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# Oxford Word of the Month – December: koala diplomacy

**noun:** Australia’s use of koalas as diplomatic gifts to other countries; a form of Australian soft power diplomacy.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In May 1994, Australia arranged for a koala called Blinky Bill (named after a famous koala in Australian children’s fiction) and his younger half-brother, Kupala, to spend some time on extended loan at a zoo in the German city of Bonn. The koalas came from San Diego Zoo (rather than Australia), but were nevertheless Australian ambassadors. Their display in Bonn Zoo was complemented by the broadcasting of the Australian television show *Blinky Bill*, the sale of koala t-shirts, and the chance to win a trip to Australia.

An Australian embassy representative said: ‘Australia could benefit from the **koala diplomacy**.’ (*Canberra Times*, 18 May 1994) The koala visit would raise Australia’s profile in Germany and encourage German tourism to Australia. It also had an unexpected result: the Australian embassy received unsolicited donations to support organisations helping injured wildlife after a recent Sydney bushfire. As it turned out, when the media events took place at the zoo, a didgeridoo performance upset the koalas:

*Zaine Flynn, an Aborigine who is playing a didgeridoo in a modern production of Hamlet in Stuttgart, provided an additional Australian flavour to the **koala diplomacy**. He played inside the koala house until zoo authorities asked him to leave because the noise seemed to be upsetting the residents. (Canberra Times, 29 May 1994)*

One of the first instances of **koala diplomacy** occurred in 1984 with the gifting of two koalas to Japan by the Queensland Premier; several other instances have occurred since, including the 1994 German event. The term is modelled on China’s *panda diplomacy*—where pandas are sent to other countries to facilitate diplomatic relations between China and other countries (starting in the modern era in the 1950s).

One of the most notable recent instances of **koala diplomacy** was during the G20 summit in Brisbane in 2014 when world leaders, including US President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin, were photographed cuddling koalas.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop commented that:

*... koala diplomacy should not be underestimated as 'it portrays Australia in a soft light and promotes our values as an open, free, tolerant democracy'. The koala's diplomatic sway was crystallised for Ms Bishop at a retreat she held this year for a number of foreign ambassadors in West Australia. During a visit to the Sandalford Winery native animals were brought from a nearby wildlife sanctuary for the diplomats to meet, with a koala proving the most popular. (Melbourne Age, 27 December 2014)*

The effectiveness of **koala diplomacy** as a form of soft diplomacy has seen the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade producing what is referred to as a '**koala diplomacy** manual'. The approach has been criticised by some commentators:

*In historical efforts at cultivating soft power—Australia's public image overseas—we've leaned pretty heavily on wildlife (DFAT has reportedly produced a 600-page koala diplomacy manual). It's hard not to see the koalas as another outing in the line of dumbed-down Paul Hogan-inspired Australiana kitsch we've been flogging to the world for decades: g'arn maaate, c'mon down unda! (Sydney Morning Herald, 22 December 2015)*

Despite this criticism, it seems very likely that Australia will continue to engage in **koala diplomacy** in the future.

**Koala diplomacy** will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.

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