

## Community Wildlife Conservation Award for 2006

The Community Wildlife Service Award is made each year to recognise organisations which make a significant contribution to the preservation of Australian wildlife.

Dr Clive Williams announced that the Community Wildlife Conservation Award for 2006 was awarded to the Friends of the Koala Inc from Lismore in New South Wales.



**Peter Cundall presents Lorraine Vass, President of Friends of the Koala, with the 2006 Community Wildlife Conservation Award**  
**L to r: Rick Vass, Margaret Russell, Clive Williams, Pat Barnidge, Karen Jennison and Barbara Dobner**

Friends of the Koala (FOK) is a non-profit community group run by volunteers dedicated to conserving koalas in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales.

Volunteer rehabilitators operate a twenty four hour rescue service for sick, injured and orphaned koalas. Koalas are cared for in home care or at the Koala Care Centre in Lismore, NSW. Critically ill koalas are transferred to the Australian Wildlife Hospital within Australia Zoo at Beerwah, Queensland.

A native plant nursery is attached to the Care Centre, providing koala food trees for free to local landholders. Over 90,000 such trees have been distributed. The proceeds from other native plant sales go towards the cost of koala care.

Friends of the Koala play an active role in promoting habitat restoration in the Northern Rivers Region. This includes encouraging landholders to commit to new plantings and maintaining and looking after remnant vegetation. They also act as consultant to the Lismore City Council as well as assisting other Councils in the region.

The group supports research, in particular into the prevalence of disease in koala populations and in mapping current koala populations and their distribution. The group has been chosen to receive The Society's Community Wildlife Conservation Award for 2006 because it is a completely volunteer group that plays a significant educational, scientific and rehabilitative role in its region.

Friends of the Koala hope this national recognition will serve to focus attention on the relentless erosion of koala habitat in the State's north east, brought about by development pressure as well as agriculture and forestry. Many of the area's koala populations have a high incidence and variety of disease and too few scientific studies have been conducted in the Northern Rivers region over the past decade.

**Acceptance speech by Lorraine Vass, President of Friends of the Koala**

Friends of the Koala's reason for being is *to conserve the koala populations of the Northern Rivers Region of this State.*

In various ways, members of our entirely voluntary group have been doing just that for twenty years. Initially, they focused on habitat that was being lost to urban growth around Lismore by drawing public attention to the plight of the resident koalas. They also organised tree plantings, an activity that continues to this day. Perhaps more important are the 90,000 koala food trees that Friends of the Koala has distributed to landowners across the Northern Rivers since 1990.





Some members in Lismore were persuaded to extend their activities to include the rescue and rehabilitation of individual koalas. This change of direction was not popular with some, but it prevailed. Similarly, when the group built its Koala Care Centre in the mid 1990s – a few home carers fell away, but the Koala Care and Research Centre prevailed. During the six months from July to December 2006, 248 koalas were reported to FOK. Fortunately many did not need to come into care.

Perhaps because we started off as a habitat conservation group and our rescue and rehab work is limited to a single species, the group has attracted sufficient people with a strong advocacy focus for us to have integrated with the energetic conservation lobby of the North East.

There we have the three strands of FOK's core business – habitat repair, rescue and rehab. and advocacy. Each is equally as important as the other. Over the years we have engaged an extraordinarily wide range of partners, corporate and individual, within the Northern Rivers and beyond to assist us to become more effective. I cannot talk about all of them here, but I will mention a couple.

The first and most enduring has been the group's relationship with Southern Cross University. FOK's Koala Care and Research Centre is built on university land; indeed its construction was managed by the University's facilities section. The University provides us with significant in-kind services, ranging from security patrols to a constant source of student volunteers and the occasional research undertaking.



The second partner of significance is the Australian Wildlife Hospital at Australia Zoo. When Steve Irwin head-hunted koala experts, Jon Hanger, the Chief Veterinarian at Dreamworld and Gail Gipp, President of Wildcare Australia, to be his Chief Vet and Hospital Manager respectively, a wonderful opportunity presented itself to FOK.

Since September 2004 some one hundred and fifty Northern Rivers koalas have been admitted to the Hospital which has built up a specialist staff including five wildlife veterinarians. Many Northern Rivers koalas have benefited from the ever increasing refinements of treatments as well as surgical innovation. Some have been part of the Hospital's on-going research on koala retrovirus (in partnership with the University of Queensland) and chlamydiosis (in partnership with Queensland University of Technology) as well as other research, including the treatment of cataracts.

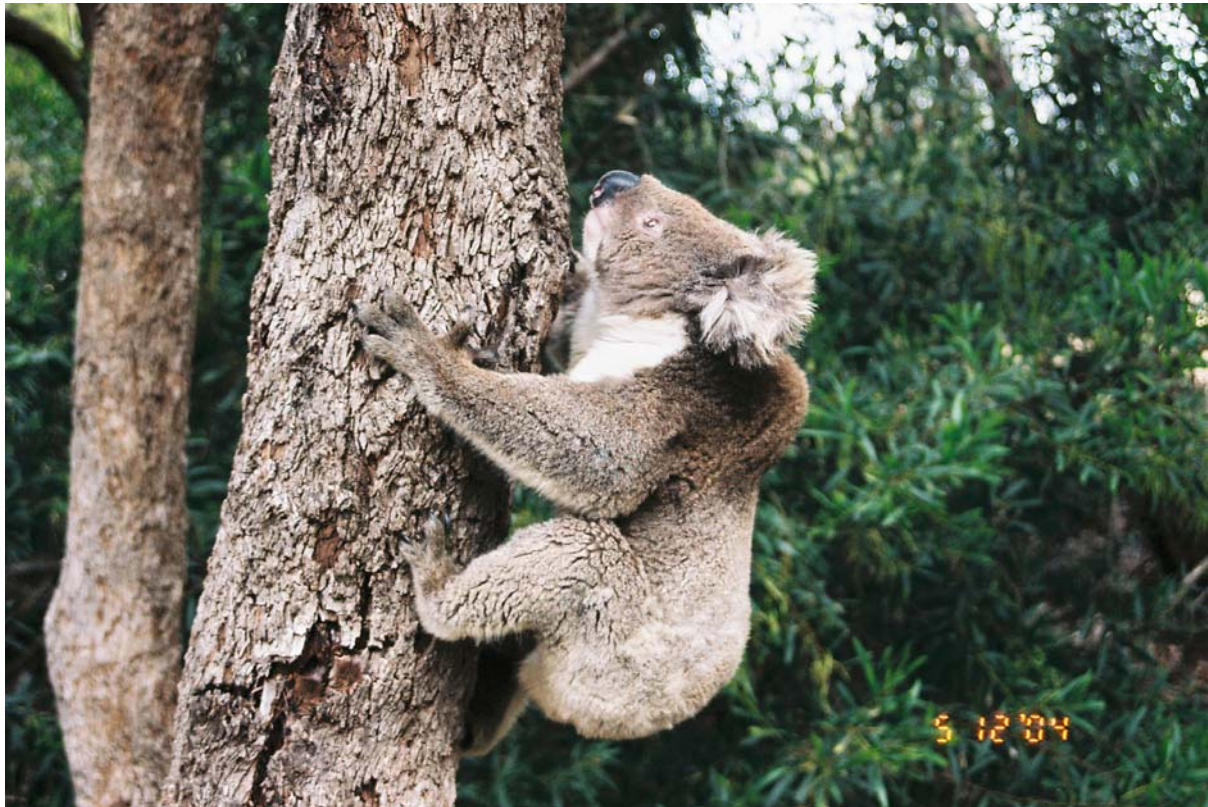


The depth of diagnostics that the Hospital can undertake and the specialist knowledge of its vet team has accelerated knowledge and learning within FOK. Many of our members have regular opportunities to observe and discuss diagnosis, prognosis, treatments, and so on during visits. Our rescue and rehabilitative practices are constantly evolving in line with the Hospital's recommendations. Whilst we still experience disappointments, the joy of releasing a rehabilitated koala back into the wild is shared by the whole team.

But are we really making a difference? The Australian Koala Foundation's modelling has predicted a worse case scenario for the survival of the koala in the Northern Rivers Region at roughly nine to ten years. Best case scenario is about forty three years. That modelling didn't take account of climate change. The State Government has announced its twenty five year vision in the *Far North Coast Regional Strategy*, planning for 64,000 additional residents over that period of time.



Despite a plethora of legislative protection, habitat and populations continue to disappear. You may have seen reference to the recent report released by World Wildlife Fund Australia: *Impacts of Land clearing: the Impacts of the Approved Clearing of Native Vegetation on Australian Wildlife in New South Wales*. The report estimates the number of mammals, birds and reptiles that have been destroyed as a result of authorised clearing over the past eight years. The numbers are in the millions. They include something in the order of 30,000 koalas. Yes, an estimated 30,000 koalas destroyed as a result of authorised clearing in New South Wales over the past eight years.



Putting aside whether or not you believe that figure to be close to the mark, and putting aside the collateral damage of the unauthorised clearing that occurs, it is clear that legislation alone is no protection for our wildlife.

Like the Wildlife Preservation Society, FOK believes strongly that engaging peoples' hearts, imagination and intellect is what will count in the end. Education has to be the answer. In this regard I want to share with you an exciting development that will see schools in The Wilson, Southern Cross, and Richmond Valley Education Networks participating in our work. Known as *Northern Rivers Koala Friendly Schools: a Project linking Northern Rivers Primary and Central Schools with Friends of the Koalas*, it aims to:

- raise awareness in the community of the plight of local koalas
- generate funds and in-kind support for koala conservation
- augment the K-6 curriculum with real-life relevant study
- provide students with opportunities for hands-on environmental involvement; and
- link schools with community groups.

The programme has been signed off by the three regional superintendents, and schools are starting to sign-up. If we make a success of it, perhaps the model can be used in other parts of the State.

In conclusion, let me say that Friends of the Koala is extremely honoured by this Award. We would like to formally acknowledge Councillor Judith May who thought enough of our work to nominate us. We are particularly thrilled that the Award is for 2006 which was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Friends of the Koala's formation. The Award is recognition of the efforts of all those members who have gone before as well as those who are active today. This recognition will fortify us and strengthen our resolve as it must for you, the Society which confers it.

Thank you.



**Lorraine Vass, President of Friends of the Koala**