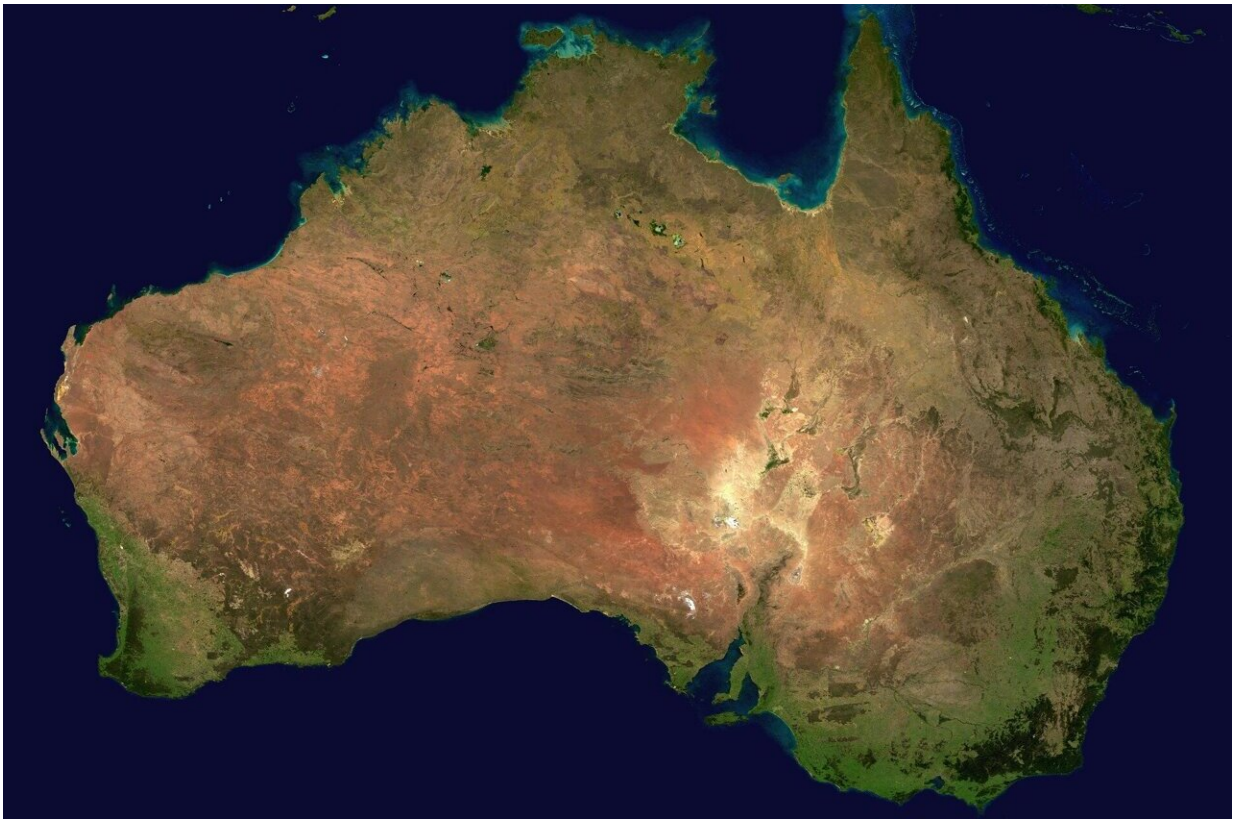


Australians clueless about their country's most endangered species

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Australia holds an unenviable conservation status: it's the fourth-worst country in the world for species extinctions and is in the top three for critically endangered animals.

This week's Federal Budget included a \$224 million allocation to help save threatened species—news that coincides with some concerning findings of a new paper authored by University of South Australia (UniSA) researchers.

A study led by UniSA conservation psychologist Dr. Elissa Pearson reveals overwhelming public ignorance of Australia's most threatened species, a factor that is contributing to the extinction crisis of endangered animals.

UniSA researchers, alongside colleagues from Zoos Victoria and Edith Cowan University, polled more than 300 zoo visitors and [community members](#), testing their awareness of seven endangered species at risk of extinction within the next decade.

"More than 90 percent of those surveyed did not recognize six of the seven species; the exception being the Tasmanian devil," Dr. Pearson says.

The other species were the Leadbeater's possum, eastern barred bandicoot, helmeted honeyeater, southern corroboree frog, Lord Howe Island (LHI) [stick insect](#), and orange-bellied parrot.

The [Journal for Nature Conservation](#) paper outlines a clear link between species recognition, likeability and conservation support, showing that people are far more inclined to donate toward conserving Australia's iconic koala, kangaroo and wombat populations, despite these not being endangered.

"There are huge gaps in community knowledge regarding native Australian wildlife, with less than eight percent of people able to correctly name six of seven [endangered species](#) when shown photographs.

"Apart from the Tasmanian devil, which 86 percent of people recognized, the level of familiarity and knowledge of our vulnerable species is limited. Misidentification is also common, particularly the eastern barred bandicoot which is often mistaken for a bilby."

The most likable Australian animals—the koala and kangaroo—also reflect the 'similarity principle', which suggests that people tend to prefer animals most like humans, and that when only a limited number of species can be conserved, mammals are favored over other species, regardless of their endangered status.

The helmeted honeyeater, southern corroboree frog and LHI stick insect were consistently the least liked species.

"Apart from the likeability factor, our study showed that being able to recognize [species](#) increased people's willingness to support their conservation, so that is a starting point we need to address."

Endangered insects are fighting an uphill battle for support, with 85 percent of people disliking them, putting their survival at most risk. However, this perception could be changed with some clever marketing initiatives, the researchers suggest.

"The LHI stick insect has some exceptional qualities, such as their resilience and survival against all odds, their ability to reproduce without males, their tendency to form large social groups during the day, or even the fact that their foot pads are heart shaped. If people knew these facts the likeability factor would likely shoot up," Dr. Pearson says.

More information: Elissa L. Pearson et al, Can we save Australia's endangered wildlife by increasing species recognition?, *Journal for Nature Conservation* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jnc.2022.126257](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnc.2022.126257)

According to a [2018 ABC article](#), Australia has 40 extinct animal species and 106 critically endangered animals.

OECD data on endangered animals as a percentage of threatened species can be found here:

https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=WILD_LIFE

Provided by University of South Australia

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