience made up mainly of children, therefore you should tailor your story towards capturing their interest in terms of language, style, characters, dialogue, storyline and themes. Include illustrations as you see fit. You may wish to collaborate in pairs for this activity.





- From the program, describe the attempts that biological scientists have undertaken to control the spread of the koala retrovirus and chlamydia through koala populations.
- During the program we also see other scientists – Bill Ellis, Sean FitzGibbon and Ben Charlton – researching the sound patterns of the vocal bellow and the breeding habits of koalas. Research some of the ways that this team’s findings have been incorporated into planning in south-east Queensland, e.g. mining revegetation guidance, variable road speed limit timings, noise pollution and its impact on koala bellows, San Diego Zoo breeding program, juvenile dispersal patterns, etc.
- Although it might be a surprising statistic, of what relevance is it for Bill and Sean to discover that, at least in the area they studied, ‘resident males within the population were only siring about 50 per cent of the offspring’, and that ‘transit’ or dispersing males were responsible for siring the remaining 50 per cent of all offspring being born? Why might these findings be of vital importance in safe-guarding the future existence of koalas where urbanisation encroaches?
- Discuss in class whether the type of research carried out by the scientists seen during the program has any wider relevance in Australia. Outside of the study of koala populations, behaviour and breeding in suburbia. What other native Australian species could benefit from what we have learned in studying koalas.
- Taking the events presented in the documentary as an example, write a letter to the editor of a daily newspaper as though you were a biological research scientist, answering criticism that your work is too costly and not of the highest priority.
- If koala colonies along the eastern stretches of Australia are under stress and threat from urbanisation, and it is correct that population numbers have dwindled over the two-hundred-year period between 1812 and 1912, are zoos and other types of wildlife enclosures a practical and positive approach to future maintenance and growth of a healthy species? Can zoos replicate natural living conditions on a long-term basis? Are koalas able to adapt without stress



Above: Vet checks injured koala. Photographer: Gary Steer **Middle:** Dr Sean Fitzgibbon radio collars koala. Photographer: Malcolm Ludgate **Below:** Dr Bill Ellis and assistant anaesthetise koala ready to be radio collared. Photographer: Malcolm Ludgate

* SCIENCE RESEARCH: SOLUTIONS

During the program, we see that the research and field work carried out by biological scientists alerts us to the problems confronting koala colonies where the spread of urbanisation is a daily reality. This scientific work also seeks to offer solutions to the plight of the koala (at least as a starting point) towards ensuring the survival of the species in its natural habitat.

- First, after viewing the documentary, explain why scientists place electronic tracking devices on captured koalas, and what they expect or hope to achieve from carrying out this activity, especially when koalas are traditionally expected to spend most of their time in trees. What, in fact, have the scientists in the program discovered about not only the extent of mobility but the mode of mobility of koalas?
- Of course, in placing tracking equipment on a koala, scientists first have to trap the animal. Describe the logic, technique and the equipment applied to capturing an arboreal or tree-inhabiting animal.
- Comment on what scientists Cathryn Dexter and David Black have found about the ways in which freeways impact on the existence of travelling koalas, and the measures they have taken to help koalas overcome this problem of confinement and mobility. Look, for example, at the relevance of freeway overpasses and underpasses, and how the scientists are able to collect evidence as to whether these constructions can be of possible value to koalas. Explain what Cathryn means when she says that the tracking program will ‘have major outcomes for road mitigation’. Also comment on the significance of the scene in which Cathryn and David review night-time video footage covertly filmed in an underpass.



to zoos – and to human audiences? Are zoos merely a creation for the satisfaction and entertainment of humans? Carry out research then write your own findings on these questions.

* MEDIA STUDIES

Carry out the following Media study activities that arise from a viewing of *Koalas: Slow Life in the Fast Lane*.

- Discuss whether '*Koalas: Slow Life in the Fast Lane*' is a suitable title for the program. Does it capture an adequate impression of the program's narrative, subject matter and themes? If you were asked to give the documentary an alternative title, what would you call it, and why?
- The film begins and ends with totally contrasting camera shots. Comment on the meaning and the emotional reaction derived from these shots, and what they tell us about the film's overall intentions.
- In their press kit the filmmakers refer to the 'blue-chip filming style' of *Koalas: Slow Life in the Fast Lane*. What do you think they mean by this term? Look in particular at the way in which certain camera shots, angles and movements are arranged and constructed, particularly the use of high-view shots from a koala point of view, in both natural and urban environments. Can you find other examples of a 'blue chip' approach to the subject?
- Following from the previous discussion, explain and discuss the filmmakers' statement in the press kit that 'the suburbs are treated like an antagonistic character'. Find and comment on examples where this occurs during the documentary.
- The filmmakers also state that 'the intent was to make an emotional rather than an intellectual film... a story akin to a modern day "koala soap opera"'. Discuss, with descriptive examples,



Above: Mother and Joey hugging tree (Mary and Bruce). Photographer: Gary Steer
Middle: Front clousup of Koala chewing on leaf behind branches. Photographer: Wade Fairly
Below: Dr Sean Fitzgibbon and Dr Bill Ellis take measurements of the sleepy koala. Photographer: Malcolm Ludgate

this statement, and offer reasons behind this approach to the overall narrative. How might the documentary be perceived in terms of a 'soap opera' about koalas? Comment on whether the inclusion during the program of the interviews, activities and research of the two biological science teams is a distraction or a worthwhile and valuable addition to this 'soap opera' approach.

- Following from the discussion on the 'soap opera' approach, comment on the filmmakers' view that, '... we weren't afraid to anthropomorphise'. What does this mean? Ensure you know what 'anthropomorphic' means: you may wish to draw up a list of examples you have seen in films, TV and fiction literature. Drawing from the documentary, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of telling a story about animals from an anthropomorphic stance.
- Comment on the style and purpose of well-known actor Shane Jacobson's narration and the possible reasoning behind choosing him as narrator.
- The music composer for the film is Rajan Kamahl. In the press kit he says, '... the score had to help tell the story of the plight of these animals'. Discuss in class, with examples, the way in which the soundtrack music complements the visual narrative.
- Plan and write a review in about 300 words of *Koalas: Slow Life in the Fast Lane* for the pages of a weekly TV magazine or newspaper liftout. You are writing for a generalist reading audience, and your aim is to inform people of the content, the main themes, items of interest, and whether audiences are likely to be satisfied by the narrative and the overall approach or not.



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