

On trail of koala killer



UNDER threat ... Zarraffa's Coffee CEO Kenton Campbell gets a cuddle from a koala at Australia Zoo yesterday. Picture: Graeme Parkes

Croc Hunter's dad joins fight

Glenis Green

A MYSTERY syndrome causing hand-reared male koalas to die when released will be the focus of a world-first research project launched at Australia Zoo on the Sunshine Coast yesterday.

The drive to discover what has been affecting the cuddly icons is being led by the zoo's founder Bob Irwin, the father of Crocodile Hunter Steve Irwin who was killed by a stingray last September.

A passionate conservationist who has turned much of his huge Blackbutt property in the South Burnett over to koala habitat, Mr Irwin has joined with Australia Zoo Wildlife Warriors Worldwide and coffee franchise sponsor Zarraffa's in backing the project.

Australian Wildlife Hospital manager Gail Gipp said while Mr Irwin's first love was reptiles — like his famous son — he also loved koalas and was keen to begin the research.

"In the Blackbutt area there are very few accidents (that kill koalas) — it's mainly disease and they're just found dead on the ground with no obvious reason for dying, so it will be really interesting to see if we can get some data on what's happening out there," Ms Gipp said.

"We know from the data we already have that males are finding it really hard and aren't surviving when they should be — they're young, they're healthy. There's no reason that (dying) should be happening, but the females are doing well in the same areas."

The 12-month project will employ radio tracking to study the migration patterns of koalas returned to the wild and their ability to re-establish new home ranges.

The zoo's hospital treats about 900 koalas a year which are returned to the wild whenever possible.

Ms Gipp said the next few weeks would be spent at the Blackbutt property counting and studying the koalas. Then the first of 12 hand-reared male koalas fitted with radio collars would be released into the area next month.

Wildlife Warriors chief executive officer Michael Hornby said the project was significant for koala populations in southeast Queensland and globally.

"Every day we're dealing with the pointy end — koalas hit by cars, attacked by dogs or (brought in) as a result of land clearing," he said.

"When they are returned back to the wild, we need to know their survival rate is as high as it can possibly be."