Carers fear koalas under severe threat

Loss of habitat and viruses claim many of embattled species

By NICOLE CRIDLAND
nicole.crillandpiorthernstarcorn.au

THERE comes a point in every koala carer’s year when they wonder if they can continue doing what they do.

And, while the reality of caring for wildlife is that sometimes an animal will die or need to be euthanased, it doesn’t get any easier.

In fact, when it comes to the koala – arguably Australia’s greatest wildlife icon – it becomes incredibly hard.

Friends of the Koala (FOK) carer Rick Stewart said the odds were stacked against the embattled species.

“There are times when you can make a difference and a koala is nursed back to health and successfully returned to the wild,” Mr Stewart said.

“But unfortunately, because of disease and loss of habitat the koala is under severe threat at the moment.”

Koalas across the Northern Rivers appear to have a higher rate of euthanasia and death from other causes than groups elsewhere.

In addition to habitat loss, they also suffer from a retro-virus similar to HIV in humans as well as Chlamydia.

A study examining the genetics of koalas by University of Queensland PhD student Kristen Lee has identified two distinct koala populations in the Northern Rivers – one to the north of the area which was occupied by the Big Scrub and another to the south, in and around the Lismore area.

Ms Lee’s research suggested that the southern cluster had reduced diversity compared to the northern cluster.

She said this could be the result of the small number of founder animals which successfully crossed rivers and radiated to the south.

Mr Stewart has been with FOK for five years and also collects leaf to feed koalas in care at the centre in Lismore.

“It’s very difficult because you join a conservation group because you want to help conserve the animals,” he said.

“When a koala can’t be helped and the decision is made with the vet to euthanase, I grit my teeth and do it but when it happens three or four times a week, that’s when I get that empty feeling in the pit of my stomach and wonder why I’m doing it.”

FOK president Lorraine Vass said both carers and vets found it tough at times but the work was vital to the conservation of the koala.

Mrs Vass said FOK was eagerly awaiting the Federal Government’s announcement on whether the koala would be listed as ‘vulnerable to extinction’ under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act.

The Koala rescue hotline is manned 24/7 on 6622 1233.
DOING THEIR BEST: Koala carer Rick Stewart at the Friends of the Koala rescue centre with Carrie who was recently rescued in Lismore.

Picture: JACKLYN WAGNER