Protecting wildlife from domestic dogs

A guide to community engagement

Contents

Background

Many native Australian animals are attacked by domestic dogs each year. Dog attacks can often be fatal, making them a common cause of death for many native species.

Many dog attacks on wildlife occur in the dog's own backyard. Generally, the larger the dog, the more likely it could be responsible for a fatal attack on a native species. If there are two or more dogs present at a property, the likelihood of attack increases.

Some animals, like koalas, can defend themselves. They have sharp teeth and claws capable of causing deep wounds. Any dog that attacks a koala may risk serious injury.

Managing the interactions between domestic dogs and native wildlife is becoming an increasing challenge for land managers such as local councils and state government.

Many people exercise their dogs in wildlife habitats, despite signs prohibiting this, leading to attacks on native wildlife. Existing management strategies to reduce dog attack rely heavily on owners changing their behaviour but bringing about this change is difficult.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide land managers with guidance about designing infrastructure and programs to reduce the incidence of dog attacks on native wildlife.

In 2019, the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (the Department) hosted a workshop with dog owners, local councils, NSW Government staff and community members. The workshop aimed to build land managers' understanding of dog owners, the importance those owners place on their companion animals, and how dog-owner behaviour could be influenced to reduce dog attacks on wildlife.

These guidelines provide recommendations from the workshop for how to reduce dog attacks on wildlife using:

- highly visible and well-publicised compliance activities
- physical separation of domestic dogs and wildlife
- effective communication and community engagement to influence dog owner behaviour
- monitoring of strategies.

No-dog areas are most effective at protecting shorebirds. Overall, there was higher compliance in 'no-dog' areas compared to on-leash access. Review of Dog Impacts to Beach-nesting Birds and Management Solutions, Dr Grainne Maguire 2018. Photo, John Turbill/DPIE.

Structural options

Physical separation is the most certain, effective and sustained means of protecting wildlife from domestic dogs.

Physical separation includes:

- erecting exclusion fencing
- establishing and enforcing 'no-dog' areas.

To be most effective, you will likely need to engage the community in discussions about these solutions to ensure local acceptance. Engagement should also seek to build a supportive, knowledgeable and vigilant local community.

Exclusion fencing

Fencing can be used to stop native wildlife from entering back yards. It can also be effective as a barrier between residences and adjoining nature reserves.

No-dog areas

No-dog areas can effectively minimise interactions between dogs and wildlife.

Because most people tend to follow rules and obey the law, no-dog zones can help normalise good behaviour. Appropriate signage can help educate the public about vulnerable local wildlife.

Some dog owners may not understand the importance of no-dog areas. They may also ignore them in areas that are out of sight of the public.

Koala exclusion fencing: unclimbable fencing at least 1.5 m high prevents koalas jumping up from the ground and gripping the top. Photo Sandpiper Ecological.

To increase the likelihood of dog owners respecting no-dog areas:

- undertake consultation with the local community including dog owners, being sensitive to their values, needs and desires

- ensure the area has adequate signage and is publicised

- plan highly visible and well-publicised compliance activities.

A note on compliance and enforcement

People are unlikely to break the rules when faced with a fine. Compliance and enforcement are therefore vital tools, especially where small numbers of people are responsible for significant damage.

A minority of people will find ways to continue their damaging behaviour despite exclusion zones, often going to great lengths to conceal it. Detailed community consultation can provide information about local community expectations and values. Enforcement programs that reflect these values are likely to be more successful. Community monitoring and social pressure can be powerful ways to augment formal monitoring and enforcement actions. For example, a shared or community-supported approach using social media can be an effective means to communicate environmental messages and report people not doing the right thing.

Community engagement model for wildlife protection

Local communities can play a vital role in protecting wildlife. However, engaging communities to support wildlife conservation activities is often challenging.

The Department hosted a workshop with wildlife protection professionals, engagement experts, and community volunteers at Ballina in July 2019. One output from the workshop was the general -purpose model described below. It outlines promising and inexpensive community engagement tactics.

The methods have been selected based on high reach per dollar, persistence in the environment, and depth of impact on potential champions and advocates.

For the best result, you should use all these methods in a single project in a specific location.

Community engagement method summary

Method	Detail
Research and consultation	The most important step of any engagement project is to first understand the local community
High reach ideas to help you spread the message to the broader community	
Communication tools	Use methods that maximise reach and language that is clear, respectful, positive
Signs	Use clear, prominent, respectful, action-oriented, uncluttered signage
Creative public art	Use permanent installations in the environment that draw attention to the species and celebrate it as part of the identity of the local community
High impact ideas to stand the test of time or break through other distractions	
Face-to-face contact	Organise activities that spark conversations with dog walkers about wildlife protection and dog management
Immersive learning activities	These develop knowledgeable and committed local champions and advocates, especially among the young

Research and consultation

A community engagement program should begin with research and consultation with the local community, including dog owners.

Preliminary research allows you to be sensitive to local needs, desires, expectations and issues. It reveals hidden opportunities and warns you of pitfalls to avoid.

Research and consultation activities include:

- interviews with individuals
- focus groups
- field observation
- CoDesign workshops.

For practical information on these methods, see resources from Australian Association for Environmental Education and IDEO under 'More information'.

CoDesign example

The Leave it! project was established by Redland City Council and Griffith University to reduce dog attacks on koalas in south-east Queensland. Leave It! was created using a 3-step social marketing process: co-create, build, and engage (CBE).

Dog owners and experts were shown examples of where dogs were an issue for koalas in the region, then brainstormed possible solutions. The result was a positive, dog-focused program that delivered obedience training. Read more about the in the article. *Does Your Project Make a Difference?*.

The Leave It! program was launched during a popular Dogfest festival with 1500 attendees. This was a fun, positive way to engage with and educate large numbers of dog owners.

Here are some questions you could ask the local community before launching any engagement project to conserve wildlife:

- What do you know about the species locally?
- What do you know about threats to the species?
- How do you think we should tackle the threats?
- What conditions would need to be met for you to adopt certain actions or practices (such as avoiding a section of beach).
- Why haven't you adopted those actions or practices already?
- What do you think is the 'normal practice' in your community?
- What do your social contacts say about the problem and about possible solutions?
- What kinds of community activities most interest you?
- Who do you think is a credible source of information?
- How would you like to hear from us?

Dogs can be trained not to chase wildlife. Photo: Mariamichelle at Pixabay
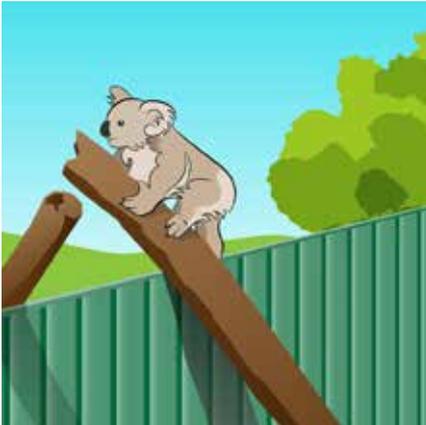
Keep recommended actions few and simple, illustrating exactly what to do.

Celebrate and thank dog owners as wildlife protectors.

Communication tools

You should prioritise communication methods that have wide reach and are long-lasting, such as prominent signs or fridge magnets. Short-lived methods like social media and advertising will work best to promote specific events and activities.

Key content

Communication tools should clearly inform people about:

- the location of the native wildlife
- individual actions that can protect the species
- ecological knowledge that helps people make decisions (for example, that koalas travel long distances through the area, seeking specific trees).

Avoid blame

Respect is vital to building positive support and a healthy relationship with dog owners.

Avoid language that blames or implies disrespect towards dog owners. Most dog owners want to protect native species. The community of dog owners are the best defence against the bad behaviour of a few.

Rather than using negative, dog-blaming language, you should thank and celebrate dog owners for doing the right thing.

Effective communication tools

To motivate community action, communication tools like leaflets and posters should aim to:

- inform about problems, but avoid being excessively negative or pessimistic
- use non-blaming, respectful, dog-friendly language
- express that most local dog owners carefully protect native species
- express that the native species you are trying to protect is a local treasure that belongs to 'our' community
- avoid overwhelming people with ideas: instead stick to one or two individual actions per communication, and keep the actions simple, using illustrations if possible
- use visuals with a grassroots 'community' feel; be whimsical, humorous and creative
- be wholly or jointly in the name of a local community group
- have an open uncluttered layout with white space and a font size of at least 11pt.

Department of Planning, Industry and Environment

Example of leaflet or poster

A simple but creative, non-government look

Quirky, attention-getting headline

Have you seen Fuzz?

Fuzz the koala and about 120 friends and family live in and around our Port Macquarie suburbs.

Human activity can endanger koalas, but we can protect them.

Be positive and hopeful

At night, Fuzz and friends get moving. They can travel hundreds of metres through your suburb where they are often attacked by dogs.

You can help Fuzz. As a caring dog owner:

Useful info about species behaviour

- watch out for koalas in your area, especially if your dog is off-leash

Simple actions

- set up a koala escape route in your backyard, such as a log against the fence

- tell friends and neighbours about koalas you've spotted

Acknowledge that dog owners care about wildlife

- report koalas in trouble to 0400 000 000.

Actions:
few, simple, clear, illustrated

Dog walkers keep a keen lookout when dogs are off-leash

This pole makes a good koala escape route.

Wholly or jointly in the name of a local community group

Produced by Friends of Fuzz with support from Port Macquarie-Hastings Council.
www.friendsoffuzz.com.au 0400 000 000

Map shows location of species and routes travelled

Over page: MAP showing Koala colonies and likely routes in Port Macquarie area + safe off-leash dog walking sites.

Take every opportunity to inform people about the species location and vulnerability. Photo: Martin Smith.

This sign simply states the action that is needed to protect the species.
Photo: William Quilliam.

Signs

Use signs to inform residents and the community that there is wildlife in the area and what action they should take, including restraining dogs on leashes.

What makes an effective sign?

Signs should:

- be legible from a normal walking or driving distance

- prominently display the species name and state that it occurs in the area. Include an image of the species

- clearly state the desired action, such as 'Slow down'

- give the reason for the desired action, where space allows, such as 'for dog and wildlife safety'

- be respectful: the sign should be one the public is happy to read

- use minimal words and avoid dense text and cluttered layout

- avoid uninformative headlines like 'Notice' or 'Wildlife awareness'.

- avoid threats such as, 'Council rangers on patrol. Fines apply if dogs are not on a lead.' Threats cause resistance. If required, place the threat on a separate sign.

Ideally, the goal of a good sign should be to inform the community about the species at threat and depict an appropriate action they can take to reduce the threat.

Good

Prominent, simply states the problem and the desired action, able to be easily read from nearby walking paths. Photo: Wayne Quilliam

Bad

Densely crowded text, uninformative headline. Only motivated people will read this. Photo: Nick Cubbin/DPIE

Best

Simple, uncluttered layout, easily legible from a distance

Tag line focuses on values (not just facts or commands)

Highly legible cartoon, illustration or photo that grabs attention

Primary heading very prominent, speaks for itself

Includes useful information that helps understand risk

Image shows koalas on the ground, not just sleeping in trees

Provide a reason for acting

Simple action that helps protect the species

Clear, visual depiction of the desired action

Caring for wildlife

KOALAS
are active here, day and night.

For dog and wildlife safety, please keep dogs on-leash

All enquiries 0000 0000

[logo]

Creative public art

Prominent creative installations in the environment can help focus attention on the species and celebrate it as part of the identity of the local community.

Public art can educate subtly without lecturing or threatening. It can affect behaviour because it raises the perceived value of that species for that community, sparks new conversations and influences social norms.

Instead of messages like 'don't be bad', it communicates 'this is who we are'. Permanent public art can be a valuable legacy of a project.

Hello Koalas sculpture trail raises awareness of Port Macquarie's threatened Koala population. Photo: Lindsay Moller/DPIE.

Face-to-face contact

Use friendly activities such as 'Dogs breakfast' beach BBQs and 'Doggy Day Out' community events to spark conversations with dog walkers about wildlife protection and dog management.

Conversations between people from diverse backgrounds and worldviews can create shifts in perspective. It can be an effective way to break down prejudice and open minds to alternatives.

Ideally, these events should be social, enjoyable, safe, comfortable and non-confronting. Take care to ensure that people don't feel judged. Food is an excellent way to bring people together. Councils new to such events could consider dog training demonstrations, health checks, nail clipping and doggy bags with education material and doggy treats. Visit the NSW Koala Country website to read about a dog event hosted by Byron Shire Council.

'It's a Dogs Breakfast': Coffs Harbour Council staff, national parks rangers, and volunteers socialise with beach dog walkers, focusing on little tern conservation. Photo: Mark Watts/NPWS.

A project based on the 'Popular opinion leaders' method would involve recruiting dog walkers to have conversations with other dog walkers. Photo: Gavin Hansford/DPIE

Koala Watch involved hundreds of residents in workshops, tours and school activities in the NSW Northern Rivers region. Photo, Justin Mallee/DPIE

'Popular opinion leaders' method

Another effective approach is to recruit members of the target audience to have conversations with their peers. This method has proven effective in many contexts, including peer education about health and social issues.

Immersive learning activities

Offering immersive learning activities where people can interact with a species in its environment can encourage greater community interest in that species.

Passionate people can become great supporters and local champions for a species.

They can be the 'eyes on the ground' who take a stand, spark conversations and influence local norms.

Children make great advocates, so immersive activities should be child-friendly and offered as school excursions.

More than 250 citizen scientists of all ages turned out for the 2019 Narrandera Koala Spotting Day. Photo: Zachary Wells.

I Spy Koala app – Citizen Science

The NSW Government has launched a new app called I Spy Koala to promote citizen collection of koala sightings in the wild.

App users can enter information about the location and condition of the koala, as well as photos and other information.

Data from the app is made available for access through the interactive NSW Government Sharing and Enabling Environmental Data (SEED) portal. The SEED Portal was developed with and for the community of NSW as a central place for everyone to find data about the environment.

Reporting koala sightings is essential to help koalas in the wild. Better information about koalas leads to better koala conservation and better planning decisions.

The app is available for download for Apple and Android devices.

Citizen science projects can expand the number of knowledgeable and caring supporters. Source: DPIE

Monitoring

To monitor the effectiveness of your efforts, you need to assess the results at different times during the project, because some results take longer to become apparent.

For example:

- **Wildlife outcomes** (long term) include reductions in attacks on wildlife. This data is collected at intervals of months or years
- **Dog owner outcomes** include changes in knowledge or behaviour, or structural changes like erection of fencing or provision of ranger patrols. This information is collected at intervals of months
- **Engagement outputs** include changes in participation and attitudes at community engagement events and actions of relevant authorities, e.g. the number of dog owners who engaged during a 'Dogs' Breakfast' event and their satisfaction with the interaction. This information is collected on the day of the event.

Don't forget to collect baseline data. This means doing your survey or counts before you start implementing the project, so you have points of comparison with later results.

Carrying out one-on-one interviews with members of the public is a simple way to monitor changes in awareness. Doing this at the beginning of your project is a valuable way to 'listen' to the public in the design stages of your project.

For example, the City of Canada Bay interviewed 80 dog walkers in public parks before designing their 'Bag it, Bin it' dog poo reduction campaign. This survey helped them to understand their target audience and develop a successful campaign that reduced dog poo in public places.

Monitoring and evaluation can be simple and effective. Remember to only collect information that will inform your objectives. It may be a good idea to speak to social scientists and professional evaluators when devising your plan.

When researching, designing, planning, implementing and reporting and evaluating your environmental education program or project, use a guide such as _Does Your Project Make a Difference?._

A simple monitoring strategy

	Outcome	Measures	Sources of data
Wildlife outcome	Reduced domestic dog attacks on wildlife	Counts of injured and killed wildlife	Data collected by WIRES, rangers, and local vets.
Dog owner outcomes	Dog owner awareness	Percentage of dog owners aware of: • presence of species • threat posed by dogs • actions that reduce threat • presence of ranger patrols • protecting wildlife	Random survey on dog walking paths
Dog owner outcomes	Dog owner behaviours	Percentage of dog owners: • complying with leash signs • with koala-friendly yards	Observational counts
Immediate outcomes	Number of: • homes letterboxed • signs erected • dog owners met during Dog's Breakfasts • participants in immersive learning activities • ranger patrols in area. Percentage of community satisfied by communications, interactions	Counts Counts Counts Counts Counts Random survey	Data sheets kept by project team Data sheets kept by project team Data sheets kept by project team Data sheets kept by project team Data sheets kept by project team Random survey in public places

More information

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Councils and other land managers, such as Tweed Shire Council and Byron Shire Council, can also reach out to surrounding councils that are already engaging with community to protect wildlife from dog attack.