

A billion animals caught in Australia's fires; some may go extinct

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.16.20

Word Count **546**

Level **570L**



Image 1. Volunteer Sarah Price of wildlife rescue group WIRES, which is working to save and rehabilitate animals from the monthslong wildfire disaster in Australia, takes care of rescued kangaroos at her house on the outskirts of Sydney. Photo by: Saeed Khan/AFP via Getty

The dunnart lives on Australia's Kangaroo Island. The mouse-sized mammal is not well-known. Still, it may be the most special mammal in the area.

One-third of Kangaroo Island has burned. The island is still on fire. Before the fires, the dunnart was already endangered. Even some dunnart researchers had never seen one. Now they fear they never will. The whole area where these dunnarts are known to live has burned.

"The entire range of the species has been burned," said Rosemary Hohnen, an ecologist. She studies the Kangaroo Island dunnart. The mammal, she said, is in real danger of extinction.

Fires are sweeping across Australia. They are the worst to ever hit the continent. More than 1 billion animals may have been affected or killed, said the University of Sydney. Some of them are found nowhere else on Earth.

Bugs And Cattle Are Dying

Manu Saunders is an insect scientist. She said that many ecologically important animals could be lost. Even if individuals survive, their habitat could be gone. "They'll die anyway," she said.

Christopher Dickman is an ecologist. He said the loss may never be undone.

Then there are all the insects. Bugs serve as food, clear dead matter and spread the pollen of plants. Now, tens of millions of bugs are being burned alive. Some may vanish without ever being discovered.

Wild animals are not the only animals suffering. Thousands of cattle have been lost. The Australian government says 100,000 cattle will die in the fires.

Surviving animals will struggle in the burned land. They will have a hard time finding food or protection. They are also at risk of illness.

Dunnarts Are In Danger

On Kangaroo Island, conservationists worked hard to protect endangered animals. Now their efforts might be undone.

The situation looks bad for Kangaroo Island dunnarts. The mammal is quite rare. It has been detected just 48 times. Since 1990, they have only been seen in a small western pocket of the island, Hohnen said.

Kangaroo Island Land For Wildlife is a conservation group. It uses remote cameras to watch the dunnart. Its machines were "melted" by fires. Some photos of surviving dunnarts were caught, though.

After the fires end, Hohnen and other experts said surviving animals will need help. Vegetation will need to be replanted. Non-native predators must be removed.

Climate Change Needs To Be Addressed

Some also say there must be more government action on climate change.

Dickman said that scientists feel the world is watching Australia. The continent is quite dry. The effects of climate change were expected to appear there first. "There's a sense of even greater responsibility, in some ways," he said.

That responsibility should extend to the dunnart, Hohnen said. Even if it is not a national icon.

"Biodiversity is part of what makes planet Earth planet Earth. It's our heritage; it's our richness," she said.

