Australia's Kangaroos

Kangaroos are native to the Australian continent and to parts of Papua New Guinea. Some species are only found in Australia.

There are over 60 different species of kangaroo and their close relatives. While it is impossible to determine the exact number of kangaroos in Australia, the population of the four most common species is thought to be more than 50 million. All kangaroos belong to the super-family *Macropodidae* (or macropods, meaning 'great-footed').

The macropod family includes kangaroos, wallabies, wallaroos, pademelons, tree-kangaroos and forest wallabies. These species are also found in Papua New Guinea. Species in the macropod family vary greatly in size and weight, ranging from 0.5 kilograms (1.1 pounds) to 90 kilograms (200 pounds). The *Potoroinae* (potoroid) family of kangaroos includes the potoroo, bettong and rat-kangaroo. This family of kangaroos lives only in Australia.

The Australian public feels strongly about the protection of its native animals and about cruelty to animals.

Legislation throughout Australia protects kangaroos. This includes severe penalties to prevent cruelty to or inhumane treatment of kangaroos.

All female kangaroos have front-opening pouches, which contain four teats. This is where the 'joey' or young kangaroo is raised until it can survive outside the pouch.

Most kangaroos have no set breeding cycle and are able to breed all year round.

All kangaroos in Australia that are not kept in zoos and wildlife parks live in the wild. Kangaroos of different types live in all of the diverse areas of Australia, from cold-climate rainforests and desert plains to tropical areas.

Life and habitat

Kangaroos are herbivorous, eating a range of plants, and in some cases fungi. Most are nocturnal but some are active in the early morning and late afternoon. Different kangaroo species live in a range of different environments, for example potoroids make nests and tree-kangaroos live in trees. Larger species of kangaroo tend to shelter under trees or in caves and rock clefts.

Kangaroos of all sizes have one thing in common, powerful back legs with long feet. Most kangaroos live on the ground and are distinguished from other animals by the way they hop on their strong back legs. The tail is used by kangaroos to balance during hopping and as a fifth limb when moving slowly.

TONY MILLER

Common species of kangaroo, such as these, can reach plague proportions.

AUSTRALIAN PICTURE LIBRARY

Hopping uses less energy than four-footed running.

Because they are such prolific breeders, a kangaroo population can increase fourfold in five years if it has continuous access to plentiful supplies of food and water.

Kangaroo management and use

Kangaroos have long been important to the survival of Australia's indigenous people. Kangaroos have been hunted by Aborigines for tens of thousands of years, for both the meat and the skins. When Europeans arrived in Australia in the late eighteenth century, they too hunted kangaroos for survival.

Kangaroos continue to be used as a resource but only under strict government controls.
All Australian States and Territories have legislation to protect kangaroos. Only the four most abundant species of kangaroo and small numbers of one common wallaby species can be harvested, and then only by licensed hunters.

Kangaroo harvesting and the environment

The Australian rangeland environment is very fragile and easily degraded. Kangaroo populations have increased dramatically in these areas due to the introduction of European farming methods, with water being supplied for domestic stock such as sheep and cattle. New water supplies have greatly increased kangaroo survival rates. The consequent growth in kangaroo populations in Australia's rangelands has led to excessive grazing pressure on this vulnerable environment.

The culling or harvesting process is therefore a vital tool in both kangaroo population management and sustainable land care, and assists the sustainability of all species of kangaroo. It also protects the natural habitats necessary for the survival of other native animals.

The four species of kangaroo that are harvested have very large populations, all in excess of five million animals, which need to be controlled to relieve pressure on the fragile environment. None is threatened or endangered. The harvesting of kangaroos is decided on an annual quota basis so that the populations of these species are maintained at sustainable levels.

While there is a large trade in kangaroo products, the harvesting of kangaroos is well managed and the trade does not require any international monitoring (under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna).

There is no farming of kangaroos in Australia. All kangaroos hunted for commercial use are shot in the wild by licensed hunters. All kangaroos, except those in zoos or wildlife parks, are free-ranging wild animals.

An Australian Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare, after an extensive investigation, concluded that: "There is no doubt that the shooting of kangaroos by professional shooters is the most humane way of killing kangaroos." Kangaroo harvesting and processing is subject to strict regulations and all hunters face penalties if they do not abide by the National Code of Practice for the Humane Killing of Kangaroos.

Protecting kangaroos

The live export of kangaroos is prohibited under the *Wildlife Protection (Regulation of Exports and Imports) Act 1982*. There are a few exceptions, for example zoo-to-zoo exchanges, where small numbers are transported overseas.

All kangaroos hunted for commercial use must be killed instantly by a single shot to the head by a licensed and fully trained hunter. An Australian Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare, after an extensive investigation, concluded that: "There is no doubt that the shooting of kangaroos by professional shooters is the most humane way of killing kangaroos." Kangaroo harvesting and processing is subject to strict regulations and all hunters face penalties if they do not abide by the National Code of Practice for the Humane Killing of Kangaroos.

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Kangaroo, Lake Argyle, Western Australia
All kangaroos in Australia that are not kept in zoos and wildlife parks live in the wild.

The kangaroo industry

Australia's kangaroo industry began exporting kangaroo meat to Europe in 1959 in response to interest from the European game meat industry. Today kangaroo meat and skins are exported all over the world.

Exports of kangaroo products are derived only from the four species of kangaroo that are allowed to be harvested and used commercially.

Products derived from kangaroos are popular in Australia and throughout the world. Kangaroo meat is recognised for its high quality and is popular in restaurants.

All kangaroo products processed for export, including meat, offal, skins and leather, must undergo inspection by Australian Quarantine Inspection Service officials. A breach of government regulations relating to the export of kangaroo meat will lead to fines of up to $250 000 or imprisonment of up to ten years or both.

Kangaroo meat

Australia exports kangaroo meat to twenty-one countries. Kangaroo meat is increasingly popular, and export markets are expected to increase. The European Union is the largest importer of kangaroo products. Kangaroo meat is also exported to the United States and many parts of Asia.

All kangaroo meat processed for export undergoes strict inspection by the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service to ensure that the carcasses are fit for human consumption.

In addition, all kangaroo meat processing plants must have a certificate of registration and are examined and certified in accordance with the strict requirements of importing countries.

Kangaroo furs, skins and leather

Kangaroo skins and furs are exported to a large number of markets in Europe, the United States and Asia.

Kangaroo skins are exported in different stages of treatment:

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salted, pickled (semi-processed) and tanned. Like all kangaroo exports, these products are strictly sourced from only the four most abundant kangaroo species.

Some kangaroo skins are traded as furs, while others are sold for the leather.

Kangaroo meat is considered one of the finest game meats. Its growing appeal stems from its well-flavoured, slightly gamey taste. Kangaroo meat contains very little saturated fat relative to other meats and is high in protein, zinc and iron.

Government inspectors examine the meat during processing to ensure that it comes only from healthy kangaroos. In addition, all kangaroo meat processing plants must have a certificate of registration and are examined and certified in accordance with the strict requirements of importing countries.

Although pickled skins generate the most export earnings of all kangaroo skins and furs, there is a growing export trade in finished kangaroo leather.

Kangaroo skin is renowned for being very strong, yet light in weight. It is ideal for use in the manufacture of high-quality leather goods, including footwear. Because of kangaroo leather's high tensile strength, it is ideal for the manufacure of sporting footwear.

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While only a limited number of kangaroos of certain species may be harvested, a full range of high-quality kangaroo products is available for international markets.

For more information on kangaroos in general and kangaroo management:

☛ *Try*

<http://www.biodiversity.environment.gov.au/plants/wildlife/mgmtintr.htm>

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