

# Koalas catastrophe

## Furry friends ravaged by disease peril

Glenis Green

IT has always been an iconic Queensland image — a grinning tourist cuddling that most endearing of living fluffy toys, a koala.

But will images and photographs be all that's left of the state's koala population in less than 15 years?

After years of conservationists sounding warnings about the threats from urban pressures, a leading researcher has now said bluntly that koalas could soon be just a memory in the southeast and even throughout Queensland without serious government management.

Director of veterinary services at Australia Zoo's Australian Wildlife Hospital on the Sunshine Coast, Dr Jon Hanger, said new ground-breaking research had shown that koalas were not only being killed off by declining habitat, dogs and traffic but also an insidious virus causing widespread cancers and AIDS.

"It's a very real epidemic and the Government has not recognised that," Dr Hanger said this week.

"This is not a robust species. It's a species on the edge and we're already looking at extinction along the coastal strips and still the Government is pushing ahead with plans for tens of thousands more houses."

Dr Hanger said he did not think the Environmental Protection Agency had either the will or the power to stand up to the Government.

It needed better resources and wider powers to better protect habitat and wildlife.

"We're either serious about conservation or we're not... we need to get realistic about management options to conserve koalas, such as translocation to safer areas after rehabilitation (which at the moment breaches EPA policy)," he said.



FIGHT for life... an orphaned baby koala and Dr Jon Hanger with a monitored koala.  
Pictures: Megan Stede

But an EPA spokesman said a 10-year koala conservation and management program implemented in late 2006, to which \$2.145 million had been allocated over four years, was already under way to balance rapid urbanisation with the needs of the koala.

**'This is not a robust species. It's a species on the edge'**

"The Koala Plan has been in operation for less than two years and it will take time to show positive results," he said.

Dr Hanger said while there was good news that 12 months of research showed hand-raised koalas could survive in the wild, the bad news was that diseases were now killing at least 50 per cent and up to 80 per cent of wild koalas prematurely.

The main killer was koala retrovirus (KoRV), which caused AIDS-like immune deficiency diseases and a range of cancers.

There was also chlamy-



diosis, which caused conjunctivitis, urinary and reproductive tract problems which could lead to blindness and infertility.

"We did a survey and the average age of death for koalas is six years while they should be living to 12-14 years," Dr Hanger said. "Just imagine if this happened in the human population and you had all these people dying at 40 — there'd be a huge outcry."

Dr Hanger said the Australian Wildlife Hospital research project done with the University of Queensland and sponsored by the Zarruffa's Coffee company, had demonstrated that the practice of hand-raising koalas was successful — with seven of the 10 koalas in the subject group surviving in the wild without human intervention and another two surviving with medical treatment.

But health checks confirmed suspicions the group was not immune to diseases prevalent among wild koalas — with one of the males contracting chlamydia and associated prostatitis, one female developing reproductive cysts and another fatal lymphoma.

## Cash payments for MBF members

MBF customers have started receiving their cash payments after the successful merger with BUPA Australia.

More than 820,000 people have received a share in the \$2.4 billion paid by BUPA for the merger with MBF.

The merger was formalised on June 16 after a 98 per cent supporting vote by policy holders on May 12.

Because MBF is classified as a mutual organisation, it is owned by policy holders. This means the takeover fee has to be shared among its members, including 301,000 in Queensland.

A single person with MBF hospital

cover for five years could expect about \$700, while a family with full health cover for a decade could get \$3000.

A BUPA spokeswoman yesterday said all direct credits were processed and cheques mailed on June 30.

"The good news is everybody who received an estimate (earlier this year) got a little bit more than what they thought," she said.

Anyone who has not received their cheque or direct credit payment by Monday, should telephone the scheme's hotline on 133 505.

Leanne Edmiston

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