

KANGAROO ISLAND DREAMING

The dunes on the southern side of Kangaroo Island.

STORY AND PHOTOS RUTH-CZEFIMAK MALDINI

Islands are special places wherever you are in the world. Most are isolated, allowing solitude, and they almost always provide contact with the ocean – experiences I wish for when taking a break from an otherwise busy schedule. The other bonus is that most islands have a range of different plant communities to explore. With this in mind I headed to Kangaroo Island, a large island off the South Australian Coast, for a five day trip. As you may have guessed, it is home to a large population of Kangaroos, but it also abounds with other amazing wildlife, and many Conservation areas.

Matthew Flinders sighted Kangaroo island and noted that it was uninhabited by Aborigines. Interestingly, Aborigines that lived on the mainland at the time, called the island 'Karta' which roughly translates to 'island of the dead'. Settlement began around 1815 with the first official settlement in 1836. It was not until the early 1900's that prehistoric tools were discovered on the island and it is estimated that around 2250 years ago the Aboriginal population on Kangaroo Island left or disappeared. The reason for this is still being debated today. The lack of an Aboriginal community in recent history has meant that vegetation on the island has evolved with a reduced fire regime as compared to the mainland.

PARK AREAS

The island boasts one National Park, seventeen Conservation Parks, a Conservation Reserve and five Wilderness Protection Zones and has approximately 1200 species of plants, of which 45 are endemic, while an additional 7 are found on Kangaroo Island and other areas of Australia, but not South Australia. The island has many walks through different plant communities as well as Stokes Bay Bush Garden - a privately run garden displaying both endemic and native vegetation.

The oldest trees on the island are *Eucalyptus cosmophylla* (Cup gum), with some having 2m diameter butts. They look much younger, however, as the trunks are actually formed from epicormic growth over many hundreds of years. The tallest tree species on the island is *Eucalyptus cladocalyx* (Sugar gum). It occurs on the northern hills and often forms monocultures. There are a number of other Eucalypt species including the recently named *E. paludicola*, found in only two populations, one on the Fleurieu Peninsula and one on Kangaroo Island.

When comparing vegetation on Kangaroo Island to the neighbouring mainland, it is interesting to observe the thick 'nature strips' which run along the road sides. These are so diverse in vegetation, that they can really be appreciated by the



An example of the Eucalypt forests on the island. (above)
After the 2007 bushfires, the forests began their regeneration. (below)
Lignotuber regrowth after the Kangaroo Island bushfires in 2007. (bottom)



Entrance to walled garden. (top left)
Entrance to monastery garden. (top middle)
Enticing pathway through the woodland. (top right)
One of many statues placed throughout the garden. (above)
Curved pergola with climbing roses & clematis. (middle right)
The Abbess's garden. (right)



SCREENING | CLADDING | FENCING | OVERHEAD SHADE

day tripper. I observed at least 10 different eucalypt species, *Allocasuarina verticillata*, *Banksia* species, *Hakea* species, *Acacia* species, *Leptospermums*, *Xanthorrhoea semiplana* spp. *tateana* and many herbs. Locals told me that all of the unsealed roads on the island, except the two 4WD tracks, have been doubled in width to accommodate tourists. This in turn has had a bad impact on these nature strips, making them vulnerable to weed infestation.

BUSHFIRES

In late 2007, a large bushfire swept through Kangaroo Island burning over 20% of the island. About 6 months after the fire, the island received some rain, which triggered widespread regrowth throughout the burnt areas and germination of many species.

One of the first things that you notice about the regrowth is the distinctive red tinge that the epicormic and lignotuber growth has. This red tint is caused by a high concentration of chemical compounds, making the leaves indigestible to insects and browsing animals, protecting the trees in the early stages of regeneration. This red tint was beginning to fade during the time I was there.

A large number of *E. baxteri* (stringy barks) on the island were killed in the recent fires. This is unusual, as typically the thick fibrous bark would insulate the epicormic buds from fire. Many believe that the death of the stringy barks indicates that they were under stress to begin with, while others believe that the population of stringy barks on the island have less fire resistance than the mainland population.

The fires have made it easier to identify the many different vegetation communities on the island by making them more visible. As most of us know, one of the main factors defining the distribution and form of plant communities is soil nutrient status

Kangaroo Island's *Xanthorrhoea semiplana*. (top left)
The island is exposed to intense storm activity. (top right)
The island is home to large numbers of goannas and poor soils. (above left)
Kangaroo Island even boasts limestone caves. (above right)
The northern coastline of Kangaroo Island. (right page: bottom)

and pH. The island can roughly be divided into 3 main areas – the coastal zones, the low lying plains, and the raised plateaux. The island is exposed to intense storm activity, which has meant that in some areas all the nutrients in the soil have been washed away, while in other areas where the rocks are still weathering, the soil is rich and fertile. Strong winds blowing north across the island towards the mainland have pushed the beach sand inland, and over time, large areas of limestone and alkaline dunes have been formed. The soils on the south of the island generally support mallee with the northern soils supporting stringy barks.

The poor soil, although very detrimental to the Europeans, actually halted large scale agriculture taking off, which in turn, prevented weeds becoming too wide spread. The high goanna population on the island is the reason that rabbits, although introduced a number of times, never took hold. The island also has no fox population.

However, the population of Koalas on Kangaroo Island makes for extremely controversial and passionate debate. The Koala was introduced to the island in 1923 due to concerns that it faced extinction on the mainland. After the fires of 2007, many Koalas were sterilised or returned to the mainland. The preferred food for the Kangaroo Island koala population is *E. viminalis* ssp *cygneterensis*, a localised population of Manna gum. Unlike the mainland population of Manna gum, which evolved with Koala populations, the island form doesn't have resistance to browsing, because of the incorporation of unpalatable compounds or structures in their leaves. The problem has been compounded with forestry recently starting on Kangaroo Island. *E. globulus*

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plantations are located on the island, and after Manna gum, is the Koalas second targeted tree. Many locals feel that potential exists for the remaining population of Koalas to expand rapidly in the *E. globulus* plantations, which in most cases were not touched by fire, damaging these areas, before moving on to decimate the recovering Manna gum population.

Kangaroo Island has many activities to keep you busy. The camping grounds are fantastic, with most having flushing toilets and some with showers, but you must only camp in designated areas. Camping is via self-registration and costs \$10 a night.

Entry to the parks is not free but you can buy a ticket which gives you entry to all the parks and guided tours (including a tour in a

cave and a walk along the beach with the sea lions) for \$45 and it is valid for 12 months. As with most areas in SA you are also allowed to drive on the beach. This means that at every beach, cars park about 50 metres from each other and you set up next to your vehicle.

There are 20 cellar doors, a cheese factory, honey farms, emu farms, Marron farms, penguins, seals, fishing, caving, diving and galleries. The tourist brochures state that the beaches are safe for swimming. I suggest that if you do want to go swimming you should visit the Cape Willoughby lighthouse first and have a look at the photograph of the 7 foot shark they found during the school swimming carnival at Emu Bay last year. **LD**

